

Chapter #24

THE PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYEES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY BRAND: SPANISH CONTEXT CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This research was carried out to examine the role of brand capital in higher education. For this purpose, the main contributions of the literature to the study of brand capital and its application to the education sector were analyzed. Then, the variables determining brand capital in the higher education sector were identified and a comparison between the main employees was made. Once the educational brand capital construct was established, an empirical study was carried out using a valid sample of 1,106 responses (690 from lecturers and 416 from service staff, belonging to eight public and private universities in Valencia (Spain)). SPSS v.19 for Windows and EQS 6.2 were used as statistical work tools. The present investigation fills a gap in the marketing discipline because it is considered that there are no current investigations that analyze the perception of the brand capital through the opinions of the main employees involved in Spanish universities. The results obtained show the effects of each variable of brand capital in relation to the determining variables and, especially, to brand awareness, thus, helping the university managers to decipher the key aspects for their employees and thereby generate strategies to maintain them or improve them.

Keywords: marketing, brand capital, higher education, university employees, structural equation modeling, Spain.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and free trade have meant that public universities have lost growth in recent times, in terms of enrollment of new students and attraction of talent. This implies an increase in the same parameters within the private university environment (Salgado & González, 2015). In the Spanish environment, according to the 2020 report developed by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, there are currently around 50 public universities and 37 private ones. Thus, Retamosa (2018) highlights the need to build an education brand, seeking to differentiate itself from aggressive competition and cover a greater share of the student market. Within this marketing strategy, one must aim at maximizing brand capital, defined as an individual relationship and the experience of each consumer with the brand, although universal guidelines and behaviors can be generalized (Casanoves, 2019). University agents become a fundamental part of the process, and they must be considered as professionals but also as people (Zabalza, 2016). In other words, the aim is to generate a feeling of love for the brand by the groups involved and thereby improve

the sales figure (Esteban, Ballester, & Muñoz, 2014). The present research has selected the two that are considered to be most linked to the inside functioning of the university, lecturers and service staff.

In the scenario described, the objectives of this research are based on (1) analyzing at an empirical level which variables of brand capital are most relevant in the Spanish higher education environment, (2) deciphering what the most significant variables are by university agents involved internally (lecturers and service staff) and (3) comparing their perceptions in order to decipher whether there are significant differences.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After reviewing the seven most relevant proposals on brand capital found in the literature (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993; Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001; Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Delgado & Munuera, 2002; Buil, Martínez, & De Chernatony, 2010), four elements shared by the authors have been considered: (1) brand awareness, (2) brand image, (3) perceived brand quality and (4) brand loyalty. Following this line, and applying it to the context of this research, the Spanish higher education sector, the hypotheses are detailed below.

2.1. Brand awareness

In the field of higher education, Foroudi, Dinnie, Kitchen, Melewar, and Foroudi (2017) argue that university brand awareness will increase as brand elements such as identity, service attributes or public relations are maximized. Rachmadhani, Handayani, Wibowo, Purwaningsih, and Suliantoro (2018) detail that the knowledge that students have about the university, amongst other factors, can tip the balance to choose to study in the public or private sphere in Indonesia. Noor, Manan, and Kuthoos (2019) highlight that, amongst other dimensions, brand awareness has a positive relevance with respect to the corporate brand value of Malaysian public universities, so it is important to be taken into account by educational managers. Finally, Sagynbekova, Ince, Ogunmokun, Olaoke, and Ukeje (2021) argue that brand awareness has often been achieved within the higher education context through promotion and word of mouth (WOM), indicating in their study that electronic word of mouth acts as a mediator of the relationship between social media communication and higher education brand equity.

In view of the above, it is possible to propose the first research hypothesis: H1. The perception of brand awareness influences the perception of the brand capital of internal agents involved in higher education.

2.2. Brand image

In the field of higher education, Mirzaei, Siuki, Gray, and Johnson (2016) evaluate the associations with successful and unsuccessful university brands, highlighting that a better university image can be generated through communications from the most distinguished associations to the students themselves. Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, and Ivens (2016) state that in the face of the aggressive increase in competition, universities must aim at generating a solid brand position, based, above all, on its personality and image. Yuan, Liu, Luo, and Yen (2016) consider that marketing activities and the transfer of resources improve the reciprocal influence of the image of a university and its brand extensions. Ruiz, Forcada, and Zorrilla (2019) argue that the affective image, perceptions of teaching resources and the training of graduates influence the formation of the university image among different groups

involved (society, potential students, current students, graduates, alumni and companies). These findings are of great value to generate marketing strategies that project a favorable image to various audiences. Finally, Alcaide, O'Sullivan, and Chapleo (2021) argue that brand image is crucial for every university, and it is important to prioritize communication with students through the institutional website in countries such as England and Portugal, as well as placing more emphasis on topics like ethics and social responsibility for Spanish students.

