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Image of Business Schools: a Malaysian Perspective

By:

**Sharifah Faridah Syed Alwi
and
Philip Kitchen**

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**Sharifah Faridah Syed Alwi, University of Malaya, Malaysia
Philip Kitchen, Hull University, United Kingdom**

ABSTRACT

The increasing number of business schools in Malaysia has led to competitive pressures to attract the best students from both national and international arenas. These business schools have, and, are developing competitive marketing strategies to augment their image in terms of university rankings as well as be seen to be the top business school in the country. The current study, thus, focuses on the branding of Malaysian business schools. Specifically, the study investigates the impact of several attributes (functional, technical quality and innovativeness) on satisfaction and, subsequently, upon institution (or brand) reputation and loyalty. This study is informed by 417 responses from MBA students attending three Malaysian business schools. Results indicate full mediation among technical quality, innovativeness and brand reputation while functional attributes have only a partial effect. The practical contribution of the study and its managerial implications lie in the domain of strategic direction and positioning of brand reputation in a higher education context.

INTRODUCTION

What drives brand reputation (e.g. academic quality) in an educational context, other than that established through ranking position, is a major question (Gioia and Corley, 2002; Vidaver, 2007). Yet understanding this is vital to business schools because favourable brand image of a school may influence a student's decision to stay for advanced studies (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). Similarly, in marketing, a strong positive brand reputation helps a firm achieve a competitive advantage as well as encouraging repeat purchases (Porter and Claycomb, 1997), and, as a source for generating future income streams (Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002). In addition, the education industry is thriving and marketing budgets have become very significant. Education generates direct investment for the country by attracting local and foreign students (Lin, 1997). Thus, there is a pressing need to fully understand what brand images and reputation are in higher education institutions, as this will aid in terms of differentiation and positioning and ensure that marketing budgets are invested wisely.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study examines image and brands in the context of Malaysian business schools and is necessary for several reasons. The Malaysian higher education sector has undergone substantial growth as a result of efforts taken by the Ministry of Education to expand the education industry. It is the government's long-term goal to make Malaysia a regional centre of excellence in education (MOHE). The growth of higher education in Malaysia can be seen in several areas: increase in student enrolments, increase in number of higher education institutions (HEIs), increase in government spending, additional government policies in promoting education, and the country's continuous need for human resources. For example, the number of universities has now increased from nine to twenty institutions (MOHE). However, the increase has led to competitive pressure among the business schools to be the best, as holding the highest ranking will help increase enrolment of excellent students, attract funding agencies, top employers recruitment, and alumni donations (Gioia and Corley, 2002). It appears that the academic environment is undergoing a transformation to compete as a

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business-profit making industry and that academic quality may be under-emphasised (Zimmerman, 2001; Gioia and Corley, 2002; Vidaver, 2007). For example, *'the rankings are pushing business schools to be "more business and less school", and have turned business education's primary purpose from the pursuit of knowledge to the pursuit of resources by way of ranking'* (Gioia and Corley, 2002, p.109). However, the ranking system has been heavily criticised by scholars as the value, methodology and objectivity of such ranking is questionable (Vidaver, 2007; Gioia and Corley, 2002). Ranking may not be the only important criteria as it was proposed that most ranking measures do not consider critical factors concerning the business school's educational or academic quality (Stake, 1998; Zimmerman, 2001; Gioia and Corley, 2002). Policano (2005), for example, adds that educators and accreditation agencies are concerned about the over-reliance on rankings to measure business schools. Moreover, a review of previous literature on educational, branding and reputation shows that academic reputation, good programmes, staff quality and expertise and quality of education offered were among the important attributes influencing a student's decision to study at a university (Discenza et al., 1985; Qureshi, 1995; Mazzrol et al., 1996; Soutar and Turner, 2002) and for brand positioning in Asian universities (Gray et al., 2003). Due to the criticism of ranking measures, it can then be argued that being at the top in ranking does not necessarily mean an institution is offering the best academic quality. One should realise that brand image of business schools takes place over a long time. Once established and trusted (for example, having good quality academics, teaching quality etc), it will contribute to the brand reputation of the schools. Relying solely on ranking may endanger the long term brand reputation as ranking focuses only on the short term (Gioia and Corley, 2002) whereas branding is for the long term (Davies et al., 2003). Although brand reputation does help to boost the ranking position, more importantly, it explains to its audience who the institution is and what it stands for. Consistency over time shows that it will help to increase trust, and, therefore, evolve into a potential top business school attracting many new top students. Thus, it is the intention of the current study to investigate the following:

