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Contemporary Branding Strategies for Higher Education

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Definition: "Brand" is a term relating to organizational activities designed to synthesize and manage various complementary elements, such as visual identity, online presence, and reputation, in order to create a tangible sense of value to which people can make emotional attachments. "Higher education" refers to universities and other similar organizations that offer qualifications at degree level and above, and it represents the upper-most level of formal education in most countries. "Students" in this context are individuals attending university to study degree-level qualifications at bachelor's, master's, and doctorate levels.

Keywords: higher education; branding; brand success; marketing; post 1992; university

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1. Introduction

The marketization of higher education refers to the trend of treating education as being a marketable commodity [1]. This agenda has been driven over recent years by increased competition among universities as they strive to attract both students and funding against a backdrop of falling birthrates [2]. In this context, university branding has become a critical strategy for institutions to use in an effort to differentiate themselves from each other and to thereby establish their own unique identity. Effective branding can influence prospective students' decisions regarding which university to attend. It can also enhance their perceived value regarding a university, its courses, and the value for money offered by its educational provision. Furthermore, it may foster loyalty among current students and alumni [3].

Branding in this sense involves various elements, such as visual identity, online presence, and reputational management. Together, these aspects of branding need to be "weaponized" to ensure that they appeal to prospective students, staff, and other key stakeholder groups. Considering visual identity, a university's logo and color scheme are integral parts necessary for creating a memorable and recognizable brand. Ideally, these elements are designed to reflect a university's values and heritage [4–6] and can be supported by the use of agreed typographical and design elements including the consistent use of fonts and styles across all platforms and marketing channels. In the case of online presence, an up-to-date and engaging website and active social media profiles are crucial for reaching the digital-native audience [7], and a content strategy based upon regular and high-quality material that highlights a university's achievements, research, and student life helps to maintain engagement and interest and build a positive image [8].

De Heer and Tandoh-Offin [9] stressed the importance for universities to possess a comprehensive understanding of branding's role and the advantages it offers. By grasping how higher education organizations can cultivate desirable and successful brands, universities can attract top-tier academics and high-achieving students, thereby enhancing their public perception and fostering goodwill [10]. The quality of the customer experience is shaped by every interaction that a university has with both internal and external stakeholders. Positive experiences contribute to enhancing a university's reputation, consequently reinforcing

its brand and bolstering brand equity [11]. Thus, comprehending the fundamentals of effective brand management in higher education has become an imperative.

This entry paper considers the complexities of brands and brand management and relates them to the context of universities operating within the higher education sector. The key strategic dimensions of branding that universities need to consider when building their brand equity are discussed in detail, and suggestions are made for actions that can be taken for maximizing the resulting brand performance.

2. Defining Brands

The literature on marketing emphasizes the intricate nature of brands. While they are created by organizations, they ultimately exist in the minds of consumers [12], ensuring that the concept of "brand" is subjective and has no uniform interpretation [13] (p. 3). Branding itself is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to ancient times [13,14]. At its core, branding has been described simply as a legal statement of ownership [15] or as being the adoption of a mark to signify legal ownership.

Historically, branding has been associated with an organization's attempts to increase sales, foster brand loyalty, and/or attract more customers. Its objectives include informing and educating the market, offering differentiation from competitors, and enhancing promotion efficiency [16]. Definitions of brands solely focused on names or logos intended to identify a product or service have been critiqued in the literature [15,17]. However, the manifestation of what a brand is and how a brand is used has now evolved significantly.

A more contemporary perspective on branding was presented by Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester [18] (p. 256), defining a brand as being "an evolving mental collection of actual (offer-related) and emotional (human-like) characteristics and associations that convey the benefits of an offer identified through a symbol or a collection of symbols and differentiate this offer from the rest of the marketplace". Brands also offer both functional and symbolic value and so aid in fostering enduring relationships that cross generations and often remain in the public psyche long after their commercial use has ended [19].

2.1. Defining Brand Success

De Chernatony [20] highlighted the significance of defining brand success clearly as a foundational measure for assessing and subsequently improving a brand's effectiveness. Previous research has pinpointed various crucial elements essential for a brand's success, such as support from leadership, a clearly articulated vision, commitment from employees, and proficient communication [21,22]. Having a robust and thriving brand represents a significant managerial asset [23], offering benefits such as sustainable competitive advantage, increased profitability, and enhanced market performance [24].

Furthermore, Urde [25] (p. 19) defined brand success as being "an approach in which the organization's processes revolve around creating, developing, and safeguarding brand identity through continuous interaction with target customers, aiming to achieve enduring competitive advantages in the form of brands". The literature reinforces this complexity of achieving brand success. Establishing a successful brand is challenging [26], with organizations facing significant hurdles in creating and maintaining enduringly positive brand associations for stakeholders [27]. De Chernatony [20] posited that brand success is a multifaceted construct encompassing both business and consumer-based criteria, making it inherently multi-dimensional. Doyle [28] outlined three prerequisites for building successful brands, these being (1) an effective product, (2) a distinctive identity, and (3) added value. Aaker [27] suggested that the success of a brand hinges on factors such as brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and proprietary assets.

