



Brand Reputation Management in a Chinese Higher Educational Institution

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Abstract: Brand reputation management is of increasing importance in the highly competitive landscape of higher education institutions, particularly in the context of Chinese culture. This study explores the challenges and strategies related to managing brand reputation in a Chinese higher educational institution. It highlights the significance of brand reputation in attracting students, faculty, and external support, making it a critical aspect for these institutions. Drawing on the Reputation Quotient Model, this research examines reputation in terms of innovation, workplace culture, social responsibility, financial performance, emotional appeal, and products and services. It also explores the interplay between brand association, brand identity, and the overall quality of academic services and how these factors affect the perception of the institution. The study's findings reveal that the perceived quality, brand association, and brand identity play pivotal roles in shaping the brand reputation management of Chinese higher education institutions. The research provides valuable insights for institutions to enhance their brand management strategies, thus attracting and retaining high-quality faculty and students while fostering engagement with stakeholders and alumni. Additionally, it emphasizes the need for institutions to balance global and local perspectives to maintain brand relevance and reputation in the competitive higher education market. Ultimately, the study underscores the critical role brand reputation plays in the success of higher education institutions in China.

Keywords: Brand reputation management, Brand Reputation Management, Higher Education Institutions, Brand identity, Perceived Quality

Introduction

Brand reputation management has become increasingly important in today's competitive business environment. It refers to monitoring and influencing the perceptions of stakeholders and the general public about a brand to maintain a positive image and reputation. In the context of higher education institutions, it plays a crucial role in attracting students, faculty, and funding.

Branding is a way for universities to differentiate themselves from many others in highly competitive market. A university brand refers to the image and reputation represented, by which is composed of factors such as the university's history, culture, educational quality, and social recognition^[1]. A strong university brand can help schools achieve success in enrollment, recruitment, fundraising, and increase their reputation and influence. The importance lies in enhancing its attractiveness and recognition. A well-known and well-established one can attract more outstanding teachers, students, and partners to the school, and enhance public recognition and trust in the school^[2]. University education has become a highly competitive market.

This study explores its significance, particularly within the context of higher education institutions, as it plays a pivotal role in attracting students, faculty, and funding. Universities employ branding as a strategy to distinguish themselves in a highly competitive market, with a university's brand encompassing factors like its history, culture, educational quality, and social recognition. A strong university brand yields benefits in enrollment, recruitment, fundraising, and reputation enhancement, making it a key element in enhancing attractiveness and recognition.

Brand reputation is vital for student enrollment, as prospective students heavily rely on an institution's reputation when making decisions. Similarly, it influences faculty recruitment and retention, as distinguished faculty members seek institutions with positive brand reputations. Additionally, it impacts the institution's relationships with external stakeholders, including alumni and employers. Understanding the significance of brand reputation is crucial for effective management, especially in the context of Chinese culture, which places great emphasis on reputation and prestige.

This research aims to explore the dynamics of brand reputation management in a Chinese higher educational institution, shedding light on current practices, challenges, and the cultural specificity of brand reputation management. It contributes to the knowledge on this topic and provides valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing brand image and crisis management strategies in the Chinese higher education sector.

Literature Review

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There are many universities and colleges throughout the world that use marketing and brand management strategies to obtain a competitive edge[3]. Higher education institutions can use all of the service-related marketing strategies because this industry relates to services. The students, employers, and general public as recipients of higher education services will be the clients in this scenario for educational services. The primary consumers in this instance are students, in accordance with the principles of market segmentation and targeting^[4].

An overview of brand (reputation) management in Chinese higher education institutions presents a picture that calls for taking proactive measures to increase the attraction of the institutional brand in order to attract top candidates for admission and guarantee that the institution's strategic objectives are met. This strategy includes accepting the competition's challenge, implementing internal corrections, and then making sure that all branding components are in perfect harmony. This is a way to make the aforementioned happen.

The positioning statement for higher education branding, which grounds its distinctive brand image in intense competition, is what makes it work^[5]. Therefore, careful adjustments are required when using positioning attributes in higher education branding portfolios^[6] in order to implement the best and most accurate branding strategy. In this field, a brand should lead to the creation of marketing plans that will enable an institution to endure over the long term^[7].

