



Branding in Higher Education: A Case Study from Turkey

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Drawing upon the brand-building experience of a young and successful Turkish foundation¹ university, this case study attempts to broaden our understanding of branding in Higher Education (HE). Focusing on the diverse brand conceptualizations, brand management principles and brand strategies that are deployed to circumvent barriers to successful university branding, the study's results are expected to offer some valuable insights to the leaders of young universities in establishing and sustaining strong university brands. In order to illustrate how a young university creates, demonstrates and delivers its brand 'promises' to its target audience in a real-life context, some members of the board of trustees, including the founder, the president, vice presidents and advisors to the president were interviewed by the use of a semi-structured interview guideline. The data was analysed using content analysis method. The findings are grouped under three main themes: brand conceptualization, brand strategies and brand management principles. Findings revealed that how the leaders interpret 'being a brand' in HE shapes and drives brand management principles and brand strategies.

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Introduction

With significant increases in the numbers of students from lower socio-economic status entering universities, Higher Education (HE) became the most dynamic and fastest growing sector of the twenty-first century (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009; Erguvan, 2013). In order to secure a bigger slice of the ever-expanding HE pie, universities strive to attract and enrol greater numbers of students (both national and international) (Marginson, 2006); offer many more types of degree courses (Şenses, 2007); and become more involved in marketing and branding (Naudé and Ivy, 1999; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Chapleo, 2007). As in other developing countries, competition in the Turkish HE sector is growing at an unprecedented pace. A number of factors, including the Turkish government's tendency to require state universities to generate a considerable portion of their own

income, proliferation in the number of universities, rising tuition fees, expansion of the HE pie with the introduction of high-fee summer and evening programs, commercialisation of student services, growing internationalisation of universities and the change of the related article of the Constitution, which previously prevented foreign universities from opening branches in Turkey dramatically increased the strain on Turkish universities over the last decade (Şenses, 2007; Turkish Higher Education Council, 2007; Aslıoğlu, 2009; Erguvan, 2013). All of these changes led Turkish foundation universities to undergo dramatic changes and invest more in branding. Branding is now a very important issue in Turkey especially for young universities having to attract a sufficient number of students to finance their activities. In order to enhance their visibility, form a favourable reputation among the public and eventually differentiate themselves from the others, an increasing number of young universities in Turkey now use corporate branding techniques (Aysen *et al.*, 2013).

Purpose of the study

A strong university brand can engender the belief that the institution is excellent and that the prospect of enrolling to the university is a pleasurable and rewarding experience that will add value to the student (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009). Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009, 85) define ‘university brand’ as ‘a manifestation of the institution’s features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students’ needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of HE and help potential recruits make wise enrolment decisions’. On the basis of the ‘brand’ definition above, this study examines the branding efforts of a young Turkish foundation university from the accounts of its most important decision makers. More specifically, the study attempts to illustrate how a university creates, demonstrates and delivers its brand ‘promises’ to its target audience addressing to the following research questions:

- (1) How do the institutional leaders interpret being a ‘brand’ in HE?
- (2) What are the most important Brand Strategies (BSs) that are deployed to circumvent barriers to successful university branding?
- (3) What are the Brand Management Principles (BMPs) adopted by the university to facilitate a successful university branding?

Importance of the study

Despite the growing importance given to branding in HE, research focusing on branding in young universities is still in its infancy. A fundamental gap in the field is derived from the lack of knowledge about what exactly decision makers (rather than academics) in universities interpret being a ‘brand’ in HE, and exactly which BSs and



BMPs are adopted to facilitate the establishment of successful university brands. A case study delving into the chief decision makers' views (rather than academics) on these issues thus has the potential to offer valuable insights particularly to the leaders of young foundation universities in establishing and sustaining strong university brands.

