

University Branding: A Myth or a Reality

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Abstract

Every university needs a brand and an image that can be trusted and believed and that will differentiate it from others. University brand, in fact, is the perception and reputation developed in the minds of the people about the university or institution. It is the reaction appears in the minds of the people when they hear or see a name or symbol of some university or institute. This research aimed to identify key factors that are required to be taken care of while developing university branding strategy. For this research a deductive approach is adopted, as the main objective of this research is to investigate the influence of attributes like awareness, acceptance, and quality on brand image of universities, therefore, it is proposed to conduct semi structured interviews which are considered to be a most suitable for testing of influence of different attributes on brand image. The components used in the study are awareness, acceptance, prestige, incentives and quality. The result of the study shows that in the university selection decision, image of the university is the key determinant. The result also shows that the image of the university has four key constructing factors which are quality, prestige, financial incentives, and acceptance. Quality is found to be the strongest construct followed by prestige, acceptance and incentives.

Keywords: Acceptance, Higher Education, Quality, Image, Prestige, Financial Incentives.

1. Introduction and Background

Every university needs a brand and an image that can be trusted and believed and that will differentiate it from others (Parameswaran and Glowacka, 1995; Santovec, 2007). The image is vital (Trejo, 2008). It is necessary for every university to know what make them able to develop better linkages with stakeholders and the community (Stimpson, 2006). If the university management knows about themselves and what they can do for themselves, they can position themselves in the market as the best and can develop niche and this can add prestige to the universities. This can also help universities in knowing

the customers more precisely (Stimpson, 2006). The concept of branding in the university has not fully been developed and demand more research for the advancement in the field. During this study, we found more of the literature relevant to business whereas very little came from the sources of higher education.

In today's business world branding is become a buzz word (Hall, 2008; Sanborn, 2008) There are universities who are unable get their brand such recognition which it deserved. They are not aware of the process that how they can increase the prestige of their institution by using branding (Stimpson, 2006). There are some who believes that the term branding is the most misused and overused word in the business of marketing (Miller & Muir, 2004; Stimpson, 2006). Researchers also reached to the agreement that for universities or educational institutions brand is neither a logo nor is a crest, although both are the part of the brand (Santovec, 2007; Temple, 2006). It is also not a motto or a slogan (Santovec, 2007). University brand, in fact, is the perception and reputation developed in the minds of the people about the university or institution. It is the reaction appears in the minds of the people when they hear or see a name or symbol of some university or institute (Clifton et al., 2003; Landrum et al., 1998; Marconi, 2000; Miller et al, 2004; Santovec, 2007; Sevier, 2001; Temple, 2006). Therefore branding can be considered one of the processes that can strengthen the universities by making them able to face the challenges in the volatile periods and also by making them able to grab the opportunities appear during this period. During the process of branding, organizations normally identify their strength and use it in the decision making process (Mariotti, 1999; Moore, 2004).

The brand's power most of the time increase the association of the customer with the product. Stronger the brand greater will be the association. Contrary to the production industry the trend of branding in service industry has not yet fully been explored (Ukpebor and Ipogah 2008). Prasad and Dev. (2000) in their study regarding service industry showed that the branding is the only criteria used by the customers to differentiate between organizations. In service sector firms name is the main brand (Low and Lamb 2000). The term branding is also getting importance in the business of higher education as the term 'globalization' has affected the education, and education is now become an internationally tradable good/service like others. This angle of understanding compelled the countries to develop such policies where the term of higher education is understood as a corporate term with the aim of growth in 'market share'.

Any service industry must identify the requirements of the potential customer and devised its product and service according to the needs of the customer (Harvey & Busher, 1996). Same is true for the education sector as well; as it is also a service industry with student clientele (Harvey & Busher, 1996; Mazzarol, 1998). Universities, therefore, must develop a clear understanding about what potential student is looking for (Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2006). Brand familiarity has got importance, especially, at the time of decision of attending the institute for education or for donation purposes. Sevier (2001) explains the importance of brand familiarity by giving the example of the students who when receive the letters from different universities, normally open the one which comes from the most familiar university. This clearly explains that a good brand have high respect (Hupp, 2007).

