



**CONFIGURING INTEGRATED MARKETING
COMMUNICATION TOWARDS BRAND IMAGE AND
BRAND EQUITY OF MALAYSIAN HIGHER
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

Due to its unique characteristics (variability, perishability, inseparability and so on), managing a service brand is relatively challenging compared to product industry. In addition, numerous perceived risks are associated with it. The branding of a service can therefore play crucial role in minimizing the risks and give assurance to the service receivers. Higher education as a service provider is also not an exception. Better educational institution is no longer based only on its history and tradition. Establishing a good brand is synonymous with engaging to greater brand equity where brand image is an integral part of it. Brand equity does not only mean brand loyalty but it also denotes confirmed engagement, community feelings and more importantly love marks for the institutions. This consequently leads to positive words of mouth which is an expected action from the service receivers. Marketing communication is treated as a voice of a brand and serves as a bridge between service providers and receivers. However, a comprehensive review of the literature reveals that higher education industry in Malaysia is almost nowhere in terms of coping with the multitude of marketing communication tools (different online and conventional communication methods). It is noted that Malaysia is a prominent place for international education and it sets its vision to become one of the top educational hubs in its vision 2020. In line with this, the current study is aimed at configuring integrated marketing communication towards brand equity and brand image of Malaysian higher educational institutions. The study is quantitative in nature and the selection of the respondents is based on stratified random sampling technique. As a result, more than 350 respondents were chosen from different private and public higher learning institutions in the county. Exploratory factor analysis is used to fit the right items for each construct and structural equation modelling technique is applied to assess the relationship between and among the constructs. The result of the study reveals that brand image is directly related to brand equity of the industry. It is also revealed that brand image plays the role of mediator in establishing relationship between brand equity and conventional marketing communication as well as online marketing communication. In addition, conventional marketing communication has a direct relationship with brand equity. However, the study does not indicate a direct relationship between online marketing communication and brand equity of Malaysian higher education service. Furthermore, in multi group analysis, the study reveals that there is no significant difference between the perception of service providers and service receivers. However, it reveals some key points which suggest that students' opinion differs from the service providers. The findings of the study are the most valuable asset for higher educational institutions in particular and the Ministry of Education in Malaysia as a whole and those who are struggling to configure its marketing communication tools to create better brand image and brand equity of their institutions. Practitioners, academicians, policy makers and researchers can also benefit from the present study. Further research based on the application of mix methods is recommended to extend the opening of service receivers and providers. In addition, private and public institutions can be studied independently due to the differences in their nature.

