Qualitative Market Re

Projecting University Brand Image via Satisfaction and Behavioral Response: Perspectives from UK-based Malaysian Students

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Projection of University Brand Image via Satisfaction and Behavioral

Response: Perspectives from UK-based Malaysian Students

Abstract

This study attempts to ascertain the essential dimensions and components of university corporate brand image, including the cognitive attributes (service/educational quality) and affective attributes (corporate brand image) of the university. It builds on Schmitt's (1999) conceptualization of brand experience. In doing so, this study develops, explores, and presents a student-consumer behavioral response model based on students' experiences at a UK university, exploring the relationship between these attributes with satisfaction and behavioral response (word-of-mouth). Findings reveal that both branding aspects - brand experience and corporate brand image - follow a rational thought process before an affective component is then considered, resulting in brand promise and loyalty. This study identifies several important brand experiences such as social, functional and emotional in higher education that enhance a university corporate brand image and behavioral responses that guide brand positioning of a UK university for the Malaysian market. Based on the findings of this study, a conceptual framework has been presented. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed with suggestions for future research.

Keywords – University brand image, brand experience, satisfaction, word-of-mouth, corporate branding, higher education branding

1. Introduction

The increasing demand for higher education has made the sector among the fastest-growing industries worldwide (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Such growth and the need for evaluation by government funding bodies has led to competitive pressure among universities to be perceived as more prestigious and better known than the competition (Nguyen et al., 2019). This has resulted in the growing importance of corporate branding within educational institutions (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Melewar & Nguyen, 2015). For example, several researchers have proposed that higher educational institutions (HEI's) can effectively position their corporate or institutional brands by using corporate brand image (Balmer & Liao, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Goonwardana, 2007; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). By having a reputable image, a university will benefit in many ways, including improvements in various rankings, increased enrolment of excellent students, attracting funding opportunities, recruitment by top employers, and alumni donations (Davies & Chun, 2008; Curtis et al., 2009; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015).

However, despite calls for positioning based on corporate brand image, to date, few scholars have focused upon corporate brand image in the higher education sector when modeling consumer-student behavioral response (e.g., Melewar & Akel, 2005; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Curtis et al., 2009). Here corporate brand image refers to the image associated with the organization's brand and is based on the perceptions of the stakeholders' (Hatch, Schultz & Williamson, 2003; Bravo, Montaner, & Pina, 2012). Simões & Dibb (2001) emphasize the importance of brand orientation and used the terms corporate brand image and brand identity interchangeably. They highlight that each organization has its own personality, uniqueness and individuality. A strong brand image/identity was important for presenting a consistent internal and external image among stakeholders.

Most extant works in this context either tend to be theoretical in nature (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007) focus on the service aspects of HEIs by incorporating singular components of attitude such as service, product or educational quality (Davies & Chun, 2008). The branding aspects, however, are limited in empirical evidence on how to manage a brand in this context (e.g. Melewar & Akel, 2005; Balmer & Liao, 2007; Davies & Chun, 2008, Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). Also, this is perhaps due to the newness of the area and its apparent multidisciplinary nature.

This study intends to provide more insights and understanding on the role of corporate brand image in attracting incoming students to the university. In doing so, we will integrate attitudinal components (brand image and brand experience) and investigate their effects on consumer behavioral response. Incorporating both brand attributes to understand a specific university's corporate brand image, may shed light upon clearer strategic corporate brand positioning in this highly competitive market. In particular, focusing on UK based Malaysian students, this study anticipates providing explanations of consumer behavioral responses (Oliver, 1997; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009) by developing, exploring, and presenting a student-consumer behavioral response model based on their experiences at university. Hence, the following research questions are formulated: *What is the relationship between brand experiences and corporate brand image and what are the resulting behavioral responses of this relationship, to Universities in the UK. In other words, how does satisfaction with the University relate to brand image and with word-of-mouth?*

To provide insights into these questions, the following research objectives are formulated focusing on brand image of HEIs among Malaysian students in a University in the UK:

(1) To examine the relationship between university brand experiences (positive and/ or negative) with perceived corporate brand image of the UK university.

(2) To investigate the behavioral responses to the brand experiences and perceived brand image, including the extent to which they will recommend the university to others in the future, specifically their word-of-mouth in favor of a specific university.

The focus upon branding from an HEI perspective among current Malaysian students is of great interest for several reasons: First, Malaysia is the most important target market for new student recruitments for several universities in the UK including X University. Secondly, at many UK-based universities, the number of students recruited from South East Asia and China tends to number in the hundreds each year (student recruitment from Malaysia is one of the largest). Thirdly, X University has been aggressive in its marketing and branding worldwide making it an excellent research context. The university has been actively promoting their brand at several education fairs in Malaysia.

Most of the previous studies which have looked at similar relationships, were in the context of consumer products, whereas this study examines the higher education context which is quite different. Moreover, it has been shown that services marketing methods used in other services cannot be transferred easily to higher education marketing (Canterbury, 2008). The way customers (namely students) interact with other customers and a range of different employees (academics and administrative staff) as well as the fact that higher education usually involves a high-involvement purchase with life- long consequences, make it different from other contexts (Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri & Pich, 2016). In examining the issues involved, this study builds on Schmitt's (1999) conceptualization of brand experience. According to Schmitt (1999), brand experience can be developed from several sources such as sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral and social. However, it was not clear how brand experience is influenced by service and educational quality.

The study has implications for the way in which university branding is expected to result in positive recommendations to universities in the form of positive word-of-mouth for

its future marketing and branding campaigns. Contributions are made to the corporate brand, student-consumer behavior, marketing, and HEI literature by exploring student interests as well as their experiences at a corporate brand level and relates their effects on behavioral response (such as word-of mouth). The practical contribution of the study and its managerial implications lie in the context of defining strategy in relation to positioning the university or institution in an increasingly competitive higher education market.