McGrath^[8] suggests additional study to evaluate the marketing environment in higher education. When 111 college deans from various academic specialties were polled in 1991 by Taylor and Darling on their attitudes^[9], finding that while these professionals generally agreed that marketing was necessary, they were skeptical of its effects on enhancing the institutions' overall quality. Michael^[10] and colleagues spoke with 96 Canadian higher only a fraction of students actively participated in marketing research and product development, according to school officials. Professionals at 59 institutions were polled by Kittle^[11], who focused on their perspectives on media use and the relative importance of various target audience groups are issues connected to advertising.

According to McGrath^[8], "there seems to be a chance to tread new ground by investigating which institutional functional area is in charge of college and university marketing, and then to attempt to gauge these functional sectors' perceived efficiency in carrying out marketing initiatives.

Some claim that developing the institutional brand is the higher education marketing team's main duty. In this regard, it is believed that how higher education institutions present themselves to the public affects how that public perceives the institution^[12,13]. According to Kirp^[14], the reputation of an institution is identical with its brand and is prized by the most prestigious institutions of higher education institutions.

The main factor influencing a brand's commercial success and monetary rewards is its perceived quality^[15]. Perceived quality is one of the key factors that influence brands to carry particular items, according to Huang^[16]. The value of a brand will increase with the level of perceived quality. Being a marketer, one must remember that the claims made in an advertisement must be close to, if not identical to, the product's real output. Otherwise, efforts to increase perceived quality will be ineffective. For instance, independent studies may reveal that a motorcycle with the best fuel efficiency is actually the worst. These exaggerated statements may directly endanger the reputation of the brand.

In terms of Higher Education, an institution with a poor reputation in the past may find it difficult to reinvent itself as a high-quality institution in the education market. The institution must therefore undergo a radical transformation in order to provide the services, programs, and facilities that students have come to anticipate from institutions of high perceived value. Consumers may find it challenging to distinguish between all the new and old offerings when an old image is reinvented or reformed, making it tough to judge quality^[15]. Higher education institutions have a similar problem, making it difficult for customers to compare the quality of their old offerings to their new portfolios.

Lessons from Crisis Management in Branding

Crisis management is a critical aspect of brand reputation management in higher educational institutions. During times of crisis, such as scandals, accidents, or incidents that harm the institution's reputation, effective crisis management strategies are essential to restore and maintain a positive brand image.

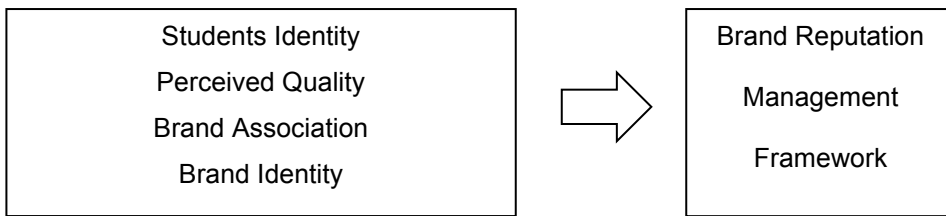
Existing research provides valuable insights into crisis management in branding, both within the higher education sector and other industries. Scholars have explored different approaches and strategies for managing crises, such as crisis communication, crisis response, and reputation repair.

One prominent theoretical perspective in crisis management is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs^[20] in 2007. This theory suggests that organizations should tailor their crisis response strategies based on the type of crisis and the stakeholders involved. Further research has also highlighted the significance of social media in crisis management. With the rise of social media platforms, higher educational institutions need to monitor and respond promptly to online conversations and address any negative sentiments.

Framework of the Study

This research is anchored on the Reputation Quotient Model developed by Harris Fomburn and Cees van Riel, The RQ model evaluates reputation on the basis of seven criteria: innovation, workplace culture, social responsibility, financial performance, emotional appeal, and products and services.

Figure 1. *Conceptual framework on Brand Reputation Management*



Brand Association and Brand Identity

The quality of a brand is directly correlated with its association, as previously said. According to Keller^[17], brand connections can be further divided into many types of associations, such as associations with price, customization, emotional attachment, and product qualities. The brand identity shapes these associations, which makes the consumer a repeat buyer. The brand association took steps to construct a communication message that may lead to a high perception of a product's or service's value. Brand association in higher education can be defined as having qualified faculty, programs or courses that interest you, a reasonable tuition structure, connections to the business world, etc. In order to position itself as a student association-friendly university, a developing brand must include certain association parameters in its marketing efforts.