خلاصة البحث

تُعتبر ادارة المنتج الخدمي أصعب نسبيا من إدارة قطاع المنتجات وذلك بسبب خصائصه الفريدة مثل (التغير، التلف ، التلازم ونحو ذلك). اضيف الى ذلك المخاطر المرتبطة بها. وبالتالي فان من الممكن للعلامة التجارية للخدمة ان تلعب دورا هاما في التقليل من المخاطر ومنح الثقة لمستقبلي الخدمة. والتعليم العالي كمزود خدمة لا يُستثنى من ذلك حيث ان المؤسسة التعليمية الجيدة لم تعد تعتمد على تاريخها وتقاليدها فقط. فإنشاء علامة تجارية جيدة هو مرادف لقيمة العلامة التجارية حيث تكون صورة العلامة التجارية جزء لا يتجزأ منها. وقيمة العلامة التجارية لا تعني الولاء لها فقط ولكنها تدل ايضا على المشاركة المؤكدة، المشاعر المجتمعية والاهم من ذلك علامات المحبة للمؤسسات. وسيؤدي هذا بالتالي الى كلمات مُتناقلة ايجابية من مستقبلي الخدمة كما هو مُتوقع. يتم التعامل مع الاتصالات التسويقية كصوت للعلامة التجارية وتكون ايضا مثل جسر بين مقدمي الخدمات ومستقبليها. ومع ذلك، فان استعراض شامل للأدبيات يظهر أن صناعة التعليم العالي في ماليزيا لا تتعامل كثيرا مع العديد من أدوات الاتصال التسويقية (وسائل الاتصال المختلفة التقليدية منها وعلى الانترنت). ما ينبغي ملاحظته هو أن ماليزيا مكانة بارزة في التعليم الدولي حيث تهدف رؤيتها لان تصبح واحدة من أكبر المراكز التعليمية بحلول العام 2020. وبناء على هذا، فان الدراسة الحالية تهدف الى تكوين اتصالات تسويقية متكاملة نحو قيمة العلامة التجارية وصورتها لمؤسسات التعليم العالي الماليزية. فهذه الدراسة هي دراسة كمية بطبيعتها وتم اختيار العينة على اسلوب العينة العشوائية. حيث تم اختيار أكثر من 350 مستجيب من مؤسسات التعليم العالي الخاصة والحكومية المختلفة في البلاد. وتعد هذه الدراسة الكمية في الطبيعة ويستند اختيار العينة على اسلوب العينة العشوائية. ونتيجة لذلك، تم اختيار أكثر من 350 المجيبين من مؤسسات التعليم العالي الخاصة والعامة المختلفة في المحافظة. وقد تم توظيف التحليل العاملي الاستكشافي لتحديد العناصر المناسبة لكل عامل وكذلك استخدام معادلة النمذجة الهيكلية لتقييم العلاقة العوامل. وقد كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن صورة العلامة التجارية مرتبطة ارتباطا مباشرا بقيمة العلامة التجارية لصناعة التعليم العالي. كما أظهرت النتائج أن صورة العلامة التجارية تلعب دور الوسيط في العلاقة بين قيمة العلامة التجارية والاتصالات التسويقية التقليدية وكذلك الاتصال التسويقي عبر الإنترنت. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، فان الاتصالات التسويقية التقليدية لديها علاقة مباشرة مع قيمة العلامة التجارية. ومع ذلك، هذه الدراسة لا تشير إلى وجود علاقة مباشرة بين الاتصال التسويقي عبر الإنترنت وقيمة العلامة التجارية في القطاع الخدمي للتعليم العالي الماليزي. بالإضافة الى ذلك، تظهر الدراسة عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة احصائية في التصور بين مزودي الخدمة ومستقبليها. غير ان الدراسة تقترح ان اراء الطلاب مختلفة عن اراء مزودي الخدمة. تعتبر نتائج هذه الدراسة من أهم الاصول القيمة لمؤسسات التعليم العالي بشكل خاص و زارة التربية والتعليم في ماليزيا بشكل عام، وكذلك أولئك الذين يكافحون من أجل تكوين أدوات اتصال تسويقية لخلق صورة علامة تجارية وقيمة علامة تجارية افضل لمؤسساتهم. كما يمكن للممارسين والأكاديميين وصانعي السياسات والباحثين الاستفادة من هذه الدراسة. توصي هذه الدراسة الى إجراء مزيد من البحوث التي تستخدم منهجية بحثية مختلطة لتمديد فتح استقبال الخدمة ومقدمي الخدمات. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، يمكن دراسة المؤسسات الخاصة والعامة بشكل مستقل، نظرا لاختلافها.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

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Affirmed by Md. Abdul Momen

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To

*My Respected Parents,
Beloved Wife and Adorable Daughter*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVE	Average variance extracted
AMOS	Analysis of Moments Structures
BE	Brand equity
BI	Brand image
CFA	Confirmatory factor analysis
CFI	Comparative fit index
CMC	Conventional marketing communication
CPE	Cost per exposure
C R	Critical ratio
C R	Constructs reliability
EFA	Exploratory factor analysis
GFI	Goodness of fit index
HE	Higher education
IMC	Integrated marketing communication
MOE	Ministry of Education
OMC	Online marketing communication
PR	Public relation
RMSEA	Root mean square of error approximation
SEM	Structural equation modelling
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