The organization of this study is as follows: first, a brief review of branding in HEI's in general, and specifically brand image and brand experience, are carried out. A systematic review of past studies on what forms university corporate brand image and their effect on behavioral response is then discussed. This is followed by the research methodology. The results of this study are then presented and analyzed, followed by discussion, conclusions and research implications. Finally, limitations and suggestions for further research are highlighted.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Corporate brand as a strategic higher educational positioning tool

The importance of positioning a university using corporate brand has been well-acknowledged in the past (Argenti, 2000; Balmer & Liao, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Goonwardana, 2007; Davies & Chun, 2008; Curtis et al., 2009; Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). Substantial budgeting is allocated for branding activities in many HEIs. Yet, managing corporate brand strategies may be difficult because organizations may lack understanding of how to manage their corporate brand strategies, perhaps due to the multi-faceted nature of the branding concept (Melewar & Akel, 2005; Bennet & Ali-Choudhry, 2009; Curtis et al., 2009). Previously, Curtis et al., (2009) analyze corporate brand management in a USA-based HEI at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU); Melewar & Akel (2005) explore the

corporate identity of Warwick University in the UK; Davies and Chun (2008) examine

corporate brand identity for Manchester Business School, UK; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury

(2009) investigate educational services and brand covenants of HEI's at new universities in

East London, UK; Hemsley-Brown & Goonwardana (2007) explore how to harmonize a

brand within a corporate brand (focusing on brand architecture) in a USA-based HEI, and;

Nguyen et al. (2016) examine the brand ambidexterity concept across several major

universities in China. While the many HEI branding concepts vary, a common theme exists

for these previous studies in that there is an increasingly business-like approach adopted by

many HEI's. With this scenario, developing a corporate brand image becomes an integral part

of the higher education context as it enhances a student brand's experience and understanding

of what an institution's values and stances are. These experiences increase the clarity of how

to differentiate an institution's brand (Davies & Chun, 2008). Likewise, students choose a

university not only based on the program or location, but also an institution's stances which

ultimately serves an important part of brand differentiation (Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014).

2.2 Corporate brand image and brand experience in higher education

Several literatures (e.g. Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Holford & Reindeers, 2001;

Brakus et al., 2009; Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016) are reviewed

in order to understand the main driving forces that enhance a university brand image and its

outcomes (e.g. positive word of mouth and the student decision making). In particular, two

constructs are found to be relevant and combined to describe the overall corporate image of a

university in this study - namely brand experience and corporate brand image.

In general, an institution (educational) brand image is driven by stakeholders' brand

experiences (example, the students) and these explain how the overall corporate or university

brand image is derived (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). The literature reveals that corporate brand

image is made up of different concepts. First, corporate brand image concerns the overall

impression in the minds of the public, stakeholders and constituencies about an organization

(Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). Image consists of various organizational physical and behavioral

attributes, such as the business name, products and services, tradition, ideology, and quality

cues communicated by an organization's products, services and people (Abratt & Kleyn,

2012). Patterson (1999, p.419) describes brand image as "consumer perceptions of brand

attributes and associations from which [those] consumers derive symbolic value". Construing

an overall image of an organization is a result of a process which entails understanding a

mental map (MacInnis & Price, 1987) and such a map is shaped in several ways via ideas,

feelings, and previous experience into an organization that can be retrieved from memory and

transformed into an overall mental map (Yuille & Catchpole, 1977). Thus, an image of a

company refers to not only "…what we hear and see from company messages" but

experiences its product or service as well (the direct contact consumers have with the

product, etc.)', (Ind, 1997, p.5). Moreover, an institution's image could be described by two

components: functional or cognitive, which is related to tangibles such as product or service

offered, which pertains to the service and perceived educational quality; and emotional or

affective which is the psychological dimension manifest in feelings, attitudes and values

towards an institution (Kennedy, 1977; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Davies, Chun, Roper & Da

Silva, 2004).

2.2.1: Functional (cognitive) and Emotional (affective) responses towards branding

In the higher education context, consumers may evaluate the university or corporate brand

image through the sum of brand values attached to the name or any related corporate brand

activities based on their experiences as well as others (Davies & Chun, 2008; Curtis et al.,

2009; Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). One way to build superior customer experiences is by

understanding how the consumer experiences the brand, as this guides the marketing and

branding strategies for goods and services (Berry, 2000; Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 2009).

Brand experience or the experiential approach has been proposed as important to the

formation of retail brands (Schmitt, 1999; Berry, 2000; Morrison & Crane, 2007), particularly

in the services industry including educational institutions (Theus, 1993; Holdford &

Reinders, 2001; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). While looking at online corporate brand experience,

Khan et al., (2016) also assert that corporate visual identity, emotional experience and

functionality are the strongest predictors of brand satisfaction and loyalty. In their study, the

emotional experience construct was adapted from the affective brand experience construct as

conceptualized by Hamzah et al., (2014) refer to consumer's feelings or emotions generated

in response to their brand. Schmitt (1999) further adds that brand experience can be

developed from several sources such as sensory (engage sense), affective (mood, emotion,

feelings), cognitive (intrigue, curiosity), behavioral (lifestyle, actions) and social

(relationship, social rules).

