

Conceptualising University Branding: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Higher education (HE) especially universities have become competitive globally. To ensure long-term success in the sector, it is important for universities to build stronger brands that will help insulate a university from its competitors. Although current brand management models have been evaluated in the context of service branding, limited studies focused on the higher education sector. The few studies in the literature have produced diverse opinions as to how university branding should be managed. It is against this background that the primary goal of this study was to enhance the understanding of university branding and propose a framework for university branding. Through a systematic literature review, the study conceptualise that university brand image, perceived service quality and university reputation are important factors that contributes to building a strong brand image. The conceptual framework developed can form the basis for further empirical investigation and adoption. Overall, the findings of this research contribute significantly to the understanding of the intricacies of higher education branding.

Keywords: University Branding, Higher Education, Image, Perceived Quality, Reputation

1. Introduction

Promoting educational development is one of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) aims for a more sustainable, inclusive, and just society (Endo, de Farias & Coelho, 2019). Furthermore, education is seen as the most significant aspect of society's developmental strategy because of its contribution to long-term economic, social, and personal growth (Jois & Chakrabarti, 2021). Specifically, university education is widely viewed as one of the most important aspects in the development of a highly skilled labour force anywhere in the world (Al-Dulaimi, 2016; Jois & Chakrabarti, 2021).

Meanwhile, technology improvements and shrinking global boundaries in recent years, have pushed higher education (HE) institutions into a fiercely competitive market (Girard & Pinar, 2020; Lomer, Papatsiba & Naidoo, 2018; Yu, Asaad, Yen, & Gupta, 2018). As a result, branding is increasingly becoming a potent tool for differentiating a university from its competitors as many countries move toward a more market-oriented higher education sector (Clark, Chapleo & Suomi, 2020; Jois & Chakrabarti, 2021). It is no surprise, then, that higher education branding has been designated as a key area of future brand theory and practice (Jois & Chakrabarti, 2021), with an expanding corpus of research on the subject. For instance, Chapleo and Clark (2016), explored how a branding committee supported a university's branding process, while Dean et al. (2016) looked into how university employees co-create brand meaning through their experiences and social interactions.

Building a strong university brand has the advantage of allowing students to make judgments based on limited information (Girard & Pinar, 2020). This is critical because selecting educational services is problematic for students (Mourad, Meshreki, & Sarofim, 2020), in addition to the financial repercussions, such decisions have a substantial impact on their future career path. While rating higher education (HE) elements such as research excellence, teaching, and curriculum design are difficult, universities can use the brand as a shorthand indicator to communicate these characteristics to their stakeholders in a uniform manner (Du preez, 2015). Consequently, branding is seen as a collection of attributes that contribute to the overall attractiveness of an institution (Abbas, 2019). A university's brand is a reflection of the institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to meet students' needs, create confidence in its ability to deliver a specific type of service, and aid potential recruits in making enrollment decisions (Nguyen, Melewar & Hemsley-Brown, 2019).

However, despite the growing importance of higher education (HE) branding, empirical and theoretical study on the subject remains scarce (Khoshtaria, Datuashvili & Matin, 2020, Nguyen et al., 2019). Regardless of the fact that academic study on brands and branding has been substantial, few studies have sought to define the substantive components of a university's brand (Abbas, 2019; Piha & Avlonitis, 2018). Thus the majority of HE branding ideas and models have been borrowed from non-educational sectors (Abbas, 2019), which are insufficient and often irrelevant in this context (Nguyen et al., 2019). This view was reiterated by Palmer, Koenig-Lewis and Asaad (2016) when they assert that the dimensions of university brands have been less precisely conceptualized and empirically tested.

This research seeks to undertake a systematic literature review (SLR) to explore the conceptualization of university branding and provide a conceptual framework for future investigations based on the gaps observed. The goal of this research is to contribute to a theory of service branding, notably university branding literature, which is currently lacking (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos & Bournlakis, 2016; Khoshtaria et al., 2020; Palmer et al., 2016). This comprehensive research lays the groundwork for how university branding has been conceptualized and developed in the higher education sector during the last decade. This

method aids in the identification of significant variables for university branding as well as critical factors that can aid in the development of a strong university brand.