Literature Review

Brand Management (BM) has significant implications for twenty-first century institutions that have to compete with each other for survival and supremacy. Like many institutions investing considerable sums in the development and management of their brands, universities commit a substantial amount of their financial resources to branding activities in order to strengthen their image of 'prestige' or 'quality' (McPherson and Schapiro, 1998; Chapleo, 2007). A university's image and brand have a strong impact on its future as they influence not only the students' decisions about the university but also the level of funding from donors by affecting the larger community's attitudes about the institution (Landrum *et al.*, 1998). Kapferer (2008) argues that BM is primarily concerned with products and services as the prime vector of perceived brand image, while the BSs are concerned with the communication side of branding in order to orient perceptions about the brand image in the most favourable way. There is no doubt that having a distinct image and a strong brand is vitally important for universities struggling to maintain their competitiveness in the marketplace (Parameswaran and Glowacka, 1995). Yet, despite the overwhelming importance given to branding in the HE sector, Chapleo *et al.* (2011, 25) assert that the 'quest to differentiate through branding can be challenging in the university context'. As suggested by Wæraas and Solbakk (2009), the message of a university might be too complex to be encapsulated by one brand or identity definition. As pointed out by De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003), branding is one of the most important and arguably the most visible manifestation of 'marketing'. Judson *et al.* (2009, 54–55) make the point that 'From a communication perspective, branding is an organization's attempt to tell their story' and 'organizations that do not make it priority to build a brand identity find themselves at the mercy of how others choose to tell their story'.

Although universities have multiple stakeholders (academic and administrative staff, funding bodies, boards of trustees, private donors, national and local government agencies, and so on) and groups they need to impress (for example, the media, alumni, employers), students are the most important ones as the universities ultimately rely on students for their financial well-being (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009). Although students strive for rationality when selecting a university, this rationality is bound by certain time constraints, incomplete information and insufficient resources. Therefore, a rational choice often cannot be obtained. Brand image acts as a

'halo effect' and instead of assessing all the credentials of each university, students 'buy' the brand that they find most appealing. Balmer and Gray (2003) argue that brand encapsulates the additional values that are inherent in or associated with the institution and its products and services. Furthermore, Capriotti (1999, 16, cited in Azoury *et al.*, 2013) defines brand image as 'the mental representation of a real object that acts in that object's place'. If we accept Capriotti's definition of brand image and Balmer and Gray's argument on the subject, then it is quite rational to claim that students' choices and overall judgments about the universities are substantially affected by the positive or negative connotations attached to university brands. Bearing this in mind, it becomes quite rational to assume that students' choice of a university best fits to Simon's (1997) administrative/satisfier man model rather than the economic model of rational man. Supporting Simon (1997), Hesketh and Knight (1999) found out little evidence of students behaving like rational customers. Students, in fact, generally settle with an acceptable 'brand promise' instead of looking for the university that best matches their needs at the best price. This reality, indeed, compels universities to invest more time and energy on their BM and to subject their brand to closer scrutiny.

Method

As the purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth description of the experiences of the chief decision makers in a young foundation university in regards to 'becoming a brand' in HE and to identify BSs and BMPs that facilitate the establishment of a successful university brand, a qualitative case study technique was used as the main research approach. A 15-year-old, young and successful foundation university, which became known as a brand in less than a decade was chosen as an 'exceptional' case for several reasons. (i) The chosen case was the first and the only Turkish foundation university to have so many international expansions outside Turkey (for example, Rome, Berlin, Hong Kong, Toronto, Boston, Washington DC and Silicon Valley). (ii) TUBITAK had declared it in the top 20 of Turkey's 'entrepreneurial and innovative university' index in 2012. (iii) The founder of the university was the first Turk honoured with 'Contribution to Global Education' award by the United Nations. Ten interviews were conducted across the institution. Participants included the chair of board of trustees (also the founder who is still active in setting, leading and shaping the branding activities of the university), the two other members of the board of trustees including the president, three vice presidents (VPs), two advisors to the president (Senior Marketing and Communication Manager (SMCM) and the Director of the Social Science Institute (DSSI)), one former vice president (FVP) and the Director of the Educational Sciences Institute (DESI). The data was analysed using a constant comparison technique — an approach recommended by Flick (2006). Throughout the analytical process, the researcher tried to



ensure thematic connections within and across the transcripts (Seidman, 1998) and used the participants' own words to portray their experiences.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are organised under three main themes (see Figure 1). The themes are then explored and illustrated by incorporating selected excerpts from the interviews for in-depth insight and discussed in the light of existing literature.