In spite of its early involvement with the traditional consumer goods only, branding has currently grown to become the core part of service and non-profit organizations as well. Taking its distinct features (like intangibility, variability, inseparability) into consideration, it is argued that brand image can play the crucial role for a service industry in building strong brand equity (Ha, John, Janda, & Muthaly, 2011). A review of the literature suggests that higher educational institutions like other service organizations are also heading towards the brand building activities to ensure their long term superior position above their competitors (Bunzel, 2007; Waeraas & Slobakk, 2008; Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011). Many of these institutions adopt various marketing tools like advertising, public relation, online communication, direct marketing and so on to create their respective distinct image (Ho & Hung, 2008). However, a comprehensive review of the literature does not show the strong presence of strategic coordination of these promotional tools or the use of integrated marketing communication in creating the brand image of higher education service towards overall consumer brand equity, particularly in the context of Malaysia which is aspiring to become one of the best educational service providers in the world (www.moe.com). It is to be noted that positive brand equity is a fundamental indicator that shows the effectiveness of each employed communication tool (Mourad et al., 2011). Prior to the use of each marketing communication techniques, one needs to confirm its projected value.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The role of branding and brand management has been elevated to a greater level of importance in today's global marketplace. The most distinctive character of a marketer indisputably lies in their ability or performance to manage and build a brand (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). It happens because the brand is taken as the most powerful asset which symbolizes the essence of an institution, outlasting the organization's specific products, services and benefits. Hence it must be carefully managed and developed (Royo-vela & Casamassima, 2011).

Since brand represents customer feelings and perception about a product and its overall performance, the actual value of a good brand depends on its ability to attain consumer preference towards the ultimate brand equity (Kotler & Keller, 2010). As brand equity is recognized as the most valuable intangible asset for an institution, it works as the most influential differentiator for the organization or business entity as a decision taking tool (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2008).

The knowledge of the service receivers or consumers about the particular brand also influences how marketers market the brand. Fundamentally, brand equity is established by educating and creating awareness with the strategic investment in marketing communication channels. This could consequently lead to the growth of critical association, prestige value as a non-financial outcome and economic growth in market share, profit margin and high return on investment as the financial outcome (Till, Baack, & Waterman, 2011).

To achieve strong customer based brand equity, it is imperative on marketer to look beyond loyalty. It requires the active engagement of the customer with the brands in order to deliver and develop the community feelings in posing love marks in their

mind and heart where positive word of mouth is the most common outcome (Rios & Riquelme, 2010)

A brand with good image builds customer based brand equity through managing trust which eventually lead to the continuous demand and profitability (Reicheld, 2006). Therefore, as an integral part of marketing, branding is recognized as capable of creating corporate identity as well as reputation. Due to its importance, institutions in the service industry have equally developed a tremendous interest towards the utilization of the branding strategies to manage stronger brands. In this circumstance, higher educational institutions have also started to realize the necessity to manage long term brand strategies (Chapleo, 2010).

In order to meaningfully manage and create differentiable brand image and positive brand equity which effectively communicate their strength, branding has become a strategic issue for most higher learning institution (Jevons, 2006). Due to the recent economic environment (after 2000), most of the higher learning institutions face the unfavourable financial situation, more enduring is that many of the higher learning institutions (i.e. brands) compete for the same students in the broader market place (Atakan & Eker, 2007). In addition, relatively simple and straight forward traditional promotional tools are no longer effective as they did in the past. Since today's students are well exposed and equipped with various communication tools of digital world, higher educational institutions more often struggle to realize and embrace their actual needs (Durkin, Mckenna, & Cummins, 2012).

In this context of growing demand, institutions are moving towards branding and building favourable brand image as they need to survive in many cases. Besides the institutional level, most governments have also taken the initiative to introduce and promote their country as global educational hub with strategizing branding

programs through various promotional tools. For instance, in the context of increased competition, UK government initiated global re-branding exercise campaign to develop a competitive and clear image for the higher learning institutions in order to retain and attract local and international students respectively (Hemsely & Goonawardana, 2007).