The proposed conceptual framework will aid tertiary institution management in their brand-building efforts. Again, the findings of this study will support government's effort in formulating tertiary education policies so that institutions can improve their image in order to recruit more international students to the country. In this case, the government, educational institutions, and other businesses that provide services to students would benefit financially as a result of this.

In terms of the paper's format, section 1 introduces the study's background, explains its purpose, and identifies the gaps it seeks to fill. The approach utilised to achieve the study's proposed objectives are described in Section 2. Section 3, presents the findings of the review and discusses the conceptual framework. Section 4 summarizes the findings and analyses the study's shortcomings as well as future research prospects.

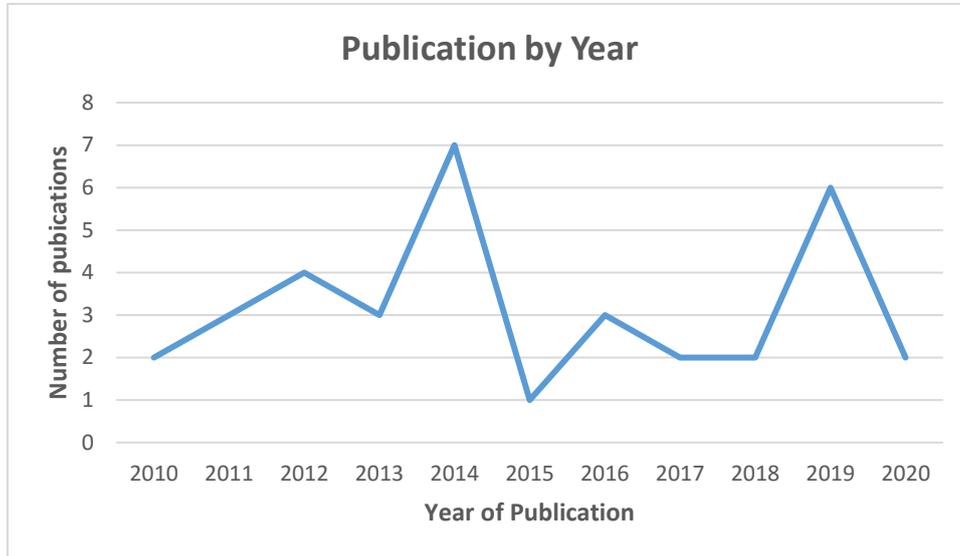
2. Methodology

To fulfil the objective of conceptualising a university brand and deepening the understanding of university branding, a systematic literature review (SLR) approach was adopted. All publications related to university branding in the area of general marketing and services marketing were identified from Web of Science (WoS), Scopus and Google Scholar being some of the most popular academic databases and online search engines. Keywords used for search are university branding, branding in higher education and brand equity.

Following this technique, the Web of Science database generated 7 papers, SCOPUS 48 articles, and Google Scholar 25 articles, totalling 80 studies collected from various databases. Eight duplicate publications were eliminated as a result, leaving a total of 72. Thereafter, the articles were scrutinized to ensure effective and efficient identification of relevant articles that were critical to the subject at hand. Such articles provided information that would contribute to the explanation and classification of university brands. Subsequently, 37 studies were deleted, leaving 35 documents in total. Following that, a graphic description of the sample was created using Microsoft Excel 2016 software, based on the 35 studies chosen. The details of the writers as well as the evolution of publications were listed in this phase.

In the final phase of the selection of publications, 35 articles covering the period between 2010 and 2020 were used. Figure 1 shows the year and the number of publications for that particular year. For example, 7 articles from 2014 were the highest and the lowest was in 2015 with only 1 publication. The year 2017 and 2018 had 2 publications each.