Students may associate an institution based on their functional (cognitive) and

emotional (affective) experiences (Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). A functional experience is

the service quality of an institution or university, and emotional concerns its image. Although

service quality has received considerable attention in marketing there is a relative paucity of

research concerning understanding of educational quality (Theus, 1993; Vidaver-Cohen,

2007). Indeed, higher education is about service rather than a tangible product (see Kennedy,

1977; Holdford & Reinders, 2001; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). Consistent with this notion,

Grönroos (1990) suggests three groups of quality dimensions: technical quality, functional

quality, and corporate image when evaluating brands in the service-related context. What is

being measured here is the brand attributes of university or known as educational quality, and

perceived corporate brand image through current experiences. The image construct comprises

both functional and technical quality, hence, a university's brand attributes can be defined as

an attitude resulting from student experiences and perceptions of university performance

from the angle of the service process (functional) and service outcome (technical quality)

(Holdford & Reinders, 2001).

Whilst ranking on service or educational quality have been useful indicators in the

past, the changing environment especially when students are becoming more critical when

selecting institutions (Syed Alwi & Kitchen 2014), make these insufficient today to underpin

consumer buying decisions (Davies & Chun, 2008; Bennet & Ali-Choudhry, 2009).

To summarize, two main drivers are found to be relevant when explaining the forces

that drive student decision namely; Corporate (university) brand image and brand experience

with the university. That is, corporate brand image is concerned with an organization's i.e.,

university's innate attributes (brand values), as experienced by students (Davies et al., 2003;

2004; Keller & Richey, 2006; Balmer, 2009). These innate attributes (as the sum of values

that represent an organization), in turn, form the corporate brand image (Ind, 1997). The

values or perceptions held by stakeholders are based on the accumulated experiences (of

these students) with an organization (Davies et al., 2003). Thus, corporate brand image is

about consumers' (or students') cognitive and affective (emotional) responses to a brand that

lead to the personification of brand attributes, which can be used to differentiate between

alternative offerings (Patterson, 1999; Davies et al., 2004; Nguyen et al., 2019).

As the topic of corporate brand image in higher education is still unclear and

relatively new (Theus, 1993; Balmer & Liao, 2007), and because the existing literature is not

robust enough to explain the concept, this study attempts to ascertain the essential dimensions

and components of functional attributes (service/educational quality) and emotional attributes

(corporate brand image) of the university's brand image. This is in line with the previous

research objective concerning the exploration of corporate branding at higher education level

with different stakeholders (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007).

2.3 Satisfaction, Brand Image and WOM

Several studies have examined the relationship between corporate image and

customer satisfaction with varying findings. While others have indicated that corporate brand

image is an important antecedent of customer satisfaction (Tu et al., 2012; Andreassen &

Lindestad, 1998). In the context of higher education, Alves & Raposo (2010) state that

university corporate image has a strong influence on student satisfaction and loyalty but, their

model shows satisfaction is not related to WOM. However, the study does not explain why.

On the other hand, other studies have shown that customer satisfaction is an import part of

brand marketing campaigns and an antecedent of brand image (Nam et al., 2011). Andreassen

& Lindestad (1998) also indicate that corporate image is the strongest predictor of customer

loyalty while surprisingly, there is no significant impact of satisfaction on loyalty.

The importance of word-of-mouth is highlighted by Kamboj & Rahman (2017), as

one of the consequences as a result of interaction between antecedents of participation in

online brand communities, with mediators and moderators. Some studies have also shown

that WOM communication, especially, online, from both current students and alumni directly

affect prospective students' enrolment choices (Yang & Mutum, 2015). However, very few

studies have empirically examined the relationship between satisfaction and/or brand image

with WOM. Some studies have indicated some potential link, for example, Tran et al., (2015)

state that corporate image, with time and experiences, can create consistent reputation.

According to them, reputation has five different levels, namely, awareness, familiarity,

favorability, trust, and finally advocacy. Though they did not exactly indicate the forms of

advocacy, it would most certainly include WOM.

This study was based on Schmitt's (1999) theoretical conceptualization of brand experience and also examines service and educational quality, relating to universities (Holford & Reindeer, 2001) and the corporate brand image (Balmer & Liao, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Davies & Chun, 2008). This study attempts to shed light on strategic corporate brand positioning in this competitive market and accordingly offer better explanations of consumer-student behavioral responses (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Specifically, this study proposes that the service process and outcome (or educational quality-the cognitive brand attributes) of a university as experienced by students may influence a student's satisfaction with the university/school (e.g. happy or pleased with the university/school), which will enhance their overall perception of the school (or corporate brand image – the affective brand attribute) and subsequently foster loyalty to the university/school (such as coming back for advanced studies, recommending to others or saying positive things about the university/school).

3. Method

3.1. Research design

In order to develop a better understanding of consumer/student behavioral responses, this study explores current students' experiences with X University and their perceived corporate brand image through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) at different levels. In particular, this study uses focus groups to obtain insights from participants at the undergraduate and postgraduate level and seeks to elicit and analyze information concerning their university experiences, perceived brand image and more favorable or more unfavorable outcome such as WOM or loyalty. An exploratory focus group-based approach is relevant to this study context (Churchill, 1979; Goulding, 2005). For example, Churchill (1979) explains that the use of FGDs is important to increase the probability of producing valid measures. As

past studies concerning the brand experience concept had a traditional setting, the phenomena or items embedded in the concept do not necessarily relate to the higher educational brand environment, and, generally, as argued, are confined to: (1) service or product brand experience only, (2) limited rather than a multi-dimensional approach (e.g., cognitive and affective), and (3) are commonly researched in the West.

Malaysian students in a UK University were selected as the sampling frame in this study because Malaysia constitutes one of the biggest target markets for X University from Southeast Asia. In fact, Malaysia is the second largest country in terms of contributions to HE students' enrolments in UK, from non-EU countries (UKCISA, 2018). Furthermore, culture and consumer perception may be different in Asian countries due to inter-subjectivity (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010) and language differences (Richard & Toffoli, 2009). Language affects consumer information processing, cognition and decision-making. As a result, people may infer different experiences and meanings, which may well result in different responses when answering questions or exploring issues. Thus, a qualitative research design is both relevant and consistent with procedures used historically, where brand-related experience studies are the objective (Parasuraman et al., 2005; Akinci et al., 2010). As highlighted in the corporate and branding literature, different study environments may result in different dimensions (Davies et al., 2003). Corporate brand differs geographically, as the degree of importance attached to corporate branding varies as much between countries as it does between institutions. Thus, utilizing an East Asian sample is justified in that it might provide new or extend or confirm extant theoretical insight (Balmer & Liao, 2007).