Universities all over the world are working very hard to build brand equity. University's strong brand name can be established by providing quality services, creating an emotional link with students, unique set of communication and service. This research is, therefore, aimed to identify key factors that are required to be taken care of while developing university branding strategy. The result of this study could serve as a decision making tool to help the university management and other policy gurus in Malaysia and all over the world to maximize the value of universities by focusing on the branding of Universities.

2. Research Problem and Research Objectives

The concept of global marketing has increased the competition among the different companies and this increasing competition has resulted in the focus on brand management. The fierce competition has made branding a top most differentiation technique for the product as well as for the service industry. In the higher education market, the top most priority of the universities and other HEI's is the development of strong brand equity but attainment of this objective is the real task; as the services provided by all the higher education institutes are same in nature. Brand equity is, therefore, the only possible way for the clientele to differentiate one university from another (Sevier, 2001). During the literature review, it was observed that limited researches regarding university brand equity has been done. This has, therefore, generated a need to explore the concept of branding and to determine whether the university branding is a reality or a myth?

Yoo *et al.* (2000) & (2001), Lin and Chang, (2003) has noticed that awareness, acceptance and quality played key role in developing the image of the product which in turn developed the clients purchase and re-purchase decision. They, therefore, identified these factors as a construct of brand equity. Therefore, the main objective of this research has also been developed on the same line which is, to check the influence of these dimensions i.e. brand awareness, brand acceptance and brand quality on brand image which in turn develop the brand equity of university.

3. Literature Review

The concept of branding is not new. It is in use for many centuries. According to William (2002) due to the perceived risks attached with the purchase of services, consumers preferred to use such services which are familiar to them and which they can trust. Keeping this thing in mind, universities and governments in different parts of the world have started developing attractive policies, especially, based on the provision of quality education in neat, clean and safe environment. Globalization has made the education as a tradable commodity. Therefore, Higher education institutes has started marketing activities to position themselves in the global market while analyzing their strengths and weaknesses and identifying the unique selling points. For this purpose they are focusing on "Brand Equity Development" to get prominent position in the global market.

Muller and woods (1994) while talking about the brand management, emphasize the importance of creation of brand image and the reliability of brand name in the service industry. In another study they recommended that for strong brand equity, service brand should concentrate on three main issues i.e. Quality, Service delivery and Image (Muller and wood, 1998). They further suggested that quality, service delivery and image collectively helped in developing the brand's trustworthiness.

In order to understand the consumer's perception of brand, it is imperative to understand the consumer behavior. Belch and Belch (2004) while defining the consumer behavior said that it is a process and actions people took on when they are in the process of search, select, purchase, use, evaluate and dispose of some product or service in order to get satisfaction for fulfillment of their desires.

Ugala, (2001), has identified that there are two types of behaviors a consumer shows, one is cognitive and the other is experience based behavior. Dalqvist and Linde (2002) typified behavior in four categories, rational, learned, unconscious and social behavior. Kotler (1999) has developed a five steps consumer decision process for making some purchases.

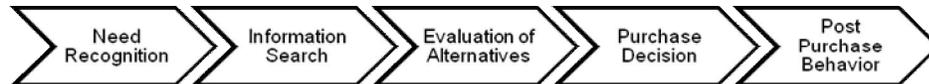


Figure 1: Buying decision process; Source: Kotler et al (1999) pg.254

He also discussed that it is not necessary that consumer always adopt all the stages while making day to day decisions. However, while making some complex decision, consumers normally passed all of the five stages. Same is true in case of University Selection Decision. Bone (2009) during his study regarding the choice of the university stated that the decision making in university selection involved a complex process. So as per his findings university selection decision involved all the five steps of Kotler's purchase decision model. Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, (2006) has also identified the same. This has established the fact that the university selection is a complex decision which is made after very careful evaluation of alternatives.