Theme 1: Brand conceptualization

The theme addressing the first research question was generally concerned with what university leaders think about becoming a 'brand' in HE. When explaining their understanding of what a brand is, what it means, and how they perceive the process of becoming a brand-name university, respondents generally tended to focus on the facilitating and hindering roles of several factors in branding. These factors are organised under four sub-themes: Sector specific conditions; accreditation; reputational heritage; institutionalisation and the country conditions in terms of stability and the level of development.

When the participants were asked 'what does it mean to be a brand in HE?', they generally attempted to answer this question either by comparing and contrasting their perception of branding in different sectors (for example, FMCS or textile sector) or benchmarking the well-known, reputable, brand-name universities. As illustrated in the following quote from the founder, branding in educational institutions was perceived as significantly different from branding in other sectors:

It is different for a university to prove its competence and build a strong brand ... It really takes a long time. Results cannot be got immediately in educational institutions. It is not like FMCS or textile sector. First of all, your production process takes much longer. Graduation of a student alone takes at least four years and then it takes ... another five or ten years for that student to prove herself ... in her/his sector. Therefore, it is really hard for universities to build a strong brand based on their product [graduates] quality.

The above findings revealed that becoming a brand in HE is far more difficult than it is in other sectors. First of all, although evidence of a good product [graduate] quality is one of the main concerns of most university applicants, considering the time it takes for a university student to graduate, relying on graduate quality does not seem to be a viable strategy for young universities.

On the other hand, as one of the VPs pointed out, becoming a brand-name university in the HE sector depends on how people rank the university among other universities. By clearly setting her frame of reference as being adequately recognised