2.2. The Corporate Brand

The notion of the "company as a brand" has garnered significant attention in both the academic and practitioner literature [29,30]. A corporate brand is described as "an all-inclusive organizational process that encompasses a single umbrella image, casting a

glow over a panoply of products" [21] (p. 129). Various definitions of corporate branding exist in the literature, all emphasizing similar concepts and reinforcing one another. It can therefore be elucidated that a corporate brand makes the organization and its values easily identifiable and conveys a level of quality and consistency of performance in the minds of its target audiences. Corporate brands serve multiple functions, including communicating the organization's vision and values, identifying differentiation, and influencing stakeholders' perceptions in order to foster loyalty [31]. Described as "complicated and nuanced" [21] (p. 130), effective corporate branding entails ensuring that all organizational messages, products, and activities contribute to shaping positive stakeholder perceptions [22] (p. 850).

While organizations inherently possess identities, they do not necessarily inherit a brand. Crafting the organization's identity involves a focused effort to convey a covenant (promise) with key stakeholders [32]. Einwiller and Will [33] affirmed this by suggesting that corporate brands should convey a consistent brand personality that bolsters the organization's reputation across all stakeholders. In today's competitive landscape, corporate brands are concerned with differentiation, improving images, and communications [23]. However, corporate branding extends beyond marketing communications, encompassing more than just a logo and tagline [21,31]. Roper and Davies [34], in fact, argued that corporate branding is a more suitable brand categorization for non-profit organizations, charities, healthcare, and universities than product branding. They advocated that responsibility for the brand should be organization-wide and not solely situated within the marketing department [34]. Balmer and Liao [35] reinforced the idea of the higher education organization as being a corporate brand, noting that "senior managers are beginning to examine their institutions through the corporate branding lens" (p. 357).

Whilst assessing the modern-day university brand in the current landscape, Aaker's critique of a corporate brand certainly seems to fit effectively, i.e., that "the corporate brand is special because it explicitly and unambiguously represents an organization as well as a product. As a driver or endorser, it will have a host of characteristics and programs that can help build the brand. It can help differentiate, create branded energizer, provide credibility, facilitate brand management, support internal brand-building, provide a basis for a relationship to augment that of the product brand, support communication to broad company constituencies, and provide the ultimate branded house" [36] (p. 10).

2.3. The Higher Education Brand

This research into higher education as a brand acknowledges the historical association of traditional branding practices with the commercial sector, where brands were viewed as tools to enhance profits, differentiate products, and gain market share, and as such, it reflects primarily commercial goals. Such strategies were not commonly applied to the non-profit sector, which historically did not perceive itself to be operating within a competitive landscape akin to the commercial sector. However, with significant reductions in funding, non-profit organizations began recognizing the need to adopt more competitive strategies.

While branding may be considered a relatively recent phenomenon in the non-profit sector, it has rapidly become a critical consideration for all non-profit entities, including universities [37]. Even traditional universities, whose promotional efforts and selection criteria were traditionally centered on academic excellence and pedagogical prowess, have had to embrace a more managerial approach [38] (p. 24). As a result, branding now plays a pivotal role for both private and public organizations alike [37,39]. Temporal [40] argued that branding in public-sector organizations is no longer optional but is in fact now essential. Concepts such as place marketing, stakeholder marketing, and societal marketing have become commonplace in the higher education literature [41].

The heightened competition in the higher education landscape has been identified as a key driver of marketization within the sector [42,43]. Consequently, universities are widely recognized as being branded institutions [44] (p. 62), and discussions within universities often revolve around branding. In both private companies and in the higher education sector, branding is being used to provide a competitive edge and sustain financial

performance [45]. As revenue sources dwindle, universities find themselves competing for the same pool of students, necessitating the identification of unique selling points and the adoption of engagement strategies akin to those prevalent in the private sector.

Higher education has become one of the fastest-growing service sectors, encompassing international markets and global service systems [46]. However, differentiating intangible products such as educational offerings poses challenges, making brand development crucial for non-profit organizations [47]. In the absence of tangible product characteristics, the brand name serves as a critical cue for prospective students and parents evaluating institutions [5]. Public-sector organizations, unlike their private counterparts, possess a unique asset in their brand image that cannot be easily replicated [40]. Effective branding conveys quality and trust and nurtures increased legitimacy, which are vital features in both private and public sectors [39,48,49]. Non-profit brands in particular enjoy high levels of trust compared to governments, corporations, and the media [50].

The higher education brand is multifaceted, encompassing various elements such as logo, image, awareness, identity, differentiation, meaning, strength, impact on satisfaction, consistency, reputation, and personality [7] (p. 20). Additionally, a university brand comprises promises of benefits, distinctive features, and external communications [51]. Furthermore, higher education involves a diverse stakeholder group, including students, academics, administrative staff, employers, communities, media, government agencies, and assessment bodies [52]. As competition intensifies, universities recognize the importance of leveraging their brands to enhance performance and so cultivate deeper relationships with stakeholders [53] (p. 348). However, existing brand management theories and marketing models are not always directly applicable to the complexities of the higher education sector, necessitating bespoke approaches [4,54–56]. Leijerholt et al. [57] therefore suggested that traditional brand management approaches do not always align with the unique context of the non-profit sector, emphasizing the need for public organizations to adapt more tailored brand practices.