In view of the above, it is possible to propose the second research hypothesis: H2. The perception of brand image influences the perception of the brand capital of internal agents involved in higher education.

2.3. Perceived quality

In the field of higher education, Pinar, Trapp, Girard, and Boyt (2014) show that perceived quality is the most important variable to take into account in building powerful university brands, followed by brand reputation and the emotional environment. The library is the most determining service, followed by student residences, professional development and facilities. Ali, Zhou, Hussain, Nair, and Ragavan (2016) exhibits five dimensions related to the perceived quality of the educational service, which influence the institutional image and, at the same time, maximize student loyalty with respect to universities in Malaysia. Lomer, Papatsiba, and Naidoo (2018) argue that by connecting particular images of the nation with those of future international students and the higher education sector, together with the combination of brand promises, the perceived quality of the national university brand in the United Kingdom can be improved. Finally, Perera, Nayak, and Van Nguyen (2020) indicate that, among other factors, perceived brand credibility has a significant effect on the value of the university brand by Vietnamese students and they provide strategies to improve the higher education sector, taking into account the perceived quality of the brand.

In view of the above, it is possible to propose the third research hypothesis: H3. The perception of perceived quality influences the perception of the brand capital of internal agents involved in higher education.

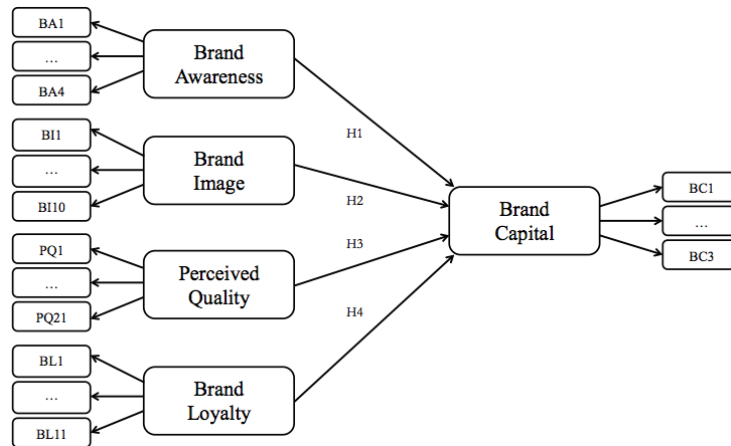
2.4. Brand loyalty

In the field of higher education, Schlesinger, Cervera, and Calderón (2014) argue that trust affects the perceived value and loyalty levels of students and this, in turn, improves the capital value of a university. Kaushal & Ali (2019) state that brand reputation has direct and indirect effects on students at various universities in India, highlighting that age, seniority, provision of financial assistance in the form of scholarships are the most influential elements. And, Rodríguez, Román, and Zúñiga (2019) emphasize the importance of maximizing the identification of interest groups with the university, through distinctive and differentiating features that thereby improve loyalty towards the university itself. Finally, Rasoolimanesh, Tan, Nejati, and Shafaei (2021) argue that corporate social responsibility (CSR) has a direct and positive effect on brand reputation, brand trust, and brand loyalty in the context of higher education.

In view of what has been stated in previous lines, it is possible to propose the fourth research hypothesis, H4: The perception of brand loyalty influences the perception of the brand capital of internal agents involved in higher education.

In conclusion, Figure 1 shows our proposed theoretical model designed to support the present investigation.

Figure 1.
Theoretical model proposed for the present research.



3. METHODOLOGY

To test the contrast of the hypotheses and meet the proposed objectives, a quantitative study was carried out in Valencia (Spain). This region was chosen because it is considered to be perceived by the student population as a large educational venue thanks to the establishment in recent years of eight higher educational centers (both universities and affiliated centers), which have projected the image of the city at national level.