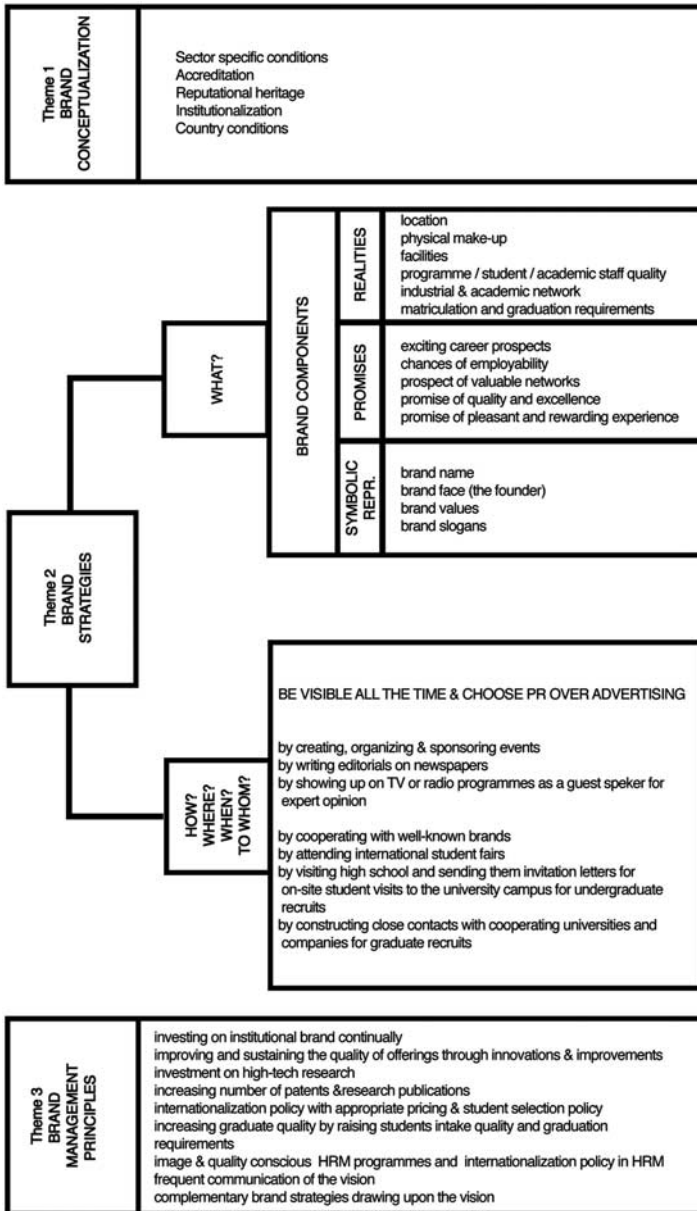


Figure 1. Themes, sub-themes and codes.



by other universities to allow comparison, the VP argued that a university becomes a 'brand' only when other universities form a clear judgment about the students of that university. She further noted that for a university to be recognised as a brand-name university, other universities should know what a certain GPA (Grade Point Average) score says about the student of that university. By bringing the role of benchmarking and accreditation into discussion, she said that: *I think that a university can claim to be a brand only if people are able to make reliable judgments about the credentials of its students and graduates from their GPAs.* Findings under this sub-theme revealed that unless a university complies with widely accepted standards that allow for basic comparisons among their students/graduates, it can never claim to be a brand-name university. This finding implies that accreditation is a 'must' for universities striving to become well-known and reliable brands in HE. Confirming the findings of Naidoo *et al.* (2014), these findings showed that when it came to brand reputation, academic leaders regard rankings on university league tables and school accreditations as key indicators of a university's status.

The meaning of 'brand' in the HE sector was also discussed in relation to reputational heritage. Confirming Hudson (2011) stating that reputational heritage is important in understanding the appeal of older brands, the founder argued that the deep-rooted universities have a unique advantage in branding. Drawing attention to the age of the institution, the founder explained how reputational heritage acquired over the years can make a difference in branding as follows:

When you look at the history of HE in Turkey and worldwide, you notice that the well-known universities have histories of at least 300 years. We are at our 15th anniversary and this is a very short time for a university. Despite this fact, we succeeded to become a well-known brand in Turkey. Although it is too early to claim the same globally, with peace of mind, I can assert that, in 15 years, we have come to the point that usually can only be reached in 30–40 years.

Prestige is something to be earned over time and takes much longer than a decade or two. Over the time, brands build a sense of legitimacy and enjoy higher levels of prestige and credibility. While older universities have a chance to exploit prior brand awareness, which precludes the need for expensive advertising and other branding efforts, and reduces the risk of failure, younger universities lack all of these advantages (Hudson, 2011). Particularly in today's world of 'pop-up' universities and rising public scepticism about the value of a bachelor degree, the older, prestigious universities have the advantage over their younger counterparts especially in attracting the 'right' applicants as they have a potential to exploit their reputational heritage for competitive advantage (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). As argued by Marginson (2006), positional value is the strongest drawcard for universities; and the greatest positional value lies in institutional prestige, which tends to be synonymous with institutional age in many cases. Therefore, supporting



the arguments and the findings above we can reasonably assert that the reputational heritage is not an asset that young universities can hinge their marketing strategies on.

The concept of ‘brand’ was also explained in relation to ‘institutionalization’ and ‘country conditions’. SMCM noted that branding goes hand in hand with institutionalisation and it is much easier when ‘brands’ are born in a country where institutionalisation has a long history and the country conditions are stable:

Branding depends on two things: Institutionalization and the country conditions. A high level of development and stable conditions facilitates institutionalization. The Republic of Turkey, on the other hand, is not very stable or developed. So it is really hard to create a successful brand in Turkey. The lives of companies are too short to invest in institutionalization and branding. Yet, we started to invest in institutionalization and branding from the very beginning. We’re now pretty much recognized despite our young age. Institutionalization gives a message of credibility and is therefore very important for educational institutions. And I firmly believe that investments made in institutionalization eventually pay off.