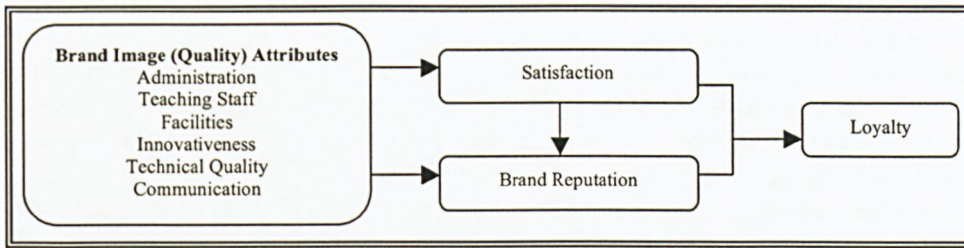
- (1) To determine the brand image attributes of service (or educational) quality of a business school (Question: What are the brand images of business schools?)
- (2) To identify the relationship between these images, students' satisfaction and brand reputation: (Question: Whether there is a mediating effect between brand image and brand reputation (i.e. via satisfaction) of the school; In other words, does a student require to be satisfied with the brand image (educational quality attributes) first, in order to form the institution's brand reputation or otherwise?)
- (3) Finally, to examine the relative impact of satisfaction and brand reputation on students' behavioural responses (loyalty)

BRAND IMAGE, SATISFACTION, BRAND REPUTATION AND LOYALTY

In order to identify what represents brand image attributes the literatures on brand image, brand reputation, corporate brand image, satisfaction and service quality were reviewed. These facets or attributes appear to be related when consumers evaluates a store's brand, company reputation and an educational institution's (or brand) reputation. In other words, attributes used to measure brand image in some way are also adopted in the understanding of store image, corporate brand image, company reputation, customer satisfaction and service quality in many different industries. Three types of methodological approach were found in earlier related literature concerning brand image evaluation. On the one hand, past studies have evaluated brand image on the basis of a more cognitive evaluation (rational/functional approach – tangible and intangible attributes of a store or website) and this is very common for store and brand image studies. On the other hand, a more affective and emotional basis for

evaluation is common in corporate branding and reputation studies (de Chernatony and Harris, 2000; Keller, 2003; Davies et al., 2004) and, finally, using both evaluations for example, Brown (1998, p.217) defined corporate association as "...*cognition, affect evaluations (that consumers attach to specific cognitions or affects) summary evaluations and patterns of associations (eg. schemata, scripts) with respect to a particular company*". This may be due to the fact that an image of a company refers to not only "...*what we hear and see from the company's messages (impression formed from other people's opinion or media advertising), but experience its product (the direct contact the consumer has with the product)*", (Ind, 1997, p.5). Consistent with this notion, Patterson (1999, p.419) defines brand image as "*consumer perceptions of brand attributes and associations from which those consumers derive symbolic value*". Furthermore, perceived product or service quality (brand image attributes) are related to the brand name and company reputation (Shapiro, 1983; Zeithaml, 1988). This suggests that brand image attributes (regardless of whether they encompass product or service related attributes) might be relevant when consumers evaluates the brand image of a retail store, or business school, which is the context of the present study. Service quality has received considerable attention in marketing (Cronin and Taylor, 1994), but there is a relative paucity of research concerning understanding of educational quality (Zimmerman, 2001; Vidaver, 2007). In the higher education context, Holdford and Reinders (2001, p.125) indicate that a student's overall assessment of a university may derive from their experience with service processes (i.e. functional quality) and outcomes (i.e. technical quality) which make up the service or educational quality. Consistent with this notion, Gronroos (1990) suggests that there are three groups of quality dimensions which are: Technical quality; Functional quality and Corporate image. Indeed, higher education is about service rather than a tangible product (Holdford and Reinders, 2001, p.125), and according to Kennedy (1977), an institution's image consists of two components: functional, which is related to tangibles such as product or service offered and emotional, which is the psychological dimension that is manifested by feelings and attitudes towards an institution (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). The current study thus regards business schools as a type of service. What is being measured here is the brand image attributes of business schools, which is also known as the educational quality, and it is comprised of functional and technical quality. Specifically, the business schools' brand image (quality) attributes are defined as an attitude resulting from student perceptions of school performance regarding the service process (functional) and service outcome (technical quality) (Holdford and Reinders, 2001; Fjortoft and Lee, 1994).