3. Brand Capabilities

Kapferer [13] underscored the relevance of brands by stating that all organizations are brands possessing a name, personality, power, and influence and are driven by values and thus serve as a source of innovation that engenders a community. However, despite their significance, brands are intricate entities [58] that are further complicated in the branding literature, in which "brands" and "branding" are often used interchangeably [9]. As such, numerous definitions of brand are available; however, all contemporary interpretations focus on three key perspectives, these being (1) the consumer, (2) the company, and (3) the purpose [9].

Operational competencies are crucial for organizations striving to establish and sustain a successful brand, as emphasized by Aaker [27]. Organizations encounter significant challenges in achieving and maintaining a successful brand, particularly in cultivating enduringly positive associations for stakeholders. Balmer [59] asserted that a successful brand must exhibit credibility, durability, significance, profitability, and responsibility. This emphasizes the importance of longevity in business as evidence of experience, prioritizing it among the characteristics of brand success.

The importance of delivering added value extends beyond product or commercial brands and is a recurring theme in the literature. Pitta and Katsanis [60] (p. 52) defined brand success as being "the value a brand name adds to a product". Aaker [45] elaborated on the perceived advantage inherent in successful brand names, describing it as an essential factor contributing to a "price premium". Consumers' perceptions of an organization's product and service quality significantly influence their perception of the brand [14]. In fact, stakeholders' interactions with a brand at various touchpoints shape their journey and ultimately their perspective of the brand's fulfillment of its promises [61].

3.1. Brand Equity

Brand equity holds significant importance in both management theory and practice [62], drawing considerable academic attention and research interest [63]. Robust brand equity offers various advantages, including higher profit margins, the ability to command premium prices, and expanded opportunities for brand extensions [64]. Additionally, it enhances an organization's resilience during crises [65]. The literature provides diverse definitions of brand equity. A commonly cited definition characterizes brand equity as being "a set of assets and liabilities associated with a brand, its name, and symbol, which contribute to or detract from the value provided by its product or service to a firm and/or its customers" [14] (p. 12). Wood [66] attributed the variability in definitions to differing orientations in financial and marketing domains, categorized as firm-based and customer-based brand equity [67].

Brand equity therefore emerges as being a crucial element in the success of higher education (HE) brands [14,68]. However, university brand managers often grapple with assessing brand equity, particularly with respect to being able to articulate the financial value that branding contributes given the unique context [69]. Empirical research by [70] demonstrated a strong correlation between brand orientation and brand performance. They identified four dimensions crucial for strong brands, which consequently build brand equity, these being (1) awareness, (2) association, (3) perceived quality, and (4) brand loyalty. While brand equity remains vital for brand success, its application to the public sector, particularly higher education, adds complexity. Understanding how brand equity can be evaluated in higher education as part of establishing the antecedents, nature, and consequences of brand success in newer universities contributes significantly to theory. Therefore, assessing how universities capture and evaluate brand success through consideration of brand equity holds valuable implications for brand optimization.

3.2. Leadership of Vision and Values

The literature succinctly outlines that to build and manage a successful brand, several variables must be in place, with a primary emphasis on fostering a brand-oriented organization. Aaker [36] warned that in the absence of a clear brand vision within the organization, the brand is susceptible to drifting, resulting in ineffective and disjointed marketing efforts. Therefore, it is crucial for the brand promise to align with the organization's strategic vision and culture.

Gussoni and Mangani [71] emphasized the importance of forward-thinking organizations whose brand strategy should be rooted in future objectives, vision, and values. However, M'Zungu et al. [72] introduced the concept of a "brand spirit", suggesting that solely focusing on external communication will not build lasting brand equity. They proposed that instead, organizational leaders should foster a "brand spirit" wherein the entire organization supports the strategic plan, aligning corporate culture and brand to ensure a consistent brand experience for all stakeholders. With this in mind, Hatch and Schultz [21] highlighted the significance of aligning perceptions of both internal and external stakeholders towards the organization. It is therefore evident that a brand is more likely to succeed when its values resonate with the emotional needs of its stakeholders [4,73].

Hatch and Schultz [21] (p. 130) further affirmed that "employees' performance can be enhanced by establishing a relevant connection to the brand vision, fostering a sense of involvement and self-worth, thereby avoiding a 'vision-culture gap'". However, aligning values between employees and the organization poses challenges. In fact, this alignment may be particularly challenging in the public sector due to resistance from internal and external stakeholders [49,55]. Additionally, some employees may strongly identify with their specialization and department rather than with the organization as a whole, leading to a perceived compromise or loss of identity [74].

3.3. Brand Ethics

Brand ethics encompasses more than simply being recognized as an ethical organization. It encompasses the manner in which a brand communicates its values, ensuring alignment between the brand and the organization's core values [75]. Ind [76] introduced the concept of social responsibility and ethical considerations as crucial components of the corporate brand. Hatch and Schultz [21] delved into how the essence of the corporate brand is reinforced by organizational development, physical design, and culture. Scholars such as Ruth [77] emphasized that brands have the ability to evoke a spectrum of emotions. In support, Aaker [27] suggested that if brands can embody a desirable group that offers social benefits, they can attain significant power and success.