To quantify the target population, a non-probabilistic convenience sampling was used, using official data from two public higher education institutions (University of Valencia and Polytechnic University of Valencia) and six private ones (Catholic University of Valencia, CEU Cardenal Herrera University, European University of Valencia, ESIC Business & Marketing School, EDEM Business School and Florida Universitaria). Thus, it was found that a total of 13,786 university agents were involved, of which 9,735 are lecturing staff and 4,051 are administration and services staff; all of them employees from one of the eight universities studied at the time of the research.

The information was collected through a questionnaire in digital format (using SurveyMonkey) and on paper distributed to a total of 431 service staff (262 from the public sphere and 169 from the private sector) and 698 lecturing staff and researchers (353 from the public sphere and 345 private). After collecting and tidying up the information, a total of 1,106 valid surveys were obtained.

The sample data includes a mixed group of men (47%) and women (45.93%) from public (54.16%) and private (45.84%) universities, of 42 years of average age and with responses from 15 different nationalities, with Spain being the country with the highest number (90%). 62.39% of the sample emerges from lecturing staff and 37.61% from service staff. It should also be noted that, of the service staff, 18.63% had university studies, followed by 10.13% with a *baccalaureate* or vocational training. With respect to the service staff, it should also be noted that 30.29% have obtained the title of Doctor, followed by 24.50% with completed university studies. With regard to seniority, about 58% of lecturing staff and 54% of responses from service staff have been employed for more than 10 years and with a full-time employment contract. Thus, it is considered that the responses received by the majority of respondents are of quality, since they come from university agents with good

knowledge of the operation and know-how of their university. Finally, it is worth highlighting the high participation obtained and the low percentage of respondents who have omitted to answer any of the socio-demographic and classification data questions (7.05%).

Grade 5 Likert scales (1 = Totally disagree and 5 = Totally agree) were used to measure the concepts of (1) brand awareness, (2) brand image, (3) perceived brand quality, (4) brand loyalty and (5) brand capital. All of them were based on the measurement scales proposed by Aaker (1992) and Keller (1993) and selected for having an attitudinal approach similar to that of this work, as well as for having been validated and used in multiple investigations throughout the literature. Following this line, and according to Casanoves, Pinazo, and Flores (2020), the corresponding items have been adapted to our field of study, the higher education sector.

Finally, the techniques for data analysis are based on descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis, using the SPSS v.19 for Windows for descriptive data techniques and EQS 6.2 for executing multivariate techniques. The statistical processing of the data followed in this study involves the application of different analysis methods depending on the information obtained, distinguishing between: (1) description and classification of the data, (2) hypothesis testing and (3) analysis of variance.

4. RESULTS

First, the psychometric characteristics of the measurement instrument were analyzed. To do this, the information was divided into (1) an analysis of the quality of the items and (2) the validation of the scales, which is shown in Table 1. Prior to that, it should be noted that the sampling error was calculated by total of 13,786 university agents involved, obtaining an error of 1% for a confidence level of 99% (estimating the maximum error made in estimating the proportions $p = q = 1\%$).

Table 1.
Reliability and convergent validity.

Factor	Indicator	Load	<i>t</i> Robust	CA	CR	AVE
Brand Awareness	BA1	0.5**	15.7	0.9	0.8	0.6
	BA2	0.8***	27.2			
	BA3	0.8***	27.3			
	BA4	0.8***	30.0			
Brand Image	BI1	0.8***	21.0	0.9	0.9	0.6
	BI2	0.8***	21.7			
	BI3	0.9***	27.3			
	BI4	0.8***	27.7			
	BI5	0.7***	17.5			
	BI6	0.8***	26.5			
	BI7	0.8***	24.5			
	BI8	0.8***	23.1			
	BI9	0.7***	25.6			
	BI10	0.8***	23.6			
Perceived Quality	PQ1	0.8***	25.5	0.9	1.0	0.7
	PQ2	0.7***	26.1			