As discussed by Brown and Mazzarol (2009), institutional image is critically important for students regardless of the institution’s age. As suggested by the above finding, stable country conditions and the institutionalisation experience of a country contribute substantially to branding. Therefore, in order to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the university brand, it might be wise to invest the time upfront to institutionalisation although nothing can be done to change the institutionalisation history of the country or the country conditions themselves.

Theme 2. Brand strategies (BSs)

BS is how, what, where, when and to whom you plan on communicating and delivering on your brand messages (Levy, 2015).

‘What?’ strategies

What you communicate visually and verbally is part of the BS (Levy, 2015), and fundamentally built on the brand components. Review of the related literature breaks brands down into three definitive components: (i) ‘brand values’, (ii) ‘realities’, and (iii) ‘symbolic representations’ (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009).

Realities

‘A brand involves a set of realities (rather than promises) that define the brand’s inherent nature’ and these realities involve ‘a university’s matriculation requirements, physical make-up, social situation, student drop-out rates, whether the university is elite and exclusive rather than comprehensive and mass market, whether



it places research above teaching, and whether it offers a desired degree programme' (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009). As argued by the university's president, by choosing an attractive location, improving physical make-up of the institution, enriching social, sport and research facilities, hiring high quality of teaching staff, designing diverse and novel programmes, building strong industrial and academic networks, and gradually increasing its matriculation and graduation requirements the university has striven to increase its brand value. The following excerpt from the FVP's interview, for example, explains how strategic the choice of a new location was for the university:

Moving to Beşiktaş was very strategic and the right choice ... There was a significant improvement in the image of the university after this. Beşiktaş is in a very attractive location. Being so close to the Bosphorous alone is more than enough for many students. For graduate students, being in the city center is also very convenient especially in terms of transportation. After they finish work they still have plenty of time to catch the evening courses.

The strategic importance of the current location of the university was also explained by DSSI from the perspectives of graduate students: *Our location provides us with a unique advantage. Most of our graduate students are working ... But, since we're located in the city center, it's not really hard for them to come here after work. I think that this locational advantage gives us a unique advantage particularly in our post-graduate programmes.*

Undertaking projects with industry and hiring teaching staff from the business world are also analysed under 'what?' strategies. As suggested by one of the VPs, the novelty, diversity, and quality of their programmes are important brand assets:

We have a wide spectrum of programmes. Especially most of our new graduate programmes are 'unique' in Turkey. We pioneered custom-made programmes, introduced the 'branded course' concept in Turkey and prepared tailor-made content for those courses. In designing our programmes we tried to make sure that our students are well integrated with real workplaces This is, indeed, why we are such a well-known university in the [Turkish] business world. Most reputable employers in Turkey are now aware of our students long before their graduation, and they know how well they are equipped for the work-life during their studies in our university.

An attractive physical environment, and the provision of social, sport, and research facilities also proved to be one of the critical assets leveraged by the university under 'what?' strategies. In regards to facilities, the president said that *social achievements are as important as academic achievements ... We provide students with not only an academically stimulating but also a socially exciting environment.* He also elaborated his point regarding social achievements by demonstrating the achievements of their Chamber Orchestra and Choir of

Civilisations as evidence and indicating the university's collaboration with one of the most famous national sports teams. Noting how hard they work to provide high quality research facilities, he said that: *We work really hard to improve our research facilities and provide an academically stimulating environment for our students. This year we've allocated a large amount of money to improve our research labs.*

Promises

'A brand represents a collection of promises made to the outside world concerning its benefits and they might involve the students' subsequent social and educational experiences at the institution, career prospects on graduation, and institutions' values etc.' (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009, 14). Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) argued that because of the intangible nature of educational services, 'promises' represent particularly important components of a university brand. During the interviews, almost all the participants (without prompting) hinted at the invaluable impact of professed 'promises' as a brand strategy. Attractive career prospects upon graduation, the promise of quality and excellence, the prospect of obtaining valuable networks for a future career, the chance of employability upon graduation, and the promise of a pleasant and rewarding university experience proved to be the most prominent promises. The following quotation by the president perhaps reflects the most striking promise of the university: 'We never promise our students a job upon their graduation. What we promise is a "vision". We encourage them to be entrepreneurs and employers not employees'. According to SMCM, on the other hand, the most prominent promise given by the university was the prospect of obtaining valuable networks:

Our students know that entering this university will open up new opportunities for them. Our students learn from top-class professors and build valuable networks early in their undergraduate years. They know that their current classmate might be their future work-partner who can help them extend their business in other countries or one of our COOP partners could be their future employer. We value conducting networks for our students as well as the academic achievement and they really appreciate it.