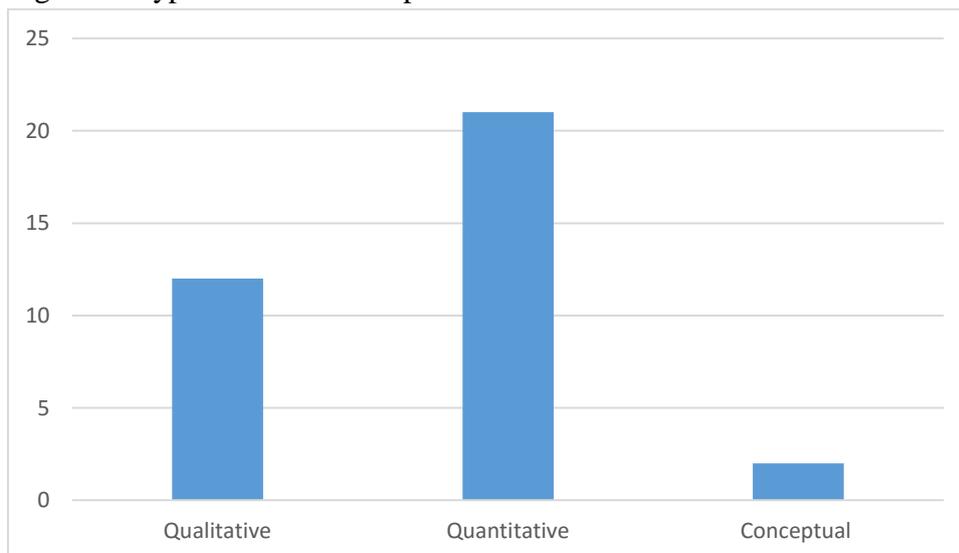
Figure 1: Number of publications on the subject from 2010 to 2020



Source: Researchers' compilation

The SLR process revealed that most of the publications used were conducted using a quantitative method followed by a qualitative approach. Very few were conceptual papers. Figure 2 presents the type of research adopted for the publications. In relation to the quantitative research, most of the respondents for the survey were students of public institutions, while management and staff form the majority of the respondents for the qualitative studies.

Figure 2: Type of research adopted



Source: Researchers' compilation

Finally, by analysing the main factors that relate to the conceptualization of branding in universities and higher education institutions (HEIs), it was possible to achieve this study's objective. That is to say, the final analysis was done with the aim of finding out if there were common themes that run through the conceptualization of the university brand. This led to the development of a conceptual framework that could form the basis for brand development efforts by practitioners and policymakers of the universities and institutions of higher learning.

3. Discussion Of Findings

The purpose of this review was to find out how various scholars have conceptualised university branding and to develop a conceptual framework that could be tested in subsequent research efforts. This review ensured the inclusion of the most relevant and highest quality publications in the marketing literature. Thus, this SLR approach provided a high degree of reliability as the researcher sought to investigate the challenges associated with university branding conceptualisation.

There are numerous key descriptive findings based on this research approach. First, out of the 35 relevant articles reviewed only 3 of the studies were conducted in Africa (e.g. Williams, Osei & Omar, 2012; Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011). 11 were conducted in Asia (e.g. Wong, Tong, & Wong, 2017; Amzat, 2016; Casidy, 2013). 12 of the studies were carried out in Europe (e.g. Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Hemsley- Brown, Lowrie & Chapleo, 2010; Tas & Ergin, 2012; Melewar & Nguyen, 2014), while 9 were undertaken in the US (e.g. Dennis et al., 2016; Pinar et al., 2011, 2014; Girard & Pinar, 2020).

This indicates that a lot needs to be done in Africa in this area to find out if the dimensions of university branding differ in different cultural contexts. In Africa, most of the countries are seen as collectivist societies (Hofstede study) as to individualist societies of the West, hence, it is appropriate to find out if such cultural values can impact university branding conceptualisation since students' decision-making processes may differ (Effah, 2020).