Many of the studies focused on branding of the universities as the main factor to attract and retain students (Gray et al., 2006; Mazzarol, 2008). Nowadays, in highly competitive and complex marketplace, higher educational institutions have moved to employ branding as a solution in dealing with the global opportunities and challenges (Whisman, 2007). Since a university or college as service provider is tied with unique sorts of characteristics, undifferentiated mass of process and people (Scaultz, 2006), the challenges of marketing lie on differentiating the institution so that they are preferred by the service receivers (Berry, 2000; Zeihtmal, 2006). More specifically, heterogeneity is the most important challenge in managing branding for a service organization (Ostrom et al., 2005) and higher education service is also not an exception. As an institution can differentiate its service by providing the value in accordance with the desires of different segments with different tools of product or service, it needs to understand how dissimilarity are perceived by the specific segments (Wang, 2011).

Considering the different groups of people with whom the higher learning institutions need to communicate, different tools are supposed to be used for different set of people. Most of the literature on higher educational branding argue that students are the main interest group for whom the overall branding and marketing communication messages are designed (Chapleo, 2011; Ivy 2008; Durkin et al., 2012), to remind, inform and persuade and to build a positive image about the service as they

are the direct receiver of the service (value creation activities, involvement with student organization, interaction with staff, other students and faculty). It is argued that without a better student learning experience, the remaining stakeholders could not even exist (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011).

To establish the brand equity of any service organization, unlike the product oriented business, service organization has to look forward to the positive brand image as the primary concern (Lee, Lee, & Wu, 2011a). The product oriented firms on the other hand need to manage both brand image and identity simultaneously (Spry, Pappu, & Cornwell, 2011). The nature of service such as intangibility, variability pushes the service industry to capture the image that the concerned organization wants in the minds of the organization in reducing the potential risk. Higher education service is no more different from this philosophy while students are treated as consumer and institutions are competing with each other to create their own distinct place in the minds of their prospect (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008).

There is a positive perception about the relationship between integrated marketing communication mix and brand image of the organization in managing overall positive brand equity (Baidya & Maity, 2010). However, most of the literature are only concentrating on the linkage between specific tools of IMC and the brand image or brand equity while the IMC concept as a whole is not depicted. For instance, a study predicts the relationship between advertisement and brand image of the higher educational service (Meenaghan, 1995) while another study shows the relationship of online communication with the brand image of various service (Angus & Oppenheim, 2004).

1.2.1 Higher educational service in Malaysia: A snapshot

The operation of higher educational service in Malaysia is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MOE). Malaysian government is always keen to develop the sector as their priority area while it enjoys the highest national development budget which in no doubt indicate the commitment of the government towards education (Najib et al., 2011).

Malaysia has become a global education hub with an estimated number of more than a million students in 2011 of which 93000 are international students from different parts of the world (over 100 countries). On the other hand, 27003 sponsored and 62683 self-funded students are studying overseas as of the year 2011 (www.moe.gov.my).

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with a population of over 28 million; it has 20 public universities, more than fifty private universities, over 400 private colleges, 73 community colleges, 30 polytechnics and 6 foreign university branch campuses in 2011 (Najib et al., 2011). A wide range of tertiary educational qualification has been offered by all these institutions at highly affordable price.

Several higher educational institutions from many developed nations such as Canada, USA, Australia, UK, New Zealand offer twinning and '3+0' programmes with various Malaysian private institutions. In addition, some renowned universities such as the Royal College of Surgeons, RMIT University and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine have been attached with collaboration with the concerned local public higher educational institutions (www.moe.gov.my).

Among the 20 public universities in Malaysia, the government has given six higher learning institutions the research university status while the rest of the universities are categorized as either focus universities or comprehensive universities.

The government of Malaysia has given the ministry of education the mandate to take these initiatives to encourage excellence among all local higher learning institutions.