3.2 Sampling and data collection procedure

This study focuses on Malaysian students studying at X University, which was selected because of the large number of Malaysian students studying in the University. The Malaysians represented the largest group of East Asian students from one country and relatively homogenous culturally. As the impact of culture was not the focus of this study, this study focused on the students from Malaysia which are relatively homogenous culturally. The sample comprised of four groups: two from the undergraduate level, one from the Masters' level and a further group comprised of PhD students. Research went ahead after ethical research approval was given by X University. We decided on the Focus Group Discussion method (FGD) as we wanted to gain an in-depth understanding and to understand the perceptions of the participants based on their experiential knowledge, with the researchers facilitating/ moderating the discussions (Bloor et al., 2001). The ethical approvals were conveyed to the students at the beginning of the focus group sessions. These students were invited to participate through a Malaysian X student website as well as through a gathering and via regular meetings held at the Amenities X center. Several follow-up emails were sent individually to all levels and text messages were sent to target respondents (particularly undergraduate) to remind them of the research focus group meetings.

All of the respondents were either: (a) The minimum/at the very least, in their third semester of their first year, or in the second/third year of their undergraduate study when data was collected, (b) The postgraduate (MSc/MBA) level which had completed their exams, (c) PhD students (postgraduate level) comprising of different years from first to fourth year. The above selection criteria ensured that the participants possessed enough knowledge of X University, in line with the procedure suggested by da Silva & Syed Alwi (2008). Roper (2004) also suggests that assessment over time will ensure a truer representation and a more accurate reflection of experience and satisfaction with an organization, thus having some experience before the session was considered highly important.

Based on Morgan's (1996) suggestion, this study conducted four FGDs. In total, the FGDs involved 31 participants from different disciplines/degrees, with a mix of genders (17 females and 14 males), and age ranging from 20 to 45 years old. Specifically, there were two undergraduate groups comprising of six and nine participants respectively, which is considered as an ideal group size (Fern, 1982) and two postgraduate groups (MSc/MBA and PhD level) consisting of seven and nine respondents respectively. The series of FGDs terminated when the data achieved saturation; with the third and fourth groups capturing very little new information (Morgan, 1996). To maintain anonymity of the respondents, they were labeled as UG1 to UG15, which denotes undergraduate, PG1- PG7 denotes postgraduate (MSc/MBA level) and PhD1-PhD9 denotes data from PhD respondents. The students in each group were from similar education/ degree levels so that they would feel more comfortable within their age group (see Table 1). The researchers conducted the four FGDs conducted within a month-long period, following the ethical approvals. On average, each FGD lasted for 90 minutes and took place at a quiet location based at the University, convenient for students. One author acted as moderator and a facilitator was appointed to assist in providing field notes. This approach follows the essential aspects in conducting the focus group procedures of Calder (1977) and Morgan & Spanish (1984), in which the 'moderator' refers to a person who conducts a discussion in a focus group session (Calder, 1977; Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Knops et al., 2010) and the 'facilitator' refers to someone who helps the moderator jot down the notes or quotes expressed by the participants in a focus group (Knops et al., 2010).

This study employed the directed content analysis and thematic approach and procedure to analyze the data from the FGDs. The analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for the determination of the initial codes of the concept studied (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For example, when unfolding a new construct/concept and its related components or dimensions i.e., corporate brand image, the method allows for

supporting or extending the existing theory. In particular, it is useful when the main objective

is to further refine, extend and enrich a specific concept or theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

This procedure is the best approach to analyze the content of findings, and, furthermore, it is

in line with the procedure suggested by Kidd & Parshall (2000) and Braun & Clarke (2006),

and other studies with similar objectives, such as Hsieh & Shannon (2005) and Claes &

Heymans (2008).

Guided by the content analysis procedure, the data analysis followed five steps: (1)

preparing full transcripts of FGDs; (2) establishing coding according to themes; (3) reviewing

the dimensionalities from the extant literature; and (4) naming of dimensionalities. Their

details are as follow.

After the completion of each FGD session, the researchers listened to the audiotape

several times and produced an initial transcript in Microsoft Word. Thereafter, a comparison

was undertaken of the initial transcript and the field notes to complete the full transcript. The

researchers re-read the transcripts several times to understand the discussions based on the

research objectives reflecting the early interest in selecting X, corporate brand image, brand

experience and behavioral responses. Established coding manually is done according to the

themes that appeared based on the existing theory (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Claes & Heymans,

2008), for instance, from the marketing and branding communication domain (Belch &

Belch, 2003). Based on the findings, new perspectives were summarized in relation to the

existing theory (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and then sorted in

accordance to the identified themes and coding relating to the research objectives using

respondent's quotations.

4. Findings and discussion

Based on the four conducted FGDs, the research identified several themes (dimensions) of

corporate brand image from the respondents' experiences and discussed associated sub-

themes. A sample of the quotes from participants appears in the Table 1 to 3 with the

identification of each dimension.