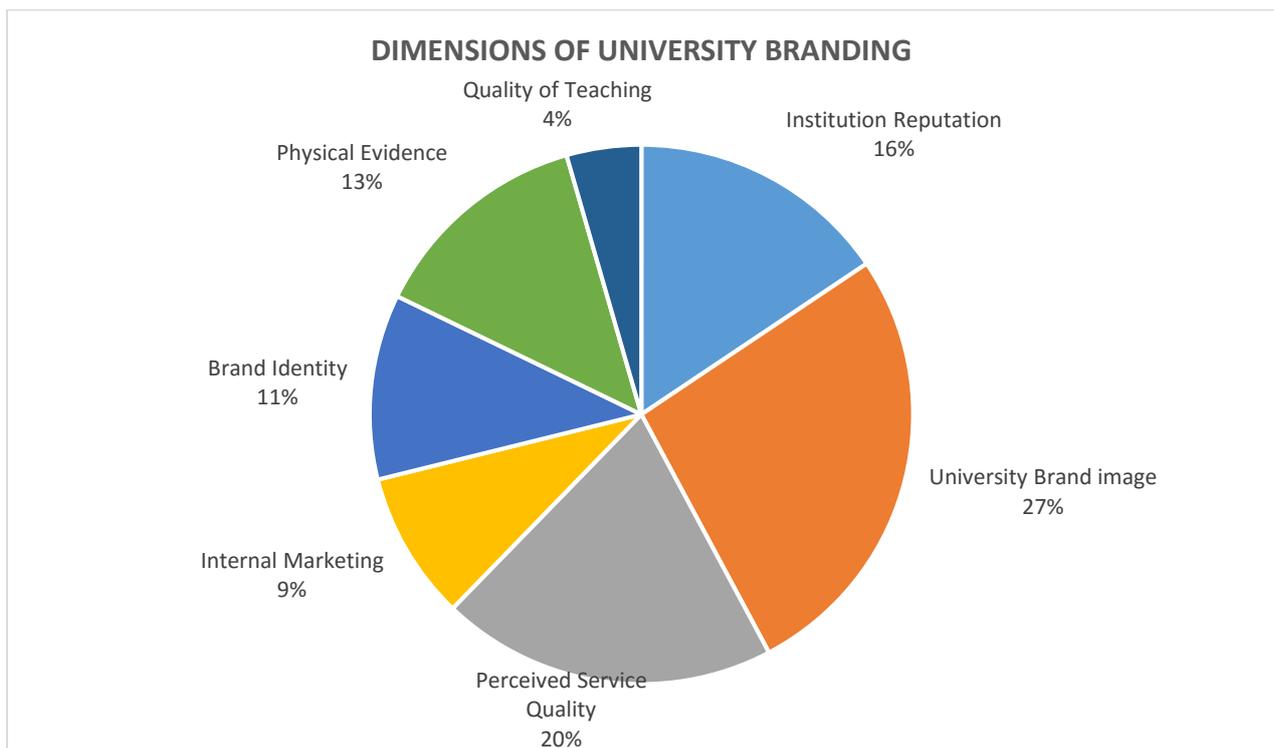
Several scholars conceptualized university branding based on traditional customer-based brand equity dimensions developed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). It includes constructs such as perceived quality, loyalty, awareness and image (Alam & Saeed, 2016; Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber, 2015; Muhmurti & Selvanayagam, 2014; Iqbal, Rasli & Ibn-e-Hassan, 2012; Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011; Temple, 2011). Other dimensions used for conceptualisation include reputation and image (Wong, Tong & Wong, 2017; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Tolbert, 2014; Melewar & Nguyen, 2014; Finch, McDonald & Staple, 2013; Hemsley- Brown, Lowrie & Chapleo, 2010). Reputation, image and identity (Joseph, Mullen & Spake, 2012; Idris & Whitfield, 2014). Furthermore, others also emphasized physical evidence and communication (Drori, Delmestri & Oberg, 2013; Tas & Ergin, 2012). Mogaji (2019) considers university branding as comprising brand identity, brand name, brand logo, and brand integration (social media, print media), while Dennis et al., (2016) conceptualised it in terms of perceived quality, reputation image, identity, and Meaning. Pop and Todea (2018) conceptualized university branding as comprising mainly brand perception. According to Buono and Fortezza (2017), the

dimensions of university branding are the institution's communication, corporate identity and visual identity. Javani (2016) on the other hand conceptualised it in terms of five components namely, mission, brand identity, brand positioning, brand communication, and brand loyalty. Furthermore, Bagautdinova, Gorelova and Polyakova (2015) see university branding as comprising academic culture and corporate visual identity.