Chen, (2006) is of the view that the graduate students while making university selection decision gave maximum importance to the "University" and then to the programs offered by the university. Pimpa, (2003) also has the same point of view. Similarly, according to Binsardi & Ekwulugo, (2003); Chen Zimitat, (2006); Chen (2006);Cubillo et al., (2006); Mazarrol & Soutar, (2002); Shah & Laino, (2006); Bone (2009), at the time of decision, the prospect student consider several things like country of destination, institute itself, country's environment, program quality, safety etc. However, the image and ranking of the university play the decisive role during this decision making process. This shows that the brand equity and its recognition obtained great importance for most of the universities around the world especially due to the increasing trend of internationalization. If the image of the university is properly managed, it will provide the competitive edge to that university. The basic attributes attached with the university are getting much importance because these attributes formulate the brand which is now commonly used as differentiating tools among competitors. Aaker (1991) was of the view that the brand equity is the product of perceived qualities, brand loyalty, brand awareness and brand image.

Similarly, Keller (1993) had discussed two dimensions of brand equity, one is brand knowledge and the other is brand awareness. Cob-walgren et al (1995) used the same components i.e. quality, awareness, and brand image which were used by Aker (1991) to measure brand equity. Prasad and Dev (2000) also used the same attributes in their study as identified by Aaker, (1991). Same was done by Lamb and Low Jr. (2000). Yoo et al

(2000) in their research also used the same three components of Aaker (1991). Cobbs-walgren *et al.* (1995), in their research presented a perceptual measure used to measure the customer based brand equity. They used the concept given by Aaker, 1991. Their study showed that the brand equity has a direct relation with the consumer behavior. Higher the brand equity higher will be the consumer's preferences and purchase Intentions. Therefore, in our study we used the attributes such as brand awareness, brand acceptance, and brand quality to determine the brand image which is the main constituent of brand equity of the university.

3.1 Awareness

Keller (2003) explained brand awareness is developed due to the repeated exposure of the product or service. Hearing, seeing, or thinking about some specific brand could be the factors involved in developing the awareness and this may result in sticking of brand into the memory of the customer. Keller 1993 while following Aaker, 1991 has considered brand awareness as a key attribute in brand equity. He also recognized the brand awareness as a combined effect of brand recognition and top of mind awareness (TOMA).

Hoyer and brown (1990), Lin and Chang (2003), Keller (2003) Jiang (2004) observed that brand recognition plays an important role in influencing consumer's choice. Therefore, keeping its importance in mind, we conceptualize that the brand awareness is the product of brand recognition and top of mind and once the awareness for brand has been developed, it ensures the acceptance among the prospective clients which leads towards the greater market share. Therefore, due to its importance for enhancing the brand acceptance through increased market share and developing the brand image, we can conclude that the brand recognition and top of mind (TOMA) creates awareness, awareness develops acceptance which ultimately resulted in creating brand image.

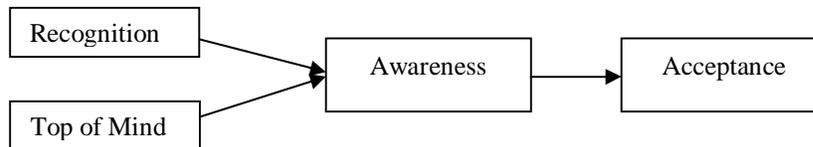


Figure 2: Awareness and acceptance process

3.2 Quality

Brunso et al., (2005) and Nadim & Noorjahan (2009) while discussing the quality explained that the product/service quality can be judged in two different perspectives: the objective quality and the perceived quality. Objective quality is that which can be checked technically, measured, and verified whereas the perceived quality is the expectation of product/service perceived by the consumer. Aaker 1993, 1996 and 1998, defined the quality perceived by the customer as one aspect of brand equity because according to him it is direct relation with the readiness to pay a higher price and purchase intention. Low and Lamb 2000 were come up with the opinion that the perceived quality developed the brand superiority perception. Similarly Szymanski and Henard (2001) also considered perceived quality as one of the factor which helped in developing a satisfactory purchase decision.