4.1 Perceived university corporate brand image based on the students' brand experiences studying at X University – Social experience with the university

As highlighted earlier, the consumer (student) experience of the university-brand

could be from their sensory, functional, affective, and social and experience as 'engaging

one's senses', appealing, and 'perceptually interesting'. This dimension relates to all five

human senses, comprising sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch, which aim to create the brand

identity (Schmitt, 1999). Based on the content analysis, the present study finds that at the

corporate brand level, social experience comprises specific components, namely, university-

corporate brand name, website appeal, their designs, and information provided through X's

website, its subsidiaries/entities such as recruitment agencies and their brand name, previous

employers, their families and friends, the combination of which is named as corporate visual

identity (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; van den Bosch, De Jong, & Elving, 2006).

Most participants assert that these components and form of communication are

evident that enhance their perception about the university brand image and early interest that

drives their selection of X University. In particular, they are based on these elements: existing

with experiences/seniors, sponsor, websites, families, employers, and recruitment agencies as

indicated by the participants below:

Table 1: Brand (social) experience and perceived university corporate brand image

Questions	Dimensions	Quotes from respondents
Where did you first hear about X University?	Social experience (existing students experiences - senior and friends)	*"I first learnt about X through my seniors that were studying there"* [UG5]
		"I registered and decided to come to X because of my friend that I met at the recruitment agent's office, she recommended me to join her studying in X University because she told me she learnt from her seniors about the university" [PG7]
	Family	*"I hear about X from my parents who asked from my sponsor"* [UG9]
	Social experiences (Sponsor & website)	*"My sponsor suggested that I check X's website with regard to my course"* [UG3]
		"I didn't really know about X until my sponsor told me about it...." [PG4]
		"I follow my sponsor, as my sponsor recommended X for my course...all my friends just follow our sponsor" –[UG15]
		Note: Most of UG students indicate they first hear about X from their sponsors
	Employer	*"My boss actually told me about X,, because I wanted to do engineering, he told me the university has a good school on engineering...."* [PG6]
	Agent	"…From agent A, Agent B, but X is not even associated with Agent C, the top recruitment agent in Malaysia..." [PG7]

Based on these findings, social experience is thus found to be relevant as the first dimension that enhances a student's perception about the university's brand image. Social experience is about brand relationship with the student and how the student is able to relate or connect with other people's experience about the university they are thinking of (Hamzah et al., 2014). For example, social experience are developed from several sources in this study such as seniors and friends, or other external cues including employers, financial sponsors, course-related material, and recruitment agencies, all appear to be important when communicating the benefits of an HEI (Table 1). Similarly, as indicated in previous literature, in a service-related setting, customer purchase decisions relied upon external cues of the corporate brand such as image and positive word-of-mouth (Grönroos, 1984). Furthermore, Argenti & Druckenmiller (2004) explain that organizations should make their assets tangible (possibly through corporate visual identity) in order to position and differentiate themselves in the minds of their stakeholders. This may be due to the fact that an image of a company

refers not only to *"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). According to Antonides and Van Raaij (1998), people differ in their perception of *reality* depending on their own experiences, life histories and personal situations when perceiving people, product or brand. As a result of these differences, each individual has a subjective view of reality or his/her own unique brand knowledge. In addition, the consumer brand knowledge may be derived from several sources: (1) objective reality (consumer personal experience); (2) constructed reality (message from advertising and media) and (3) experiences of others (such as word-of-mouth) (Antonides and Van Raaij, 1998). Therefore, a consumer's association may be comprised of both cognitive i.e. from personal experience and affective or/and symbolic elements (e.g. through advertising) (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Burke and Edell (1989) assert that it is becoming clear that the affective, symbolic and cognitive aspects of persuasion are intertwined rather than separate and Rauschnabel et al. (2016) explain that this is because the university brand represent the overall perceptions and feelings that stakeholders associate with a particular university.

4.2 Perceived university corporate brand image based on the students' (brand) experiences studying at X University – Functional (Cognitive) and Emotional experience with the university

The second and third dimensions found to be relevant in explicating the university's corporate brand image are functional and emotional/affective experience (Schmitt, 1999; Hamzah et al., 2014). Through functional experience (e.g. atmosphere, expertise/staff, facilities, location), respondents of the focus groups indicated mixed emotional experiences to several perceived university brand images. Emotional experience, on the other hand, refers

to the participation in or observation of events that involve feelings and vary in intensity from

moods to emotions, and are important in consumer responses (Schmitt, 1999). Providing

consistent 'good feeling' emotions to customers may foster and build a lasting relationship

(Schmitt, 1999). Laros & Steenkamp (2005) conceptualize brand emotions as comprising

both positive and negative dimensions. In this study, most of the participants express mixed

emotions (positive and negative) about their experiences with the university. The respondents

indicate six components, namely, happy with X University and satisfied but also worried and

disappointed with facilities, staff, and administration. Many of them express the view that

they were happy with the X atmosphere, environment, supportive lecturers (which a case of

functional experience), but propose that the school could further improve to enhance their

experiences with the university (they refer to their own experience of the university and to their

friends at X as well) as indicated below:

Table 2: Brand (functional and emotional) experience and perceived university corporate brand image

Questions	Dimensions	Quotes from respondents
What is your overall experience about X?	Affective image (Positive/emotional Experience) e.g. Happy, good feeling and satisfied	"*It's course content [...] I am so glad I chose X*" [PG5] "*[...] Good experience, worth quit my job to come to X*" [PG6] "X is good in providing support to students. When my supervisor left, they are quick in assuring me that they are doing everything they can to provide temporary support until I will be assigned a new supervisor" [PhD3]
How do you best see X as?	Cognitive image: Excellent program/ courses	"[…] *The program (mix-module, very comprehensive) [...] for me, the program is more important than the university name*" [PG2].
	Reputable	"*I compared the program with other universities (University of Y and Z) but they didn't have the exact program I wanted*" [PG3]; "X *is reputable for my module; it is seen as is tough & reputable*" [PG4] (the student is referring to Engineering degree); "*My employer suggests X is top for Engineering*" [PG5]; "*I came to X because of my supervisor's reputation*" [PhD9] *Note: Most of UG/PG students during the interview agreed that their sponsor suggest X University due to its top program for engineering school
	Other services and communication	"*Fast admission service from Admission [...] the guy that represents Malaysia. He is so good, care about us and so supportive and very quick, so I decided to come because he explains very clearly to me. I received the acceptance letter from X first*" [PG7]