Pinar, Trapp, Girard & Boyt (2011, 2014 and 2020) conducted some studies into university branding in a different context and they have looked at it in terms of essential and secondary dimensions. The essential dimensions are brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty, learning environment and university reputation. Secondary dimensions are sports, student life and community activities.

Each of the 35 relevant publications in this area conceptualized university branding differently but there were a few dimensions that appear to feature a lot more in the conceptualization. Figure 3, presents the findings on those dimensions and the number of times it appeared.

Figure 3: Result of the Dimensions of University Branding



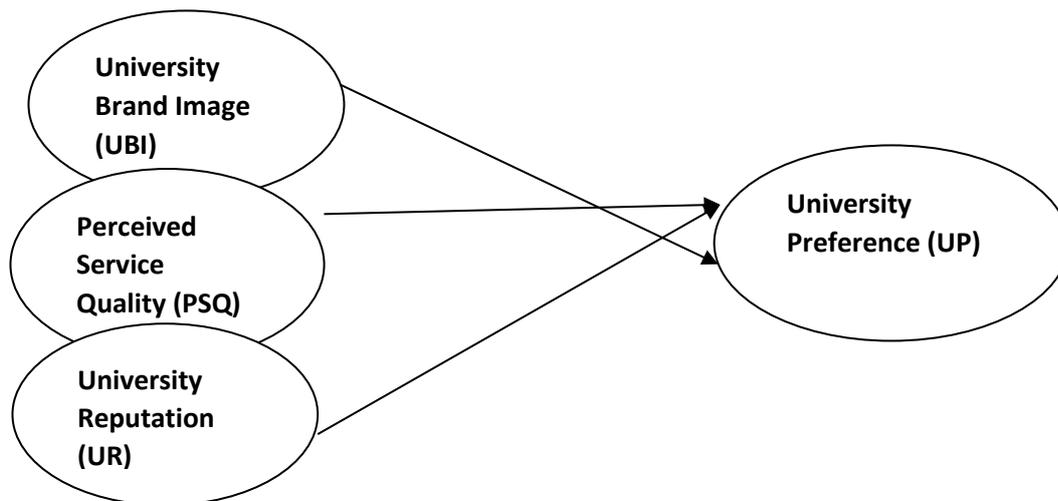
Source: Researchers' compilation

The figure shows that the most common dimensions are University Brand Image, Perceived Quality and University Reputation Respectively. Others include Internal Marketing, Brand Identity, Physical Evidence and Quality of Teaching.

4. Proposed Conceptual Model

The current study acknowledges the contribution of several scholars to the understanding of branding in the context of higher education (e.g. Pinar et al., 2020, 2014, 2011; Mogaji, 2019; Wong et al., 2017; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Tolbert, 2014; Melewar & Nguyen, 2014; Finch, McDonald & Staple, 2013; Hemsley- Brown, Lowrie & Chapleo, 2010). Reputation, image and identity ((Joseph, Mullen & Spake, 2012; Idris & Whitfield, 2014). Others also emphasized on physical evidence and communication (Drori, Delmestri & Oberg, 2013; Tas & Ergin, 2012). One of the aims of the study was to undertake SLR to help develop a framework that will form the basis for further testing and application. This review has revealed some important trends that have enabled the development of a conceptual framework based on three main dimensions, namely University Brand Image, University Reputation and Perceived Service Quality. The decision arrived as a result of a detailed review and study of all the constructs that were identified in all the 35 publications that constituted the SLR process.