Taylor and Baker (1994) also hypothesized that satisfaction and perceived quality has a positive relation with intention to purchase. Like the other industries, the issue of provision of quality services in universities is also gaining more and more attention of the researchers of higher education sector (De Jager and Gbadamosi, 2010). Researchers like Kwan and Ng, (1999), Cloete and Bunting (2000), Abouchedid and Nasser, (2002), Chua, (2004), Telford and Masson, (2005), De Jager, (2006), Oliveira-Brachado and Marques, (2007); Pareda et al. (2007), Srikantham and Dalrymple, (2007); and Voss et al. (2007) have discussed the importance of service quality in the higher education sector. They recognized the enhanced service quality performance as the only tool in the industry of higher education which attracts and retains student clientele. In this perspective, Bitner, et al., 2000 identified two satisfaction factors; one is overall satisfaction and the other is service encounter satisfaction. The overall satisfaction is the relationship specific whereas the service encounter is transaction-specific.

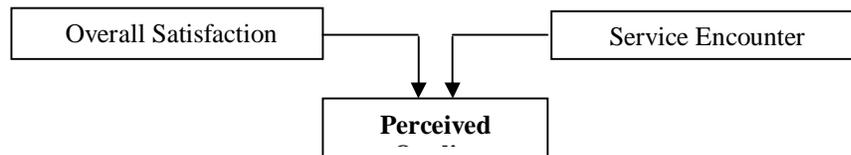


Figure 3: Constructs for Perceived Quality

Therefore, in light of above discussion we may consider perceived quality as one of the construct of our study as it create a perception of superiority of brand which is helpful in differentiating a brand from the other.

3.3 University Image (Brand Association)

Brand image has nothing to do with the product or service features, product or service technology or the product or service in actual, it is actually developed through knowledge provided to customer about the product or service. In case of higher education sector the image of the institute is important especially for the external customers like parents, friends, industry etc. who have influence on the choice decision of the students. Therefore, a good image is a top branding tool in case of higher education industry. Cubillo et al., (2006), has suggested that in the service industry the image of institution is developed by the institutional prestige and financial incentives.

According to Engel and Miniard, (1993) the image of any brand is developed due to the collective impact of brand association and consumer's perception. Beckwith & Leman, (1975); Hill & Neeley, (1988); Levitt, (1986); Nicholls et al., (1995) while discussing the image of the higher education institute discussed that the reputation of university is the most important factor for selection decision especially, in the absence of experience as it reduced the perceived risk. For good image, quality and recognition are the best sources of competitive advantage (Aaker, 1989; Fombrun, 1996. Pitta and Katsanis, 1995). Therefore, as proposed by Cubillo et al. (2006) along with prestige and financial incentive, we also used quality and acceptance as the construct of image in our study.

Most importantly it can be said that the branding in service industry helped in reducing perceived risks associated with the purchase decision and also helped in reducing the search cost. The above literature helped us in establishing the fact that the awareness creates acceptance and acceptance of any brand in combination with quality develop a

power full brand image and the power full image than create the brand equity in the service industry.

Brands are considered important as they help the customer to narrow down the choices (Marriott, 1999) whereas, the big brands are normally considered as the only choice in some specific need (Sevier, 2001, p. 79; Sevier, 2002). Similarly, brand recognition and reputation is also very important for universities as they require recognition for their well doing. Every university is working hard to get some prestige which is something everybody hopes to attain. According to temple (2006) "the brand should meet consumers' psychological needs through the values which they come to believe the brand embodies". During the mid 80's Park, Maclnnis, and Jaworski (1986) talked about the needs that have influence in consumers brand selection. These are (1) functional needs, (2) symbolic needs, and (3) experiential needs. Functional needs provide solution to any problem (Park, Maclnnis, and Jaworski, 1986). In case of university it will be the service quality. Symbolic needs respond the costumer's need to be linked with some particular group (Park et al., 1986, Marconi, 2000). In case of university it would be the image developed through awareness and acceptance. Experiential needs normally provide satisfaction for internal pleasure desires (Park, Maclnnis, and Jaworski, 1986). For university we can consider brand equity as experiential need.

After a detailed study, we have been able to develop a connection among the views of different researchers with reference to the brand equity. The literature review has revealed that there is a strong relationship between the brand equity, brand image, brand association, brand awareness and brand quality. High level of awareness means high acceptance, therefore, high acceptance along with high perception of quality creates strong affiliation with the brand i.e. strong image and Positive image of the brand will help in developing favorable perceptions means greater brand equity. Therefore, in order to check the existence of association between the university brand equity and its attributes i.e. university brand awareness/acceptance, university brand image and university service quality, we used the same components as were used by Aker first in 1991 and later on in 1996 i.e. brand acceptance/awareness, perceived quality and brand association. Due to the similarity in the definition we replace brand association with brand image.