While brand image focuses more on the cognitive evaluation of the business school, in the current study satisfaction and brand reputation constructs focus on the emotional (affective) description of the sum value or added value from the consumer perspective (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1998; Davies et al., 2004). Institution reputation is also associated with the credibility of an institution and is a perceptual phenomenon – emerging from observers' collective judgement about an organisation and based on an assessment of the organisation's performance over time (Vidaver, 2007). In the past, product/service performance was found to have a direct effect on satisfaction and loyalty (Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Shaffer and Sherrell, 1997). Satisfaction is "*an emotional response to the experiences provided by, associated with particular products or services purchased, retail outlets or even molar patterns of behaviour such as shopping and buyer behaviour, as well as the overall marketplace*" (Westbrook and Reilly, 1983, p.256). For example, store image attributes have been recognised as an important antecedent of store satisfaction and loyalty (Bloemer and De Ruyter, 1998). Customer satisfaction or service quality has been demonstrated to effect or drive store loyalty (such as positive word-of-mouth, repurchase intention (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Davies et al., 2003) and across a range of consumer products (LaBarbera and Marzursky, 1983). The following model diagrammatically explains the theoretical propositions for the current study:



The paper thus argues that: *The service process and outcome (or educational quality) of business schools may influence a students' satisfaction with the school (e.g. happy or pleased with the school), which will enhance their overall perception of the school (or brand) reputation and subsequently be loyal to the school (coming back for advanced studies, recommend to others or say positive things about the school).*

METHODOLOGY

There are four main constructs for the current study: (1) Brand image (quality) attributes, comprising of processes and outcomes of the schools' service aspects such as administration and the school in general, teaching staff, communication, facilities (functional aspect of service brand); innovativeness and technical quality; (2) Satisfaction; (3) Brand Reputation and (4) Loyalty. The literature was extensively consulted for the purpose of generating the items measured for this study's construct. Specifically, service brand attributes and satisfaction have been generated from Holdford and Reinders (2001); Vidaver (2007); Brand Reputation measures were developed from Nguyen and Le Blanc (2001) and Loyalty from Zeithaml, et al. (1996). The survey was carried out at three business schools. The current data is based on three business schools in Malaysia (of nine in total). Permission was granted from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and the deans of business schools to administer the survey to MBA students in-class. Core MBA modules were targeted in order to maximise participation and response. Students were briefed and the questionnaires distributed during their break time or shortly after classes. Questionnaires were collected before students left or through a reply paid envelope. At present, there have been 417 responses and in order to test the study's theoretical proposition both multiple and hierarchical regression were used.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Preliminary analysis was performed to determine the study's constructs validity and reliability (see Appendix 1). Detailed exposition would discuss the findings more extensively, however, this section only reports on the study's theoretical propositions outcomes. As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, four image attributes were significantly related to a school's brand reputation (i.e. administration, facilities, innovativeness and technical quality) and four were also significantly related to satisfaction (except for facilities and communication).