The quality of academic services has a crucial impact on the development and reputation of students, teachers, researchers, and institutions, as it directly affects their learning and research experience, as well as the reputation and competitiveness of institutions. High-quality academic services can attract more students and faculty, improve their satisfaction and loyalty, and contribute to the reputation of institutions worldwide^[18]. At the same time, providing good academic services can also help institutions obtain more funds and sponsorship, thereby promoting the development and innovation of institutions. Therefore, high-quality academic services are extremely important for the long-term success and sustainable development of any higher education or research institution.

By simply distinguishing the level of perception—how a brand wants to be regarded as brand identity, whereas how it is really perceived by customers is the brand image—Brand Identity Aaker^[15] distinguishes between brand identity and brand image. The provision of "direction, purpose, and meaning of the brand" is a result of brand identity, he continues. This established criteria for a target market for whom more organized branding should be carried out. The brand image aims to deliver on the promises made to the customer^[19], and a brand identity frequently results from interactions with the customer that strengthen the relationship of trust between the producer and the consumer, giving the brand the status of a competitive advantage this could mean quality customer service.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing a questionnaire survey method based on the Brand Identity Planning Model. Qualitative research allows for a deeper exploration of participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences. Given the multifaceted nature of brand reputation in higher education, understanding how students, high school students, and university teachers perceive and interact with the concept is essential. The use of open-ended survey questions permits rich, nuanced responses that can shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of brand reputation. The questionnaire survey consists of four distinct sections. The first section collects relevant background variables from the participants. The second section is dedicated to measuring Perceived Quality ^[15], while the third section focuses on the measurement of Brand Association. The fourth and final section is designed to measure Brand Identity.

Environment/Locale:

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring that the collected data originate from individuals who possess a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and can provide valuable insights. The survey encompasses a total of 320 respondents. Among these, 243 respondents are affiliated with Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology, 42 respondents are from Maoming High School in Guangdong Province, and the remaining 35 respondents represent various other Chinese universities. This diverse participant pool ensures a comprehensive and insightful analysis of brand reputation within the Chinese higher education sector.

Presentation of The Results

After the survey from the various participating customers, the data were then tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted in this section. This was intended to determine the student's perceptions University Brand in China.

Table 1. *Students' Perception on Perceived Quality*

No	Items	Students Response	
		M	Interpretation
1	Campus facilities are complete.	2.77	Agree

2	Academic Support Services are available	2.79	Agree
3	Opportunities for practice and internship are satisfactory.	2.65	Agree
4	High employment rate is evident.	2.58	Agree
5	The university cultivates leadership and teamwork skills.	2.70	Agree
	Factor Average	2.69	Agree

Legend: 3.26-4.0(Strongly Agree), 2.51-3.25(Agree), 1.76-2.50(Moderately Agree), 1.00-1.75(Disagree)

Table 1 displays respondents' perceptions of the influence of choosing a college/university based on perceived quality. This domain scored 2.69 or Agree overall, with the item "Academic Support Services are available" receiving the highest rating of 2.79 or Agree. "High employment rate is evident" received the lowest rating of 2.58 or Agree. In a study by Warwick and Mansfield^[21], several authors (Krukowski^[22]; Sekely and Yates^[23]; Shank and Beasley^[24]; Widdows and Hilton^[25]) discovered that the most crucial factors when prospective students and their parents engage in the process of assessing functional risk are the caliber of academic staff, caliber of majors of interest, and overall academic reputation.

Table 2. Students' Perception on Brand Association.

No	Items	Students Response	
		M	Interpretation
1	You feel satisfied with the brand image of your university.	2.70	Agree
2	When choosing a university brand, you first associate it with reputable universities.	3.04	Agree
3	The university brand is associated with high-quality teaching in your mind.	3.00	Agree
4	You associate a university brand with an excellent alumni network.	2.85	Agree
5	When it comes to the brand of a university, you associate it with characteristics related to innovation and research.	2.97	Agree
6	The brand of a university for you is related to diversity and inclusivity.	3.06	Agree
7	The brand of a university to you is related to social responsibility and public welfare activities.	3.05	Agree
8	You associate geographical location and environment with the brand of a university.	2.98	Agree
9	A good brand of a university to you is associated to job opportunities and career development.	3.15	Agree
10	You make sure that you have emotional associations with the university's brand.	2.99	Agree
	Factor Average	2.98	Agree

Legend: 3.26-4.0(Strongly Agree), 2.51-3.25(Agree), 1.76-2.50(Moderately Agree), 1.00-1.75(Disagree)