	PQ3	0.9***	31.0			
	PQ4	0.9***	31.4			
	PQ5	0.8***	27.7			
	PQ6	0.8***	27.3			
	PQ7	0.8***	27.7			
	PQ8	0.8***	29.3			
	PQ9	0.7***	27.2			
	PQ10	0.8***	28.0			
	PQ11	0.8***	26.7			
	PQ12	0.8***	30.6			
	PQ13	0.9***	28.6			
	PQ14	0.8***	30.7			
	PQ15	0.8***	33.0			
	PQ16	0.8***	30.0			
	PQ17	0.8***	33.2			
	PQ18	0.8***	30.4			
	PQ19	0.7***	24.3			
	PQ20	0.9***	29.7			
	PQ21	0.9***	26.6			
	BL1	0.9***	30.8			
	BL2	0.9***	31.0			
	BL3	0.9***	33.7			
	BL4	0.9***	33.6			
	BL5	0.9***	36.3			
Brand Loyalty	BL6	0.8***	28.5	0.9	1.0	0.8
	BL7	0.9***	33.9			
	BL8	0.8***	25.7			
	BL9	0.9***	32.1			
	BL10	0.9***	30.3			
	BL11	0.8***	27.1			
Brand Capital	BC1	0.7***	17.1			
	BC2	0.9***	30.3	0.8	0.8	0.6
	BC3	0.8***	21.5			

N = 1,106; ***p<0.01; **p<0.05; * p<0.1; Satorra-Bentler χ^2 (p) = 7,053.97 (0.0000), df= 1,264

CFI = 0.8; NFI= 0.8; NNFI= 0.8; IFI= 0.8; RMSEA = 0.07

Reliability was verified using three analysis methods: (1) Cronbach's (CA) obtaining, in all cases, values greater than 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994); (2) the analysis of compound reliability (CR), also obtaining values higher than 0.7 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979) and (3) analysis of the average extracted variance (AVE), highlighting that the validity of the

factors is considered acceptable, obtaining in all cases results greater than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Parallel to this, it should be noted that the elimination of 3 items of the initial 52 items (one pertaining to brand awareness, one to brand image and one to brand capital) was provided as a result, mainly due to their low factor load (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Despite this, it should be emphasized that no factor had to be eliminated, maintaining the initial structure of the proposed construct. For its part, the RMSEA = 0.07 indicator also presents an acceptable fit, its value being between 0.05 and 0.08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993) and suggesting that the structural model fits well with the data structure. Although it should be noted that the adjustment indexes of the model (NFI = 0.8; NNFI = 0.8; CFI = 0.8; IFI = 0.8) presented lower values than those recommended by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2005), which should be 0.9. This indicates that the results should be interpreted with caution, since these indexes are not excellent.

Second, and using a structural equation model based on the robust maximum likelihood method, the hypothesis test was carried out, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2.
Hypothesis test.

Hypothesis	Structural Relationship	β Estand.	t Robust	Criterion
H1	Brand Awareness Perception --> Brand Capital Perception	0.7***	3.6	Accepted
H2	Brand Image Perception --> Brand Capital Perception	0.1***	5.1	Accepted
H3	Perceived Quality Perception --> Brand Capital Perception	0.5***	9.9	Accepted
H4	Brand Loyalty Perception --> Brand Capital Perception	0.3***	8.1	Accepted

N = 1,106; ***p<0.01; **p<0.05; * p<0.1; Satorra-Bentler χ^2 (p) = 7,053.97 (0.0000), df= 1,264

CFI = 0.8; NFI= 0.8; NNFI= 0.8; IFI= 0.8; RMSEA = 0.07

As can be seen, the results suggest that the model designed in this research applied to lecturing staff and service staff is satisfactory to explain the 4 hypotheses raised. Thus, a positive relationship was demonstrated between the perceptions of brand notoriety, brand image, perceived brand quality and brand loyalty with respect to brand capital, accepting the first hypothesis (H1: $\beta = 0.68$; $p < 0.01$), the second hypothesis (H2: $\beta = 0.14$; $p < 0.01$), the third hypothesis (H3: $\beta = 0.52$; $p < 0.01$) and the fourth hypothesis (H4: $\beta = 0.33$; $p < 0.01$). In other words, a favorable perception towards brand capital will be consolidated as positive perceptions are built towards each of the four variables of the education brand by the 1,106 employees surveyed.

Specifically, it is noted that the most significant variable in the construction of brand capital is brand awareness. In other words, if internal agents have good brand awareness and are willing to recommend their University courses, the brand capital of the same will be consolidated in a more significant way. This result that brand awareness stands out as a pillar of the construction of brand capital is in line with previous research (Foroudi et al., 2017; Rachmadhani et al., 2018; Sagynbekova et al., 2021), which reiterates that such variable is a key element in the perception of education brand capital.