Table 1:

	R ²	Coefficients	P Value
EQ → BR	.436		
Administration		.319	.000
Teaching Staff		.027	.619
Facilities		.097	.045
Innovativeness		.139	.019
Technical Quality		.222	.000
Communication		.087	.141

Table 2:

	R ²	Coefficients	P Value
EQ → Satisfaction	.511		
Administration		.238	.000
Teaching Staff		.185	.000
Facilities		.054	.228
Innovativeness		.142	.025
Technical Quality		.242	.000
Communication		.073	.138

The four steps suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) were undertaken on the overall proposed model to observe whether a partial or full mediation effect has taken place. To test the mediation effect, only three attributes (technical quality, innovativeness and administration) were considered – the significant variables that directly predict reputation as indicated in steps 1 and 2 of Baron and Kenny (1986, see Table 1 & 2). From Table 3, R² showed (a change of 0.043, p<0.001), suggesting that the proposed model has improved with the presence of a mediator. Specifically, the results suggest that brand reputation is fully mediated (via satisfaction) by innovativeness (standardised beta coefficient = 0.085, p>0.05) and technical quality (standardised beta coefficient = 0.062, p>0.05) and a partial mediating for administration (standardised beta coefficient = 0.187, p<.001). Furthermore, table 4 indicated that there were direct relationships between satisfaction and brand reputation, and between satisfaction and loyalty. It was also found that loyalty was partially mediated by satisfaction (via brand reputation), as there was a change in R² (.138, p<0.001). In terms of the variances explained in the outcome variables (i.e. the satisfaction, brand reputation, and loyalty, the predictor variables (i.e. the brand image attributes) explain 48 % of the variance in satisfaction and 43% in brand reputation and 61% in Loyalty. Apparently, this is consistent with other related studies. For example, 60% of the variance in online store image explains the online purchase intention, (Heijden and Verhagen, 2004). In Selnes (1993) study, his presented models varied in their ability to explain variations in loyalty from 34% for the salmon feed supplier, 54% for the Telephone company, 61% for the College and 81.5% for the Insurance company.

Table 3:

	R ² (M1)	R ² (M2)	Coefficients	P Value
EQ → S → BR	.532	.575		
Satisfaction			.538	.000
Administration			.187	.000
Innovativeness			.085	.061
Technical Quality			.062	.109

Table 4:

	R ² (M1)	R ² (M2)	Coefficients	P Value
S → L	.567		.753	.000
S → BR	.531		.729	.000
S → BR → L	.467	.605	.543	.000

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Because the effect of brand image/reputation has been frequently uncontrolled in past studies, empirical results between perceived product/quality/brand attributes on customer satisfaction and loyalty could be biased (Selnes, 1993, p.30) as satisfaction and customer loyalty may also be due to brand reputation. The results suggest brand image (quality) attributes – administration of the school, technical quality (e.g. proud with self accomplishment) and innovativeness appear to help the formation of brand reputation and when students are satisfied with the attributes (i.e. pleased with the business school, it enhances the school's brand reputation further), they are loyal to the school (coming back for advanced studies). The present study also confirms previous notions on the importance of educational quality other than the one measured in ranking (Zimmerman, 2001; Gioia and Corley, 2002; Gray et al., 2003 and Vidaver, 2007). Perhaps the most significant finding in this study is that the innovativeness dimension, which helps to explain students' satisfaction as well as the brand reputation of the school, is a new image attribute. It was added as one of the image attributes in the current study to represent the service process and was found useful in explaining the satisfaction of the students and the reputation of the school. Innovativeness concerns delivery methods and the curriculum offered by the school and occurs when schools adapt quickly to change and implement the latest developments in the area of expertise. It appears that if students are happy and pleased with this, it enhances their perception of the school's

reputation. This attribute seems to be important in determining the academic quality of a business school. This finding appears to be consistent with Keller's (2000) notion on innovative brand image. He states that "*An innovative brand image association involves the creation of consumer perceptions of a company as developing new and unique marketing programs, especially with respect to product introductions or improvements. Being innovative is seen in part as being as modern and up to date*" (p.120).