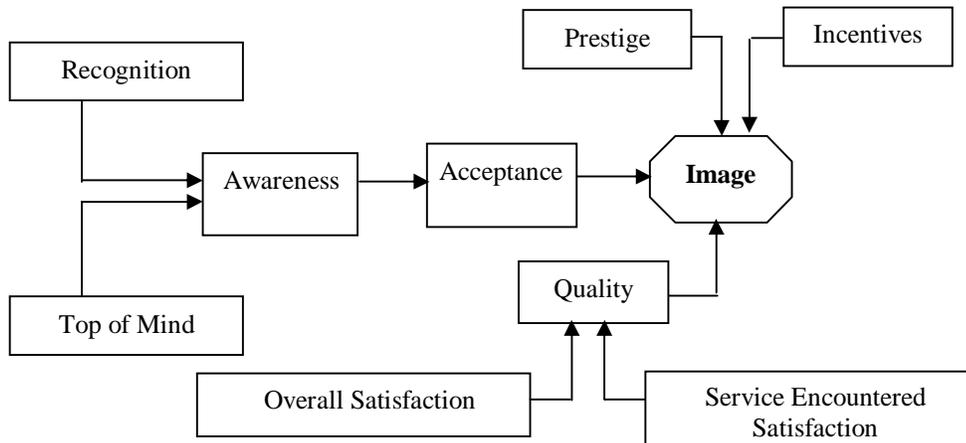


Figure 4: Model for University Branding

4. Methodology

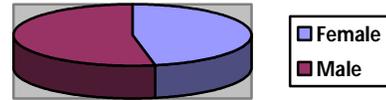
As discussed by Saunder et al (2003), for research purpose we normally adopt two approaches, one is deductive approach and the other is inductive approach. For this research we use deductive approach. As, the main objective of this research is to investigate the influence of attributes like awareness, acceptance, and quality on brand image of universities, therefore, after a thorough search it is proposed to conduct semi structured interviews which are considered to be a most suitable for testing of influence of different attributes on brand image. The components used in the study are awareness, acceptance, prestige, incentives and quality.

5. Analysis

A sample of 160 respondents was selected to check whether the constructs being developed play any role in image development or not. For this purpose the respondents from Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Yaman, Somalia, Turkey etc. were interviewed. Forty seven percent female students and 53 percent male students were participated in the interview session. Interviews were conducted using Delphi Technique. Total 144 students participated in the interview session. Out of total 144 participants, 128 interviewees provided complete information. This showed that about 80% of the enquiries were got a complete response which is quite a success. The internal consistency was determined by Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The overall reliability value for the variables was found to be 0.889 which shows that the variables tested in the study were internally consistent. The interview questions consist of five parts. 1st part was asked to find out the role of awareness in image development of the university. The 2nd part was asked to find out the whether the 'acceptance' has some role in image development. Whereas, 3rd and 4th part of the interview questions were asked to check the importance of incentives and university prestige for image. The 5th and final part was used to find out that what percentage of respondents will give importance to university quality as a construct of image of the university. In order to consider the influence of university image on our intent to determine a top rank, generally ranking is used. The same idea has been adopted in our study and we ranked different attributes using Kendall's W Ranks.