Third and last, an analysis of variance was carried out for each of the variables of the proposed model, in order to extract the arithmetic mean by response and type of university (public and private) and to compare perceptions of brand capital, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Analysis of variance with respect to the type of university.

Factor	Internal Agents Public University	Internal Agents Private University	F	P Value
Brand Awareness	3.86	4.03	2.53	0.00***
Brand Image	3.49	3.74	0.00	0.00***
Perceived Quality	3.11	3.51	0.00	0.00***
Brand Loyalty	3.36	3.78	0.81	0.00***

***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1

As can be seen, and based on the grade 5 Likert scale chosen, the results suggest that the perceptions of the private sphere are higher in all variables with respect to those in the public sphere. And, with regard to brand awareness (the most significant variable in the construction of brand capital), the important difference between one and the other is also appreciated (4.03 in the private sphere compared to 3.86 in the public sphere).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The proposed global model demonstrated a positive and direct relationship between the four variables described and the brand capital with respect to internal employees, thus supporting other research on brand awareness (Foroudi et al., 2017; Rachmadhani et al., 2018; Sagynbekova et al., 2021), brand image (Mirzaei et al., 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Yuan, et al., 2016; Ruiz et al., 2019; Alcaide et al., 2021), perceived quality (Pinar et al., 2014; Ali et al., 2016; Lomer et al., 2018; Perera et al., 2020) and brand loyalty (Schlesinger et al., 2014; Kaushal & Ali, 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021).

With this, four managerial implications arise. Firstly, brand awareness stands out as the most important variable for employees with respect to brand capital. Thus, the results show that universities have generated high brand awareness thanks to the good opinions and interesting recommendations given by the employees, in case they decided to carry out other

studies at their University. And, together with this, differences in perception are observed between both types of higher educational institutions, highlighting that there is a better opinion about the university and that of postgraduate studies at the private level, whereas doctoral studies are preferred at the public level. On the other hand, the degree of knowledge of the university and the preferences for undergraduate studies are similar in both contexts.

Secondly, and focusing on the brand image, internal employees have a good opinion of the value that their university brand transmits in terms of trust, admiration and professional growth. In addition, many of them consider that other people they admire would like to work in their centers. However, it is true that there are differences in perception between both types of universities, highlighting that personnel in private institutions have a better perception of their university in terms of trust and service offered, as well as professional growth and social respect. On the other hand, the public university is considered to have more history and prices are lower than in the private sector.

Thirdly, focusing on the perceived quality of the brand, the involved participants are satisfied with the quality that their institution gives, the relevance it has as a brand, the relationship between colleagues and with students, and the feeling of self-respect and social approval. It should also be noted that participants in the private sphere have more positive perceptions of almost all the items of such variable, emphasizing that they perceive greater innovation at work, interest in their colleagues and students, work warmth and security at the job. Public sector employees consider that their job at their university gives them a greater sense of job stability than in the private sector.

Fourthly, and in terms of brand loyalty, educational institutions have managed to project a brand on their staff that they would like to work there. Private personnel have more positive perceptions in all the items of such variable, emphasizing their pride in belonging to the university, their identification with the values of the educational institution and their interest in learning more about the same. Public sector employees stand out for considering that their university is the type of center where they want to work and for having a great sense of belonging. They often follow the news from their university and want to talk about their center to other people.

Once these results and conclusions derived from the empirical study have been analyzed, a series of limitations of this research should be qualified. On the one hand, the model has been contrasted based on the opinions of the agents involved in a specific period of time and of eight universities in Valencia (Spain) in particular. This may cause some generalisations and it is therefore recommended to extend this study to other national and international universities; thus validating the variables in other institutions and countries and comparing the results taking into account cultural differences. On the other hand, it should be noted that this research has been carried out through a fully quantitative technique but it would also be enriching if it is complemented with a qualitative study in future lines of research, in order to add value to the results obtained.

For future research it would be interesting to include the perception of brand capital of the university managers themselves, in order to be able to make comparisons between employers and employees, as well as to include other collaborating groups in the field of higher education at the external level, such as students or the general public. This addition is considered important to increase the quality of the measurement of brand capital in educational institution, whether public or private. It would also be of great interest to carry out longitudinal studies that contemplate the possible variations over time in their perceptions, to determine any changes.

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