3.4. Organisational Culture

The branding literature frequently highlights the importance of organizational culture, recognizing the significant role of internal brand management. Scholars argued that the service employees receive mirrors the service they deliver [78]. Thus, organizational culture is crucial in aligning employees' brand attitudes with brand commitment, identification, and loyalty [79]. Poor interactions between employees and consumers can negatively impact an organization's reputation, making recovery challenging [61]. Harris and De Chernatony [65] stressed the importance of aligning employees' values and behavior with consumer expectations. Roper and Fill [80] suggested that successful alignment prevents potential gaps that could damage reputation. De Chernatony and Cottam [81] argued that organizations with a culture congruent with employee and brand values will have a stronger brand genuinely embraced by employees.

Furthermore, employee behavior must align with the organization's brand values because employees are central to the brand-building process [73]. Dholakia and Acciardo [37] proposed that brand harmonization occurs when sub-departments align with organizational brand values. Thus, a key task for brand managers is ensuring the organization's identity supports the brand by connecting it to stakeholders' core values and effectively communicating the brand vision to employees in an engaging manner.

3.5. Brand Management

To establish a successful brand, universities must grasp the pivotal organizational competence known as brand management [45,82]. Brand management is deemed a key strategic concern for organizations [83], facilitating an understanding of stakeholder perceptions and raising brand awareness among target audiences [21,84]. Additionally, Aaker and Joachimsthaler [85] asserted that brand management is instrumental in accruing the brand equity discussed in Section 3.1.

Branding in non-profit organizations "is emerging as an intriguing area of research, as diverse organizations apply branding principles to establish a consistent and coherent brand" [57] (p. 277) and to create a point of differentiation [40,49]. Kirovska's studies demonstrated that an integrated approach to planning and communication contributes to an effective corporate brand [86]. However, Leijerholt et al. [57] and Sataøen and Wæraas [49] suggested that private and non-profit organizations may employ brand management techniques differently to achieve alternative outcomes. While private-sector organizations often prioritize clear positioning strategies and value propositions, public-sector organizations such as universities may need to focus more on enhancing positive perceptions to build a strong reputation.

The higher education branding literature indicates several factors prompting the need for effective brand management attention, including (1) increased tuition costs [87], (2) financial challenges faced by universities [88], (3) governmental pressures to attract and retain more students [89], (4) reliance on international students [4], (5) marketization [90], and (6) the globalization of higher education [91].

The role of the brand manager is pivotal in upholding the brand [85] because brands necessitate continuous management to retain their appeal to target audiences [70]. However,

brand management must be proactive, inspirational, and strategic rather than reactive and tactical. While symbols like logos and straplines aid in brand identification and reinforce core values [92], branding in higher education has historically been criticized for focusing too much on slogans and straplines rather than developing brand strategies [93].

Brand management is intricate, as it requires meeting the needs of both internal and external stakeholders. Leijerholt et al. [57] (p. 276) asserted that "a strong organizational brand relies on a unified perception of the brand among both internal and external stakeholders". Therefore, ongoing brand management necessitates brand managers to adopt a holistic approach to identify relevant connection points [94], considering the significant variations in stakeholders' perspectives [95]. However, in the context of higher education, this poses an exceptionally challenging task. Chapleo [5] highlighted this as a fundamental issue for universities due to their diverse stakeholders, and it requires substantial effort and attention to communicate a multifaceted brand effectively.

Ind and Riondino [96] emphasized the importance of managers in promoting a shared understanding of organizational brand values by implementing brand-supportive behavior. Additionally, sensitivity and a consultative approach have been recognized as crucial for brand managers. In addition to trusting the brand, trust in the team managing the brand is essential. Laidler-Kylander and Stone [75] introduced the concept of brand democracy, emphasizing the importance, particularly in the non-profit sector, for organizations not to exert strict control over their brand. Instead, brand managers should aim to implement a participatory brand management approach. This underscores the significance of fostering a supportive and appropriate organizational culture that encourages employee buy-in, which introduces the concept of internal brand management.

Berry [47] (p. 34) offered a definition for internal brand management, describing it as "viewing employees as internal customers, viewing jobs as internal products that satisfy the needs and wants of these internal customers while addressing the objectives of the organization". The literature consistently emphasizes the importance of cultivating a team of positive and brand-aligned staff within the organization, recognizing it as a powerful brand asset [21,31,73,97].

Internal brand management has been a focal point in the branding domain for decades [98] and has gained significance in non-profit brand research in the U.K. [99]. Communication within the organization is integral to internal brand management, as delivering a clear and consistent brand message to employees is essential [78,100]. Liu et al. [99] (p. 319) defined internal brand management as being "an organization's efforts to persuade its staff to buy into the organization's brand value and transform it into a reality". This concept is related to but is distinct from employer branding [101]. Employee comprehension of brand values and their role in supporting them is central to internal brand management [78]. Similarly, Miles and Mangold [100] stressed that internal endorsement and support are crucial for employees to become brand advocates.

Bélanger et al. [102] suggested that when a brand is not developed from a bottom-up approach, it may not accurately represent all employees and so could be primarily based on the vision of senior managers within the organization [103]. Consequently, brand development using a top-down approach is often criticized in contemporary branding discussions [37]. Furthermore, Matanda and Ndubisi [104] emphasized that aligning employee values and beliefs with organizational goals is crucial for supporting employee brand-related behavior. The literature underscores that the interactions between internal stakeholders and external stakeholders impact the organization's reputation. Therefore, employees must be motivated and encouraged to "live the brand" [105] (p. 103).