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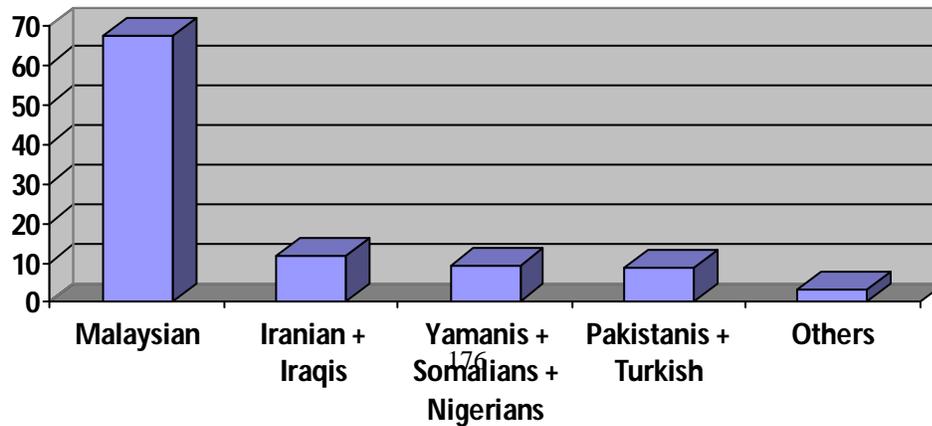
Gender	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	46.9	46.9
Male	53.1	100.0
Total	100.0	



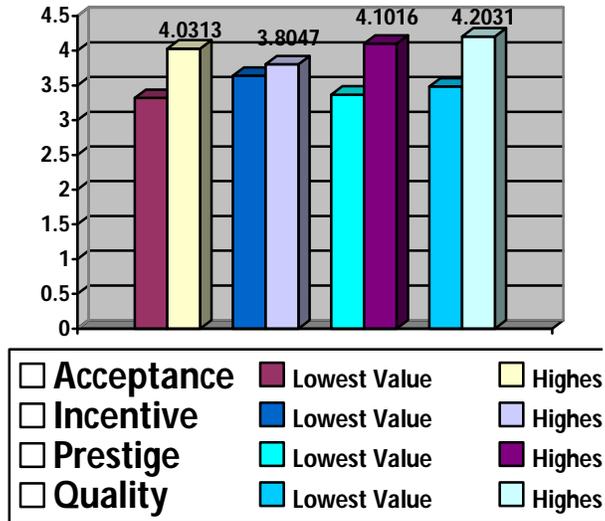
Age	Percent	Cumulative Percent
< 20 years	2.3	2.3
20-- 25 years	57.8	60.2
26-- 30 years	22.7	82.8
30 >	17.2	100.0
Total	100.0	



Nationality	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Malaysian (Malays+Chinese+Indians)	67.2	67.2
Iranian + Iraqis	11.7	78.9
Yamanis + Somalians + Nigerians	9.4	88.3
Pakistanis + Turkish	8.6	96.9
Others	3.1	100.0
Total	100.0	



Acceptance	
Lowest Value	3.3203
Highest Value	4.0313
P-Value	.000
Kendall's W	0.072
Incentive	
Lowest Value	3.6406
Highest Value	3.8047
P-Value	0.033
Kendall's W	0.036
Prestige	
Lowest Value	3.3672
Highest Value	4.1016
P-Value	0.000
Kendall's W	.348
Quality	
Lowest Value	3.4844
Highest Value	4.2031
P-Value	0.000
Kendall's W	0.085



To test the variables following hypothesis has been formulated;

Ho1: There is no consistency of ranking of acceptance items by the respondents.

To test hypothesis Ho1, we refer to p-value. The p-value is 0.000 and is less than 0.05; we can reject the null hypothesis.

Decision: reject Ho

Therefore, there is consistency of ranking of acceptance items by the respondents

Ho2: There is no consistency of ranking of Incentives items by the respondents.

The p-value is 0.033 is less than 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis.

Decision: reject Ho

Therefore there is consistency of ranking of incentives items by the respondents

Ho3: There is no consistency of ranking of Prestige items by the respondents.

The p-value is 0.000 is less than 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis.

Decision: reject H_0

Therefore there is consistency of ranking of prestige items by the respondents

H₀₄: There is no consistency of ranking of quality items by the respondents.

The p-value is 0.000 is less than 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis.

Decision: reject H_0

Therefore there is consistency of ranking of quality items by the respondents

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Globalization affects the overall business sector and society. Sustainable growth of a country is reliant on the innovative system which is necessary to renew the higher education sector while addressing economic, social and environmental challenges simultaneously. Within the knowledge society, the man, powered with suitable education, skills and mindset is a key to economic accomplishment, growth and social prosperity (Towards a reform agenda. A Task Force Report, 2001)

This study was conducted to find out the influence of university image in university selection decision. The respondents in the study were asked to rank their preferences to select a university. The result of the study shows that in the university selection decision, image of the university is the key determinant. The result also shows that the image of the university has four key constructing factors which are quality, prestige, financial incentives, and acceptance.