University facilities	"[...] Their facilities are great (e.g. library is open 24/7)..." [UG6]	
	"Facilities are generally good but some facilities (example sports) are outdated" [UG3]	
	"My PhD supervisor is great however my school needs to do more to help us as PhD students, such as special training for our topic. But they said they can't do it ...this is frustrating" [PhD6]	
The Lecturer	"When my father died, my supervisor provides all information and supported me until I finally completed my dissertation, I am grateful to her"	
	"My lecturer is very helpful, sometimes I can see her without appointment" [UG5]	
	"The support & extra classes/seminar or workshops for PhD students are excellent in the Business School, it is up to us to join or not" [PhD3]	
University environment & location	"The environment was what as my senior explains, for example, the International environment, good environment within campus, faculties, accommodation is nearby with our own Malaysian community" [UG4]	
	"It's in London…Location is good" [PG1]	
	"X is a safe university. The security is always present and I feel relax coming back home late at night as bus stop are located within campus. You feel safe here" [UG13]	
	The atmosphere within the university is friendly. We [Malaysian student community] has participated in International food where we provide taste of Malaysian food. You can see they always have international activity from time to time. [UG11]	
	*Note: most of the respondents agreed during the FGD that location (X University is in London) and campus-based environment also play important role to their decision of enrollment.	

4.3 Brand experience and perception of university corporate brand image and their effects on university behavioral outcomes: Satisfaction and positive word-of mouth

Previous research suggests that brand experience enhances a student's perceived university corporate brand image via both functional and emotional elements, the effect it has against one another however was not clear (Curtis et al., 2009; Syed Alwi and Kitchen, 2014), thus hamper university marketing administrator's understanding of designing a more appropriate brand strategy when targeting students. While affective brand attribute is thought to be explained by cognitive brand attributes (the outcomes of educational and service quality), students' behavioral responses (positive word-of-mouth) to schools depended

largely on the affective component and their happiness (satisfaction) rather than upon the cognitive element (Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). In the long-term, satisfied students may develop a sense of belonging to their university, seen as their alma mater and be proud to be associated with the corporate brand (Curtis et al., 2009). They would then offer positive word-of-mouth feedback to colleagues, prospective students' parents, subordinates or whoever seeking advice before pursuing their studies. In other words those graduates which would evaluate their university as a good, respected, and admired institution (overall attitude evaluation-corporate brand image) (Bennet & Ali-Choudhry, 2009), would be followed by feelings of satisfaction (feelings such as affinity, happiness or pleasure in being associated with the school) (Davies et al., 2004) and finally loyalty towards the University (e.g., positive word-of-mouth about the school). Loyal students would be most likely to engage in favorable word-of-mouth communications about the school or recommending the university or school (Bennet & Ali-Choudhry, 2009), remembering that not all schools have a natural association with an umbrella institution.

Respondents of this study, when asked for their overall feelings about the overall brand experiencing, gave positive behavioral responses - namely, happy, glad, good feelings, leading to satisfaction, leading to outcomes such as recommending to their friends, sponsors and families as highlighted by some of the quotes given below:

Table 3: Brand experience, perceived university corporate brand Image and behavioral response – X University

Questions	Findings Dimensions	Quotes from respondents
Now that you have experienced X, how do you feel about the brand? (Satisfaction)	Positive feelings:	*"I am so glad I chose X"* [PG5]
	Happy	*"[...] Good experience, worth quit my job to come to X"* [PG6]
	Feeling Satisfied	"*It met my expectation- as what my senior told me [...] overall, I am happy*" [PG3]
Would you recommend X? (Behavioral response-Word-of-mouth)	Loyalty Word-of-mouth	"*I would love to recommend X but many Malaysian still didn't know about it, X should increase their visibility in Malaysia* [PG4]
		"*We would love to recommend and participate in any X event (e.g. Alumni) in Malaysia*" [PG5]
How best to attract Malaysia (prospective) students?	Increase visibility among Malaysian	"*We would love to recommend and participate in any X event in Malaysia but X should do more because Malaysian relies heavily on ranking, however with helping us on appeal letter to our sponsor, and increase visibility (more marketing, promotion) could change/influence our sponsor decision*" [PhD3]
What could X do more?		*"[...] X need to talk to the Sponsor!"* [PG7]
	Talk to sponsors	*"[...] Sometimes some sponsor did not know how good X is"* [PG3]
		"*Explain to our sponsor and agents that engineering is top in X as well as other school*" [UG6]
	Marketing activities & international agent	"X *is not pushing themselves in Malaysia, not as hard as other universities, market their name and qualities* [...] *as they (the sponsor) will rely on ranking unless other marketing promotion is done to clarify [...] Explain further that X has top expertise (their lecturers), this is not communicated*" [PG5]
		"[...] Agent A, Agent B (e.g. Agent's names), but X is not even associated with Agent C, the top recruitment agent in Malaysia..." [PG7]
		"[...] however not all agents knew X very well for example, Agent C, X does not even appear via Agent C" [PG3]

These findings state that the affective outcomes are viewed as a pleasurable level of consumption related fulfillment (Oliver, 1997), as a result of consumer-student reactions evaluated through their experiences over time, (Roper, 2004). Loyalty as the behavioral intention of students can produce greater value, as this is highly related to the actual behaviors and has richer diagnostic value than overall service quality (Zeithaml et al.,1996).

