

Brand Building in Higher Education: A Grounded Theory Investigation of the Impact of the 'Positive-Visualization-Course in Brand Identity' upon Freshmen Student's Perception

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Abstract : Within an increasingly competitive and dynamic environment, the higher education sector is becoming more commodified, with the concept of branding to become exceedingly imperative and an inextricable ingredient for the university's success. Branding in higher education has proven to be an effective strategy that managed to receive considerable attention in the recent few years, and a growing number of articles have begun to appear in the literature. However, a clear void in the literature confirms that the concept of students' perceptions towards the university's brand image has not been researched extensively. An investigation on this central concept is of paramount importance since it will facilitate the development of an inductively generated theoretical model concerning branding in higher education. This research focuses on examining the impact of the 'positive-visualization-course in brand identity' upon the perception of freshmen students towards a university's brand image. A grounded theory methodology has been selected, consisting of semi-structured interviews. Forty-two students have participated in the research, among which twenty-five women and seventeen men. The identification of the sample emerged through the use of the snowball sampling technique. The participants were divided into two groups (experimental and control group) after the researcher had taken into consideration the factor 'program of study', to eliminate any possible interaction between the participants of each group. An experiment was carried out where a 'positive-visualization-course in brand identity' was conducted among the participants of the experimental group, while the participants of the control group have not been exposed to the course. For the purpose of this research, the term 'positive-visualization-course in brand identity' refers to a course where brand history, past achievements/recognitions/awards, its values, and its mission are presented. Prior to the course implementation, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out among the participants of both groups, with the aim of examining the freshmen students' perceptions towards the university's brand image. One week after the course implementation, the researcher carried out semi-structured interviews with the participants of the experimental group only in order to identify whether students' perceptions had been affected after the course completion. Four months after the course completion, semi-structured interviews were carried out among the participants of both groups. Eight months after the course completion, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim of identifying the freshmen students' updated perceptions. Data has been analyzed using substantive coding (open and selective coding), theoretical coding, field memos, and constant comparative analysis. The findings strongly suggest that the 'positive-visualization-course in brand identity' can positively affect freshmen students' perceptions towards a university's brand image. Additionally, other factors conduce to the formation of perception throughout the months. This study contributes and expands upon the existing literature by presenting an inductively generated theoretical model to guide future research in the links between 'positive-visualization-course in brand identity' and the perception of freshmen students towards a university's brand image.

Keywords : brand image, brand name, branding, higher education marketing, perception

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