Recognizing the importance of cultivating buy-in from internal stakeholders and strengthening brand attachment as a result, some organizations have embraced internal brand management as a brand implementation process. This approach aims to consult and engage with employees [37], a strategy supported by the literature highlighting the fundamental role of employees in branding [78,79,93]. Organizations achieve their greatest

advantage when employee actions and brand identity are aligned, leading employees to become brand champions who embrace the brand [96].

In the research of Clark et al. [106], it was argued that there is a consensus that marketing should begin from the inside out. Therefore, the value of organizations incorporating internal marketing activities into their broader internal brand management program is evident. Effective and consistent internal communication should resonate throughout the organization using various methods based on shared values between the organization and its key stakeholder groups [4,35,73,78]. However, as suggested by Whisman [93], this can be challenging for universities due to inadequate internal communication systems that struggle to address the "silo" culture, hindering effective and meaningful dialogue about the organization's identity.

4. Emotional Benefits of Brands

A brand is not merely constructed through logical reasoning and tangible elements but also through its impact on the emotional realm of human feelings. Emotional value refers to the perceived benefit derived from an alternative's ability to evoke emotions or affective states. According to Sheth et al. [106], this emotional value is gauged based on a spectrum of feelings. Also, it was acknowledged by Stride [107] that a brand is a multidimensional concept playing a pivotal role in aligning functional and emotional values with consumers' performance and psychosocial needs. De Chernatony [81] emphasized the importance of enhancing the perceived value of an entity by enriching a combination of functional and emotional values to attain brand success. Knapp [108] also reinforced the notion that achieving and sustaining brand success necessitates clearly articulating distinctive emotional benefits alongside functional benefits. Additionally, Elliot and McGregor [109] identified other vital components in building a successful brand, including brand awareness, brand loyalty, and favorable associations linked to the brand.

Successful brands establish emotional connections with customers, fostering positive attitudes and confidence [36,47]. Therefore, organizations must employ a variety of criteria to gauge their success beyond purely financial metrics [110]. Gronroos [111] advocated for the adoption of relationship marketing to establish, maintain, and enhance long-term relationships with customers and other stakeholders, thereby capitalizing on the emotional benefits of the brand for stakeholders.

4.1. Brand Identity, Image, and Personality

Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester [18] (p. 256) defined brand identity as being "the symbols and the set of the brand associations that represent the core character of the brand that the team supporting the brand aspire to create or maintain as identifiers of the brand to other people". Aaker and Joachimsthaler [85] proposed that brand identity is created and promoted through communicating the value proposition and functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu [22] (p. 846) suggested that brand success is achieved when "organizations have a strong identity as it helps them to align with the marketplace, attract investment, motivate employees and serve as a means to differentiate their products and services". This complements the view of Keller [112], who suggested that the most valuable asset a brand owns is the image it projects.

Aaker and Joachimsthaler [85] also asserted that a strong brand identity aids relationships between the brand and the consumer. Balmer and Wilson [113] suggested that a well-managed identity will develop a positive corporate image that will, over time, result in a positive corporate reputation. Brand image is then projected through actions and communication and aims to demonstrate what the brand stands for. Brand reputation derives from the "accumulation of brand images and is an aggregate and compressed set of public judgments about the brand" [18] (p. 256). The brand is therefore reliant on stakeholder perceptions [54,101]. Accordingly, Bélanger et al. [102] asserted that the importance of aligning brand identity and stakeholder perceptions, therefore resulting in a shared brand meaning, cannot be overstated.

Aaker [114] (p. 25) used brand identity and brand vision interchangeably and suggested that it is "crucial for organizations looking to build a strong brand presence". A brand identity that correlates strongly to brand personality can enhance reputation [115]. As a result, organizations often use a variety of visual tools, including brand logos, packaging, and brand imagery to build a brand identity [116]. Van den Bosch et al. [117] suggested that this corporate visual identity has a significant impact on how the organization represents itself to internal and external stakeholders. These consist of elements such as logo, color palette, font choice, and corporate slogan [117,118]. Alongside this, brand image is the "perception formed to the mind of a member of the external audience about the brand after one real or mental encounter with the brand" [18] (p. 256). There are many definitions of image referenced in the literature [119], and it is often confused with corporate identity and reputation [52].

Kapferer [13] (p. 9) defined brand personality as "the way in which certain groups perceive a brand and refers to the way these groups decode all the signal emanating from the products, services and communication covered by the brand". Brand personality is also defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" [45] (p. 105). McCracken [120] suggested that personality traits associated with the brand can influence the brand personality. The literature shows overwhelming evidence for the notion that humans have the ability to anthropomorphize almost anything, including brands.

4.2. Brand Awareness, Association, and Reputation

Brand awareness is defined as "the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category" [14] (p. 61). Aaker suggested that in order to make a brand more memorable and increase awareness of it, organizations should strive for a point of differentiation through the effective use of slogans, symbols, publicity, and even the possibility of event sponsorship [14]. Brand association is defined as "anything linked in memory to the brand" [14] (p. 60). This means that brand associations can be diverse in nature and can therefore be the beliefs and attitudes held in the memory of consumers, which enable differentiation from one organization from another [121]. Keller [122] therefore asserted that the brand associations should be strong, unique, and favorable in the aim of connecting and bonding with stakeholders. Muñiz and O'Guinn [123] reinforced this notion by suggesting that brand relationships, brand attachment, and brand loyalty can all be created as a result of positive brand associations. When brand attachment is strong, it evokes emotions, which encourages the self-connection the consumer has with that brand [124].