There are clear practical implications arising from this study. Business school leaders should not only be devoted to ranking but also give attention and focus to academic quality issues. In the marketing strategy, the brand value-innovativeness of the school could be enhanced in its message appeal to potential students. The current study shows these criteria are important in forming brand reputation and thus ways need to be found to concretize these attributes. There is, thus, a call for imaginative ways to stimulate student interest and consequently improve brand reputation.

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Appendix 1

Factors/Items	Mean	SD	Factor Loading	Alpha
The School In General & Admin Staff				
Show sincere interest in solving student problem	3.61	.794	.710	13 Items (.909)
Willing to help	3.72	.723	.690	
Friendly & approachable	3.73	.739	.686	
Act promptly	3.44	.890	.666	
Attempt to understand my specific needs	3.29	.821	.609	
Responsive to student evaluations about the curriculum	3.32	.841	.589	
Behaviour instils confidence in students	3.50	.784	.587	
Dependable	3.52	.730	.569	
Keep their promises	3.40	.767	.548	
Have the knowledge to answer your questions	3.47	.864	.547	
Keep students informed about issues that concern them	3.61	.837	.542	
Treat you with respect	3.71	.731	.515	
Available outside class	3.14	.995	.497	
The Lecturer/Teaching Staff				
Willing to help	3.88	.609	.702	10 Items (.901)
Show sincere interest in solving student problem	3.73	.765	.697	
Friendly & approachable	3.95	.624	.694	
Behaviour instils confidence in students	3.74	.691	.682	
Treat you with respect	3.92	.581	.669	
Attempt to understand my specific needs	3.57	.731	.651	
Sensitive to student confidentiality	3.72	.705	.606	
Have the knowledge to answer your questions	3.89	.698	.566	
Available outside class	3.47	.836	.565	
Consistent with their grading practices	3.52	.790	.391	
Facilities				
Physical facilities visually appealing & comfortable	3.18	.963	.855	5 Items (.868)
Physical facilities convenient to students	3.27	.956	.797	
Up-to-date teaching tools & equipment	3.29	.901	.676	
Physical facilities readily available for use around-the-clock	2.95	1.062	.603	
Access electronic information	3.28	.991	.527	
Innovativeness				
Innovative delivery methods	3.32	.823	.685	5 Items (.837)
Innovative curriculum	3.31	.855	.592	
Able to adapt quickly to change	3.22	.869	.543	
Latest developments in area of expertise	3.39	.865	.349	

Factors/Items	Mean	SD	Factor Loading	Alpha
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Technical Quality				
Proud of self-accomplishments	3.81	.691	.821	3 Items (.821)
Performed well in academics as anticipated	3.73	.703	.704	
High quality education	3.75	.697	.590	
Communication				
Make clear what they expect of you	3.46	.779	.558	4 Items (.832)
Explain things in a way that can be understood	3.62	.710	.555	
Best interests at heart	3.43	.782	.443	
Adequate feedback about performance	3.31	.849	.416	
Satisfaction with the School				
Happy with business school	3.84	.712	.756	4 Items (.837)
Distinct branch personality			.750	
Pleased associated with business	3.86	.662	.739	
Has a unique identity	3.57	.801	.631	
Brand Reputation				
Has a good reputation	3.81	.714	.863	3 Items (.877)
Better reputation than local competitors	3.71	.796	.847	
Fulfills promises it makes	3.54	.801	.787	
Loyalty				
Recommend the school to someone who seeks my advice	3.76	.815	.902	7 Items (.897)
Encourage friends to study in the business school	3.77	.815	.853	
Pursue at the school even if the fee increases	3.06	.987	.830	
Say positive things to others	3.81	.755	.804	
Worth paying premium fees	3.33	.913	.743	
Consider the school as first choice in future	3.44	.873	.557	
Pursue higher degree in the school	3.47	.851	.502	