Since Malaysia is aspiring and working towards becoming a developed nation by the year 2020, the government of Malaysia takes education as their priority sector besides other sectors to become the centre of excellence (www.moe.gov.my). It plans to become one of the top higher education hubs across the world. There are two basic objectives behind the plan. First is to manage the skillful, competent and knowledgeable workforce while the other is to attract the best raw materials (students) for the higher education service across the world. This is where the brand image comes to play (Beerrens, 2004). Besides the improvement of quality education, the marketing communication has major role to play in developing the perceived brand image in the mind of the stakeholders including the students while it will also help to enhance the overall brand equity which is nowadays treated as the common objective for most of the communication efforts (Ho & Hung, 2008).

1.2.2 Brand equity, brand image and higher educational branding

Brand equity is a marketing concept that articulates the overall value of achieving a well-known brand. Since customer or service receivers believe that a brand with strong equity is better than the other counterparts particularly for the customer based organization, it is treated as the fundamental assessor of all marketing communication activities (Rios & Riquelme, 2010; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008).

Brand equity goes beyond the brand loyalty and justifies the level of engagement, community feelings and assesses if the consumers or service receivers carry the love marks for the organization (Keller & Lehmann, 2003).

Brand image is the core part of long term customer loyalty and the greater brand equity (Lee, Lee, & Wu, 2011). To define the brand image in comprehensive manner Keller (2008, 1998) shows its linkage with the association of the strength, favourability and uniqueness of the brand. In dealing with the brand image, Duncan (2002) suggested that it comes as a result of brand experience that take place in the mind of the consumers with the flow of information.

In dealing with the brand image, Chapelo (2008) argues that before engaging with any of brand related matters, one should know its subsequent consequences among the target group. In addition, in developing the correct brand image the strength, favourability and uniqueness of the brand should be taken into consideration (Keller, 2008). Hence, one needs to give importance to the brand image of the organization with taking brand identity into consideration in order to influence the customer and make sure of their brand equity.

In defining the strength of the brand association, Keller (2008) suggested that direct experience can be useful for the determination of brand attributes as well as brand benefit. Brand attributes include the physical features that are associated with the product directly. Conversely, brand benefit attaches personal value with the distinguish meaning of the product. Other outcomes of direct experiences can be quality, word of mouth and price (Pinar et al., 2011). In addition to the uniqueness of the brand or “unique selling propositions” (USP) which is termed as the prime reason to buy anything, it may also be as a result of the direct comparison or non-product related attributes. In many aspects the uniqueness is also termed as points of difference (POD).

In higher educational (HE) branding and marketing activities, image related factors are far more significant than the traditional awareness related determinants to

create the strong brand equity (Mourad et al., 2011). Due to the immense global competition, the universities as a whole should incorporate the students view and the social requirement into their strategies along with other factors in terms of their marketing and other branding activities (Chapelo, 2011).

Moreover, the branding of a higher educational institution significantly involved with the emotional attachment and the brand feeling of the current and future students (Durkin et al., 2012). Hence, it is very important to discover the students (consumer) perception about the image of their university in terms of the higher educational branding.

1.2.3 Integrated marketing communication: An introduction

IMC concept has received substantial focus from the very beginning of its emergence, maturity and espousal in the marketing literature (Brown, 2007). The early adopter like Schultz (2003) defines the concept as the development and execution of the credible communication programs for current and future customer over time. Duncan (2002) has extended the idea with putting the ‘relationship’ as a core fact between the stakeholders. Kliatchko (2006) who has been working with IMC for over a decade (mid 90s to 2006) defines it as an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels, and results of brand communication programs.

The massive use of IMC is common in the corporate practice today. It is used to reach the long term customer satisfaction and to create competitive products and service in the market. The creation of the desired competitive advantage in the marketing study is considered as a major development of marketing communication strategy (Kitchen, Schultz, Kim, Han, & Li, 2004). They argued that IMC plays a