Quality is found to be the strongest construct followed by prestige, acceptance and incentives. The similar results were obtained during the previous studies conducted by Chen (2006), Litten and Hall (1989), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Bone (2009). However, Chen (2006) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also gave equal importance to financial incentive with quality. Chen (2006) is of the view that financial incentives like scholarships, tuition fee exemptions etc play significant role in the image development.

According to the respondents' ratings, perceived quality is the most important attribute. It plays an important role in university selection decision. As identified by Carman (1990), Parasuraman et al (1985, 1998) perceived quality effected positively on the brand choice of the customer. In view of Boulding et al (1993) perceived quality is a factor that directly affects the purchase intention, whereas, Cronin and Taylor (1992) found that the quality create satisfaction which develops purchase intention. Taylor and Baker (1994) also reached to the same decision as was derived by Cronin and Taylor (1992). The results obtained during our study also support the findings of Cronin and Taylor (1992) that quality in education and other related services provided by the university develop satisfaction which resultantly enhance the image of the university.

The result of this research also get support from the previous studies done by Srikatanyoo and Gnoth (2002) and Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) who were of the view that quality of education is the most important factor especially when universities are moving towards internationalization.

The results obtained during the study also shows that while making a university selection decision, students consider different factors into account. Although, we consider four different factors and check their impact on image separately, but it is observed that all four factors have been given near about equal importance by the respondents which confirm that the university selection is a complex decision making process as was discussed by Bone (2009).

7. Suggestions and Recommendations

Considering the results obtained during this study, the universities in Malaysia can take benefit of this through developing an understanding regarding the factors which play key role in university selection decision. According to Harvey and Busher (1996) like other industries, education industry should also recognize the needs and preferences of the potential costumers if they want to influence their university choice, especially, the international students who are planning to study abroad. The result of this study shows that the institutions should develop better understanding of what a prospective student is looking for, and also make sure that those strategies should be formulated which enhance the image of the university on long term basis. It has also been confirmed from the results that for universities brand is neither a logo nor is a crest. It is also not a motto or a slogan. It is the image developed in the minds of the people when they hear or see a name or symbol of some university or institute.

The general finding of our study confirms our original assumptions that all the four dimension of customer based brand equity will have influence on consumer's perception of brand.

In view of the research findings, it has also been recommended that universities should also focus on advertisement to increasing awareness, especially at the international level, so that the potential students consider their name as an alternative while making university selection decision.

Study also confirmed that top of mind awareness is an important strategy to encourage potential customer in making their purchasing preference based on advertisement. Even though, in the production industry promotional activities using media are very popular, however, in the education industry, more creative techniques to reach the potential costumers should be adopted like, encourage students to participate in educational activities like educational conferences, seminars and workshops by providing financial incentives etc.

Another result obtained from this research is that the universities with high image are expected to have high quality in all fields. Along with good quality in education other services like cleanliness, allied services, non-academic services, convenient operating hours, etc should also be given the top priority. As these are also consider as the factors to enhance the image of the university. This will give university a competitive advantage and standardization.

Another recommendation is that the university should also provide financial incentive to the local as well as international students. This strategy will help university in getting high quality international and local students who could not obtained admission due to unaffordability. According to Kotler et al (1999), image is a trust of the consumers about

certain product. This means that the customer may recommend the university to others, based on their satisfaction which is built over time from experience.

Conclusively, the outcome of this study shows that university image has a great influence on student's/customer's perception. Therefore, universities are required to work continuously to develop their brand. University management should keep in mind that the famous old names died, due to poor management of image.

8. Future Research

This study observes an evolving phenomenon within the university marketing, the phenomenon that has not been explored completely. However, this research is limited to the universities in Malaysia. Future research can be conducted in other developing countries as well. The findings of this study may not be true for other sections of education industry. Due to the importance of quality, future results can also be done with quality as a central concept.

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