Brands therefore need to work hard to create emotional benefits that match the expectations and needs of consumers, inspiring affection and trust in the process [47]. Organizations therefore need to understand how their brand triggers consumers' emotional responses [77,125]. The literature demonstrates how good experiences through awareness and association improve the organization's reputation, which in turn strengthens the brand [126]. Brand reputation derives from the "accumulation of brand images and is an aggregate and compressed set of public judgments about the brand" [18] (p. 256).

Raithel and Schwaiger [127] suggested that a superior corporate reputation has deep strategic value for organizations. Scholars suggested that corporate reputation is also a particularly important activity for higher education to invest in, as it "reduces perceived risk" [128] (p. 210) due to the intangible nature and the "characteristics of services" [129] (p. 59). Abratt and Kleyn [61] asserted, that poor interaction with stakeholders can affect the organization's reputation which may be tricky or even impossible for the organization to recover from. This is particularly relevant for the higher education sector, as demonstrated by Balmer and Greyser [130] (p. 906), who asserted, "the principal threat to a non-profit brand today comes from reputational trouble". Furthermore, Chapleo [131] suggested that upholding a strong reputation can be problematic if separate departments are seeking their own reputations, which is often the case in universities [74].

Waerass and Solbakk [56] considered the use of branding to be an effective instrument for improving competitiveness and reputation in universities. Indeed, Mazzarol et al. [132] found that a strong reputation is important if a university is to compete in the global market. Berger and Wallingford [133] found that the two most important selection criteria in choosing a university were reputation and academics. Moreover, further research suggested the image and reputation of the university are actually more important factors in influencing students' choice of university than the teaching quality [134].

4.3. Brand Heritage

Brand heritage is a recurring terminology in the literature. Urde et al. [135] (p. 4) defined brand heritage as "a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in the organizational belief that its history is important". Brand heritage has triggered much interest in the domain of branding, with an increasing amount of exploratory research emerging [136,137]. Aaker [36] suggested that heritage is important, as it adds authenticity and differentiation. Wiedmann et al. [138] reinforced this and added that the trustworthiness of a brand is heavily influenced by brand heritage, with consumers likely to place more trust in a heritage brand and associate less risk with it. The literature suggests that brand heritage creates and strengthens the consumer brand bond [138]. It is also used to create brand communities [139]. Indeed, the literature complements this suggestion by noting that a good reputation signifies historical success [140].

Brands need to be cultivated to be consistent in delivering on their promises, driven through their core values, according to Urde et al. [135] (p. 12), which will then lead to the "accumulation of credibility and trust". Brands are important assets that need to be maintained over the long term [66], as a brand's history is formed by the accumulation of experiences that will ultimately shape and influence consumer perceptions of the brand. Merchant and Ford [141] identified this nostalgia as extremely powerful for both non-profit and profit-making brands. Furthermore, studies have found that a strong brand heritage can lead to increased customer satisfaction, trustworthiness, brand attachment, and, ultimately, brand loyalty [138,142].

4.4. Brand Experience

Brand experience is defined as "a combination of memorable, subjective esoteric impressions varying in polarity and amplitude, in humans, triggered from brand interactions, which occur at various stages of contact with a brand" [143]. The notion of the brand creating and providing an experience for the consumer is prominent in the literature, with scholars such as de Chernatony et al. [144] proposing that brands enable a promise to be made about a unique and welcoming experience.

The literature continues to reinforce the importance of the brand experience felt by the consumer, as this may lead to a strong emotional bond between the consumer and the brand [145]. Taute and Sierra [146] suggested consumers want an emotional engagement with brands, so organizations need to create emotional relationships. Just the name of a brand can provide an accessible cue when consumers have limited information about the product or service [147]. Grisaffe and Nguyen [148] reinforced this, stating that once consumers have developed strong emotional bonds with a brand, they are much more likely to engage in buying only from that brand. This can result in brand loyalty strong enough for them to resist switching, even when there are very attractive incentives to do so. Berry [47] (p. 134) summarized this effectively by stating that "brands that connect emotionally are authentic summations of a company with a soul".

Harris and de Chernatony [73] suggested that increased competition, combined with rapid developments in technology, is making it difficult for organizations to create a sustainable competitive advantage. Instead, they are turning to differentiating themselves emotionally rather than relying on the functional characteristics of their brand. This is particularly relevant within the context of higher education, as highlighted by Clayton

et al. [149], who suggested public sector organizations, for example, universities, experience trouble finding a unique message to communicate, as they tend to be characterized by a "sea of sameness".

4.5. Brand Relationships

Heding et al. [150] (p. 172) argued that the relational approach of the organization's interaction with the consumer is the "one approach leading brand management into the twenty-first century". The relationship element of the branding process provides a new approach to branding models considering the consumer and brand as a connected relationship. Social psychology theories have been used as conceptual foundations in empirical research into relationship marketing; i.e., "relationships are built on the foundation of mutual commitment" [151] (p. 139). This shift represents the demand that modern-day consumers place on building long-lasting emotional relationships with the brands that they love. Accordingly, Heding et al. [150] (p. 21) proposed that the landscape has evolved from the "brand being 'owned' by the marketer, who controls the communication, to a more passive recipient/consumer [model]".

Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafé [152] referred to brands that act as being "socializing agents", which build relationships between the consumers and the brand. Equally, brands can also build strong, emotive communities between consumers that are all passionate about the same brand. Keller [112], and Schmitt [153] enforced the power brands have for facilitating consumers to explore their identity, influencing their social group aspirations, and providing a sense of social attachment and belonging through developing brand communities. Bhattacharya et al. [154] defined identification as "perceived oneness with or belongingness to an organization". The literature is conclusive that branding encourages personal exploration and expression as individuals and as part of a brand group [155]. Social interaction is a fundamental necessity for human existence and not only enforces social skills but adds quality and happiness to life [156]. This is affirmed by Knowles et al. [157], who agreed that humans have a basic need to experience a sense of belonging and to belong to a group not only for the need of survival but also for feelings of self-esteem and worth. Dahlberg [158] (p. 206) asserted that "all humans need to be connected".

Tajfel and Turner [159] discussed how social identity theory argues that an individual's connections to social groups or organizations are an important element when it comes to defining self-concepts. Social groups are collections of people with similar views and who identify with each other [160,161]. Ashforth and Mael [162] proposed that a person's social identity influences their engagement with certain activities which they feel support their identity. Thus, they may support organizations that demonstrate an identity or values that match their own. Scholars such as Park et al. [163] emphasized the point that brands give consumers a sense of who they are. This is powerful, as it can cause people to seek like-minded individuals within a "brand community". Thus, brands can be considered as being social constructions which can be influenced by consumers taking an active role in their creation and lifespan. Consumers then go on to share their brand preferences with other like-minded people, which grows more value for the brand [164].

4.6. Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as being "a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand" [14] (p. 390). Bowlby [165] investigated the theory of attachment and determined that individuals need to create bonds by developing relationships. We see evidence of bond building in brands. Muñiz and O'Guinn [123] (p. 412) defined a brand community as being "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand". They asserted that the formation of brand communities directly influences brand equity. Muñiz and O'Guinn [123] continued to explain the characteristics of brand communities as being (1) a shared consciousness or connection to the brand and the community members; (2) communal traditions, rituals, and

stories transmitting the community meaning and brand essence; and (3) a belief in a moral responsibility towards the entire brand community as well as individual brand members.

Bagozzi and Dholakia [166] asserted that brand communities provide a good environment for consumers to develop strong emotional connections with the brand. Lemon et al. [167] suggested that consumers who have a commitment to a brand community typically become "fiercely loyal". Muñiz and Schau [168] asserted that this loyalty is so passionate that it is actually comparable to religious zeal. McAlexander et al. [169] (p. 38) suggested that these brand communities can provide organizations with huge advantages such as being more forgiving with quality lapses or failures as well as being less prone to brand switching. Founier and Lee [170] asserted that brand communities should be given greater importance as a top-level business strategy to maximize the benefits that arise when they become established. Brand loyalty is a precious asset for an organization.

Strong brand attachment can result in the highest form of emotional connection, resulting in ultimate brand loyalty, i.e., "brand love", which is a contemporary marketing construct that assesses consumers' emotional loyalty to particular brands. It is a heightened emotional relationship between the consumer and the brand. For brand love to develop, there must first be customer satisfaction, and then, brand love itself is an antecedent of brand loyalty [171]. When brand love is measured, consumers are seen to show behaviors and develop emotional bonds with their brands that are similar to those they would experience with another human [172]. The results of brand love include brand loyalty, increased engagement, and positive word of mouth [173]. Consumers exhibiting brand love can help the brand grow, as they want to share their excitement about the brand [174].

5. Discussion

It is clear that a university needs to capitalize on their brand capabilities, and they can achieve through this a variety of means, starting with the development and communication of a clear brand vision with supporting values. A university's created brand must align with the overall strategic vision and long-term goals of the organization and must be a manifestation of their mission, vision, and values, which together need to be articulated in such a way that they resonate with both internal stakeholders (academic and non-academic staff) and external stakeholders (students, potential students, parents, and funders).

Senior leaders in a university need to be seen to endorse the brand, and more importantly, they need to be seen using it and creating a culture which support the values of the organization that the brand portrays. This will enhance brand equity and help to raise awareness and perception of what a university's brand means in practice, i.e., that the brand highlights the unique strength and direction of the organization so that awareness of the brand creates loyalty among key stakeholder groups. A university should create opportunities for emotional engagement by hosting events (especially ones sponsored by relevant external brand associations to piggyback on their own success) and undertaking activities that link to the traditions of students since together these may help to foster an enhanced sense of community. Celebrating the achievements of notable alumni reinforces the sense of brand heritage, and storytelling that highlights inspirational success stories linked to current staff, students, and research can be used to further build this emotional connection.

Ethical brand practices underpin brand implementation. These may be in the form of the social responsibility activities that a university undertakes but may also relate to a university's stance on important issues and challenges of the time. It is especially important that these issues and/or challenges are ones that the student and potential student bodies are facing or are particularly concerned about.