Based on the findings of this study, we have developed a conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1. The figure highlights the key themes/ dimensions and the relationships,

which emerged from this study. In particular, the study proposes that: The social, functional and emotional brand as experienced by student will form or enhance the student's university corporate brand image which in turn may influence her/his satisfaction (e.g. happy or pleased with the school), and subsequently be loyal to the university (coming back for advanced studies, recommend to others or say positive things about the school).

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework
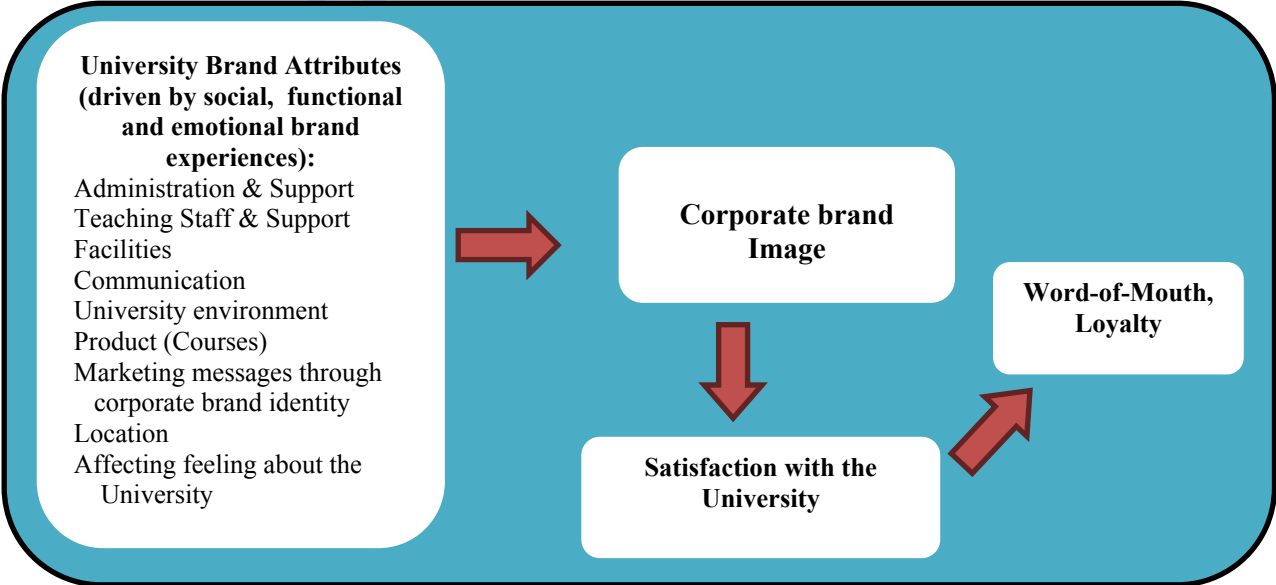
5. Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth investigation of the corporate brand image concept in the HEI context. The findings are expected to aid the strategic brand positioning of the institution, with emphasis upon the Malaysian market and consideration of brand attitudinal components such as corporate brand image and brand experience when analyzing university/corporate brand image and students' behavioral responses.

What drives brand reputation (e.g. academic quality) in an educational context, other than that established through ranking position, has continued to be a major question (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007; Syed Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). This study has provided

some understanding towards this by giving insights into what helps create a favorable brand image of a university that may influence a student's decision to stay for advanced studies (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). The results of this study add to the body of knowledge by indicating that brand reputation of the university is directly linked to the brand experiences and perceived brand image of the university. This is extremely important for universities. A strong positive brand reputation helps firms achieve a competitive advantage by encouraging repeat purchases and creates a source for generating future income streams (Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002). As indicated by the findings of this study, positive brand image and experiences can lead to loyalty and positive word-of-mouth generated by the students.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to theoretical knowledge in at least two different ways: (1) by identifying possible corporate brand image attributes and brand experiences, that guide brand positioning (for the Malaysian market), and (2) by exploring the relationship between these attributes and satisfaction and behavioral response (word-of-mouth) as presented in this study's proposed conceptual framework. This study has identified the specific attributes that influence Malaysian students' early interest in selecting X University via, for example, through social brand experience e.g. recommendation from existing students at X, their sponsors, employers, the courses or modules X offers and location – in London. This study further revealed that corporate brand image attributes of the University (cognitively and affectively) enhance corporate brand differentiation and positioning (Rauschnabel *et al.,* 2016). These include the product/programs, modules, reputable courses/modules, lecturer (expertise and supportive), university atmosphere and environment, administration aspect, service quality such as responsiveness and empathy and good feeling towards the overall university (which a case of functional and emotional brand experiences).

In addition, in studying the current students' brand experience, a mix of feelings and experiences are reported, ranging from positive (happy, pleased, and satisfied) to negative. For example, the university could do more to enhance their learning and teaching experience by improving lecturer communication or offering more support in terms of training for specific courses or enhancing their entry experiences (marketing communication) such as talking to sponsors (especially at postgraduate level). Finally, this study proposes a conceptual model that shows the theoretical relationships between cognitive and affective brand attribute relative to corporate brand image, satisfaction and finally consumer-student behavioral response (loyalty, word-of-mouth). These attributes vary according to the different levels of the degrees (PhD, MSc or Bachelor undergraduate). Arguably, corporate brand promise is seen through this effect (de Chernatony, 2002), which in turn aids the formation of corporate identity (Melewar & Akel, 2005; Davies & Chun, 2008). Thus, from a conceptual perspective, the notion of both brand aspects (brand experience and corporate brand image) follows a rational thought process first before an affective component is then considered, resulting in the brand promise and loyalty. Hence, both corporate brand image and satisfaction are important constructs in universities as they directly and indirectly link with loyalty.