This table depicts the domain brand association and how this domain influences respondents' university/college choice. The highest of the three domains, with a total average of 2.98 or Agree. This table also demonstrates that the item "A good brand of a university to you is associated with job opportunities and career development" has the highest rate of 3.15 or Agree of all items. "You feel satisfied with the brand image of your university," with a rating of 2.70 or Agree, is the least rated item in this area. According to Beneke^[26], the status quo has been impacted by changes in student choices, demographic shifts, and finally, the always evolving demands of the labor market. Future study must include crucial cross-national comparisons to understand how HEIs' efforts to control their brand reputation have affected students' decisions about which HEI to attend. More evidence is needed to determine whether brand reputation management is being used to address challenges with changing student choices and how it is assisting in employ ability outcomes in the face of constantly changing job market requirements.

Table 3. Students' Perception on Brand Identity.

No	Items	Students Response	
		M	Interpretation
1	The reputation of the university you have chosen in terms of campus life is satisfactory.	2.77	Agree
2	You are satisfied with the academic reputation of your chosen university.	2.76	Agree
3	You believe that the reputation of your chosen university in terms of job opportunities is satisfactory	2.71	Agree
4	You are satisfied with the performance of your chosen university in terms of	2.85	Agree

	social responsibility.		
5	You believe that the brand identity of your university is consistent with its actual requirements.	2.80	Agree
6	You are willing to recommend your university to others.	2.71	Agree
7	You believe that the brand identity of a university is very important for your personal development.	2.99	Agree
8	You think your university is highly recognized among peers.	2.58	Agree
9	You think that your university has been actively promoted in the media.	2.67	Agree
10	You think your university can attract excellent faculty and staff.	2.70	Agree
11	When choosing a university, you refer to the alumni group and their successful experiences.	1.36	Disagree
12	You think your university can increase your social status or reputation.	3.00	Agree
	Factor Average	2.66	Agree

Legend: 3.26-4.0(Strongly Agree), 2.51-3.25(Agree), 1.76-2.50(Moderately Agree), 1.00-1.75(Disagree)

This table depicts the domain's brand identity and how it influences respondents' choice of university/college. Respondents are taking this domain into account, as evidenced by a total factor average of 2.66 or Agree in this area. Clark and Crawford^[27] put forth the concepts of academic integration and social integration, according to Warwick and Mansfield (2003). The former refers to how well a student performs academically, while the latter concerns the student's achievement in their personal and social lives. They contend that both forms of integration are crucial for students since the likelihood that they will finish their academic program increases with increasing student-institution compatibility.

Discussion

The majority of respondents were pleased with the perceived quality of education provided by the institution. This indicates that the school has effectively created a reputation, particularly in the availability of academic support services, which is a key aspect in building a brand's reputation in the higher education industry. Furthermore, the survey revealed that brand association played a significant role in influencing the respondents toward institution's brand reputation. Respondents expressed positive associations with the institution, such as its reputation for social responsibility & public welfare activities, innovative teaching methods, and strong industry connections. These associations contribute to the positive brand image of the institution and enhance its reputation in the eyes of stakeholders. Additionally, the survey findings highlighted the importance of brand identity in managing brand reputation. The majority of respondents identified the institution's brand identity as being consistent and well-defined in terms of its social status reputation and its contribution to the personal development of the students. This indicates that the institution has effectively communicated its unique values, vision, and mission to its stakeholders. A strong and coherent brand identity is crucial for building and maintaining a positive brand reputation.

Overall, based on the evaluation of respondents, there is a significant influence on school selection decisions in terms of perceived quality, brand association, and brand identity. Meanwhile, a comprehensive analysis of the survey results indicates that perceived quality, brand association, and brand identity are key factors in shaping the brand reputation management of Chinese higher education institutions. These findings provide valuable insights for universities to improve their brand management strategies.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of brand reputation management for Chinese higher education institutions. It finds that perceived quality, brand association, and brand identity are critical factors influencing brand reputation. Effective management of these elements can attract high-quality faculty and students, engage stakeholders and alumni, and position institutions for success in a competitive academic landscape. The study emphasizes the need to balance global and local perspectives to maintain brand relevance. Overall, it underscores that brand reputation is a key determinant of success in Chinese higher education, impacting enrollment, faculty recruitment, stakeholder engagement, and overall institutional strength.

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