Even so, brand development needs to be seen to be a long-term project, so reactive short-term tactics that damage the brand need to be considered carefully. Alongside this, constant feedback from key stakeholder groups is necessary to ensure a university understands how its brand is being perceived and if it is meeting their expectations in terms of reach and impact. Any negative issues raised need to be addressed promptly to control the impact on a university's brand.

Students at university are increasingly coming from the population group known as Generation Z (Gen Z) [175,176]. One of the key characteristics of this group is the time that they spend on social media. This provides an important channel for universities to reach students using well-crafted digital campaigns that position a university as being a leader of education and innovation and so build brand equity. Such consistent messaging helps to enhance a university's reputation, leading to a potential growth in student numbers and increases in overall market performance. Communications that are personalized either to specific people or based upon particular needs may be a good way of ensuring that social media output is optimized in terms of its effectiveness.

The basic elements of brand and brand management, when applied to universities within the higher education sector, follows the same basic principles as it does in the private sector. However, how these elements are promoted and the dynamic nature of the student body which represents both current and potential future students makes implementation different. Furthermore, some universities, much like other public-sector organizations, have yet to recognize that the ongoing marketization of higher education means that thinking of brands and brand management with a more commercial perspective is essential for their survival. However, as brand equity needs time to grow and develop, universities need to consider each of the identified key dimensions of branding to ensure that they are able to control their own destiny.

5.1. Looking to the Future

Because of the fast-paced nature of this topic [177], it is worth considering the future and the ways that branding strategies for higher education may need to evolve and develop over the forthcoming years to enable universities to contest a global marketplace in which competition for students, funding, and reputation will be unprecedented [178]. Because of this, universities are now not only looking at local and national markets, but they also need to have a global reach, and this in turn increases the cost of marketing due to the added complexity of the activities required [179].

One of the factors which heavily influences international reputation is the position of a particular university in the various ranking tables, and the pressure to improve such metrics continues to grow [180]. Equally, at a time when many universities are offering quite similar educational opportunities in terms of the course content, creating differentiation is becoming increasingly challenging. In these times, the value and support of alumni and stakeholders is growing in importance [181], and the need to offer a niche specialization is becoming essential [182].

One such specialization for some universities is about being relevant to diverse groups of students and making a commitment to societal and ethical issues such as sustainability, equality, and social justice [183,184]. The use of genuine testimonials can help in this regard, as real stories from students and alumni can add to the authenticity of marketing messages [185]. Equally, at a time of rising tuition fees and living costs, addressing the perception of value for money is paramount [186], and the undertaken marketing activities need to demonstrate to prospective students the likely return on their investment of both time and money [187]. Alongside this, if there is a provision of scholarships and financial aid for students, then this needs to be clearly articulated, particularly for those universities seeking to reach student groups from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and/or who may be the "first in family" to attend university [188]. This includes information relating to how universities helped their students during the recent COVID-19 pandemic when many campuses were in lockdown and what post-pandemic support is being offered to ensure that safe learning can continue in the face of global events [189]. The use of technology is a key part of the solution that universities need to be more pro-active in discussing.

Not only is technology relevant in terms of online learning and flexible delivery [190], but increasingly, technology is being integrated within educational provision to enhance teaching quality [191], and a university's brand will need to recognize this and respond appropriately by demonstrating a commitment to innovation across their teaching and

learning delivery [192]. The recent artificial intelligence (AI) revolution is a prime example of this [193], and how universities respond to it will impact upon future trust and reputation [194]. Furthermore, students are increasingly expecting marketing that is personalized to their needs and expectations [195,196], and the use of technology is a way to achieve this through data-driven strategies that employ sophisticated customer relationship management systems [197].

These are just some of the future issues facing universities as they seek to develop their own contemporary branding strategies. Each institution must decide on its own priorities and then create a brand that encompasses them. For each university, these priorities may and in fact should be different to enable them to find their own niche in which they appeal to differing groups of students who value the same priorities and want to join together and form a community of learners.

5.2. Examples of Successful Branding Strategies

The University of Oxford in the U.K. is a good example of brand harmonization across the international market of higher education. The university leverages both its history and prestige, alongside its reputation for academic excellence, to create a brand centered around tradition and global influence that represents a combination of heritage and authority [74]. In contrast, the University of Melbourne in Australia has taken a more modern approach to its branding, again building upon their global appeal, but this time taking a geographical focus upon the Asia-Pacific region and emphasizing the student experience that they offer and the impact that they are having upon societal issues [198]. In a further example, the University of Cape Town has positioned itself as being a leading university for the continent of Africa in welcoming a diverse student body and stressing its commitment to social justice and transformation [199].

A different approach has been taken by Standford University, whose brand is focused upon innovation, entrepreneurship, and leadership. Located in the Silicon Valley in the U.S., it has developed a reputation for being a hub for technological development and has successfully incorporated this into its own brand identity by highlighting its achievements in "cutting edge" research, and the influence that its own alumni have had [56]. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has taken a similar approach, with its own branding being synonymous with technical advancement and problem solving applied to the global challenges of our time [10]. Similarly, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) has developed its branding to leverage links between its research into economics and societal issues and the impact it has globally [200]. In each of these cases, the emphasis upon impact has become an integral part of the brand, and this factor is expected to become pivotal to successful brands of the future.

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