5.2 Managerial implications

HEI brand positioning may not only be based upon ranking or product, service quality or educational quality (which represent the cognitive elements of the brand) (de Chernatony, 2002), but also on affective elements such as corporate brand values and personality (Davies & Chun, 2008; Rauschnabel *et al.,* 2016). The present study contributes to the identification of specific students' needs and attributes including courses and modules, reputable schools (engineering), the environment (e.g. campus – near to lecturer, international), helpful

lecturers, the university location. Addressing the right brand attributes enhance and clarify the

positioning aspect of the university brand, while simultaneously addressing the needs and

wants of consumers (Peter & Olsen, 2008). For example, by understanding the culture –

consumer buying behavior within this setting, marketers or school administrators can identify

exactly which behaviors could be changed and by which mechanism, for example, talking to

sponsors, and introducing activities to increase visibility/image in Malaysia. Interacting with

sponsors can influence them towards sending students to X instead of to other universities in

the UK. This could be translated into relationship building by X University with the

Malaysian or for that matter other sponsors while still maintaining a relationship with

recruitment agencies. Interestingly, almost all respondents 'strongly agree' that they would

base their recommendation on the above factors, but it is their senior existing students'

experiences in relation to all of these aspects at X that drives them to make (entry) decisions

in favor of X, from the context of the current study.

However, there are also issues highlighted about how marketers/school administrators

at X can further improve activity to increase its presence, corporate brand identity and

visibility in Malaysia through a more aggressive promotion. At present, the Malaysian

sponsors lack brand awareness (of X). The existing students propose promoting X

particularly to Malaysian sponsors through X alumni activities. This can also be done by

communicating with them directly seeing as the nature of decision-making (entry) is such

that sponsors heavily rely on rankings and the top 100 universities. Continuously providing

support to students so that they can justify their entry decision with a supporting letter

explaining ranking will assist in bringing about behavioral changes among the sponsors. The

main priority for marketing and branding messages and campaigns should be to target the

main sponsors of the students rather than just students within this context. This approach

helps improve the brand reputation of the university as well as provide promotional messages

and marketing and branding strategy for new student in-take.

5.3 Research limitations and further research

This study is not without limitations. It was conducted in a single university and

future research could replicate this in other schools/institutions. Cross-validation to other

private institutions lies outside the scope of this study. Furthermore, although this study has

identified specific attributes of university brands, they tend to be seen or interpreted as

overall for both brand experiences and corporate brand image attributes due to the reflective

nature of the construct, and also they tend to be seen as higher order rather than at individual

levels. Further research is needed to analyze these dimensions using a quantitative approach

at individual levels and testing the conceptual model as presented in the conceptual model.

This study is focused on one Asian market (Malaysian students in X University) chosen for

its potential growth in the future. Thus, the empirical work could be replicated via other

international students and comparisons made with the present finding in order to find the

standardized messages for promoting the university's corporate brand. Future studies should

look at different groups of South East Asian students to examine whether cultural differences

had an impact on perceptions of brand identity and other themes. It would also be especially

interesting to examine whether there are any differences between Asian students and students from

other European Countries. Finally, the proposed conceptual framework can be empirically

tested in quantitative study in the future in order to understand the varied constructs and their

relationships. Thus, this study provides a good starting point for further research.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Respondent Profile

	Participant Code	Program of Studies	Level (UG, PG or PhD)	Year	Age	Gender
1.	UG1	Engineering	Undergraduate	2	22	Male
2.	UG2	Engineering	Undergraduate	1	20	Male
3.	UG3	Engineering	Undergraduate	2	21	Female
4.	UG4	Engineering	Undergraduate	3	23	Male
5.	UG5	Finance and Economics	Undergraduate	2	22	Female
6.	UG6	English/Creative writing	Undergraduate	1	20	Female
7.	UG7	Business Accounting	Undergraduate	3	23	Female
8.	UG8	Business and Management	Undergraduate	2	22	Female
9.	UG9	MEng	Undergraduate	1	20	Male
10.	UG10	Business and Management	Undergraduate	3	23	Female
11.	UG11	Computer Science	Undergraduate	3	23	Female
12.	UG12	Engineering	Undergraduate	3	24	Female
13.	UG13	Business and Management	Undergraduate	2	21	Female
14.	UG14	Business and Management	Undergraduate	3	23	Female
15.	UG15	Engineering	Undergraduate	3	24	Female
16.	PG1	Computer Communication	Postgraduate	1	28	Female
17.	PG2	Engineering Management	Postgraduate	1	27	Female
18.	PG3	Design and Branding	Postgraduate	1	26	Male
19.	PG4	Engineering Management	Postgraduate	1	25	Male
20.	PG5	Finance & Accounting	Postgraduate	1	24	Female
21.	PG6	Engineering Management	Postgraduate	1	24	Male
22.	PG7	Engineering	Postgraduate	1	26	Male
23.	PhD1	Human Resource Management	PhD	3	45	Male
24.	PhD2	Engineering	PhD	2	38	Male
25.	PhD3	Business-Marketing	PhD	3	43	Female
26.	PhD4	Engineering	PhD	3	33	Male
27.	PhD5	Engineering	PhD	3	31	Male
28.	PhD6	Computer and Communication	PhD	3	29	Male
29.	PhD7	IT Management	PhD	4	27	Female
30.	PhD8	International Business	PhD	3	32	Female
31.	PhD9	Software Engineering	PhD	4	34	Male

Note: UG – Undergraduate; PG – Postgraduate and PhD – PhD. UG constitutes a 3 year or 4 year. MSc or MBA (usually a 12 month program including dissertation or 16 months program including dissertation and placement) and finally, PhD with usually a three or four year program with possibility to extend.