Figure 4: Proposed Conceptual Framework University Branding



Source: Researchers' compilation

In conceptualising university branding based on the above conceptual framework, it is established that for Higher Education (HE) especially universities to become more competitive, it is important for them to build stronger brands that will help separate a particular university from its competitors. Figure 4, further, showed that the University Brand Image (UBI) has a positive influence on University Preference (UP). Perceived Service Quality (PSQ) also directly relates to the university's preference (UP), while the University's Reputation (UR) also directly influences the University's Preference (UP). This is in support of the SLR which revealed that the three most common constructs that form university branding conceptualization are image, reputation and perceived quality. It was discovered that the image

of higher educational institutions has an impact on stakeholders' attitudes since it is a key factor in their appraisal and, ultimately, perception of the institutions' overall service quality (Panda et al., 2019). Consumers react positively to brands with unique and compelling brand images (Du preez 2015), and students are no exception (Goia et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2019). As a result, higher education institutions are urged to use successful image theories from other service and product sectors in order to attract students (Nguyen et al., 2019). Hosseini and Nahad (2012) found that universities have recognized the importance of distinctive imagery in students' university selection in their study of the antecedents and consequences of Open University brand image. Given the global competitive pressures, expressing unique and desirable characteristics that suggest a strong university image has been critical in attracting and retaining existing and potential students (Effah, 2020; Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber, 2015).

Customer-based brand equity frameworks consider perceived quality to be a key component (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013), because perceived quality sends a message of value to customers by giving them reasons to buy a product as well as making the institution distinct from others. It has been well documented that as perceived quality rises, so does brand preference (Kondasani & Panda, 2015), implying that total customer perception of product value is highly linked to brand preference. Perceived quality is a crucial component that has a direct impact on students' perceptions of the university brand, according to existing literature (Ennew & Kortam, 2011; Mampaey et al., 2015; Muhmurti & Selvanayagam, 2014; Mourad et al., 2020; Sultan & Wong, 2019). As a result, a student's decision to enrol is heavily influenced by the perceived quality of a university. For the purposes of this study, perceived quality refers to a student's subjective assessment of a university's quality in comparison to other universities (Sultan & Wong, 2019).

Organizational reputation has received a lot of attention in the literature due to its unmistakable link to positive customer perceptions of firms and their products (AledoRuiz, MartinezCaro, & SantosJaén, 2021; Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011). According to Esenyel (2020), educational institutions use active communication to invoke certain reputations in the minds of their many stakeholder constituents, increase their intellectual capital, and attract good employees (Foroudi Yu, Gupta & Foroudi, 2019).

In the higher education sector, where quality can only be evaluated during and after consumption, institutional reputation can be exploited as a credible measure of the institution's ability to meet students' demands (Foroudi et al., 2019). Institutional reputation is one of the factors that determine students' decision to attend a foreign college (Quintal, Wong, Mazzarol & Soutar (2012). Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) identified a strong education institution reputation as critical to competing in the global education industry. Again, Nguyen et al. (2019) argue that, as higher education becomes more globalised, institutional performance and reputation have become increasingly important in global university rankings because of their ability to facilitate the intricacies that surround the world of higher education.

5. Conclusion

This study answers the call by Palmer et al. (2016) for more studies on the conceptualisation of university branding such that the inconsistencies and lack of knowledge in this field could be addressed. The study identified three critical areas that could form a generic model for university branding strategy. The factors are University Brand Image, University Reputation and Perceived Service Quality. This study has contributed to the literature on university branding by identifying various components of this concept thereby helping to clarify some of the inconsistencies associated with its conceptualisation. The study was successful in offering some fresh insights into the interactions among the studied factors, which is useful for university officials, practitioners, and non-governmental organizations interested in investing in the higher education industry. The study has also revealed practical marketing implications as it has highlighted the importance of reputation, image and perceived quality in the university's brand-building effort.

Some of the limitations of this study are that only 3 databases (Scopus, Google Scholar and WoS) were used. An attempt to include as many databases as possible in future could improve the outcome of the findings. Furthermore, there could be other published work on the subject matter that was not included in our review process since only articles were used. For example, books and book chapters were excluded. Future studies that adopt SLR can expand the scope of the research area to include books, book chapters and conferences.

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