Findings regarding promises showed that the promises are a significant part of the 'what?' strategies and as suggested by Schultz and Schultz (2000) and Steele (2008), they must be compatible with the brand realities. Confirming this suggestion, the findings showed that to sound credible and convincing, university leaders put a great deal of effort into supporting their brand promises by investing in their brand realities and demonstrating this in the most favourable way.

Symbolic representations

A brand comprises various symbolic elements (that is, the brand name, slogans, logo and other visual cues) and since the services of a university are mostly intangible in



nature, they represent a particularly important component of a university brand (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009). They are embodied in the institution's marketing and other communications as an integral part of the university's brand and tell the target customer a great deal about the brand. The following quote from the founder, for example, explains the importance of choosing a strategic brand name and developing a sophisticated logo that can outlive generations:

When I decided to establish this university, I was no one in Turkey. Just an ordinary educator! No one knew me. I was not the boss of a huge textile corporation or something. So, naming the institution after me would have been non-sense ... I needed to rely on something bigger than myself. Therefore I named the institution after the town that the university was built in. I had two reasons for that. First, it was one of the most well-known towns in Turkey, because it was one of the first examples of a satellite town in Turkey. This town was a brand on its own. Second, we (as a foundation) had a very reputable college named after this town. So, I decided to name the university after the town. At that time, under those specific conditions, it was a wise choice. Yet, today, because Turkish characters in our name started to be problematic as a global university, we began using the initials in our brand name and logo.

SMCM also drew attention to the founder as the visible manifestation of the university's brand and implied that the face of the institution's brand is particularly important for young universities. *Our founder is the face of our university and probably the most important part of our brand. He is just like a rock star among our students.* Findings in this part implied that a strong face (like the founder) can provide a particularly important competitive advantage for young brands in instilling the brand spirit to the community.

Findings also revealed that brand slogans are one of the strongest assets of the university brand. Below are examples of the university's most frequently used slogans: 'The world is my campus', 'global university at the heart of Istanbul' and 'My campus is my office'. 'The world is my campus' is a slogan used to signal to students that they can take some of their courses in the campuses of the university that are located in different countries. With the 'Global university at the heart of Istanbul' slogan, the university points out the unique location of the university. With its last slogan, on the other hand, the university tries to draw attention to the 'My campus is my office' model, which gives students opportunity to work during their education.

Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) assert that the brand name, values, face of the brand and slogans are the integral and central aspects of the brand. They help people to form an opinion about the institution and convey important messages about the university to prospective applicants. 'International/global presence', 'entrepreneurial spirit', 'interdisciplinary culture', 'dynamism', 'innovation' and 'passion for excellence' are emerged as the most frequently emphasised brand values. Note the

following quote from the founder in this respect: ‘We are entrepreneurs and we love entrepreneurs. We are already ranked in the top 20 in the Turkish entrepreneurship index and aim to be in top 10 in the near future’ (Founder). ‘Our university is a global university which gives a high importance to interdisciplinary work and cooperation with the industry’.

‘How?, Where?, When? and Whom?’ Strategies

How, where, when and to whom you communicate and deliver on your brand messages and your distribution channels is also part of your brand strategy (Levy, 2015). Findings demonstrated that the university studied prefers PR over advertising. SMCM proposes two main arguments on this:

First, despite the continued dispute, advertising of educational institutions is somehow legally restricted in Turkey. Although educational institutions cannot provide advertising materials for commercial broadcasts, due to some loopholes in advertising regulations, they can participate in TV programmes and can take part in radio broadcasts as guests. And second, PR is much more effective for educational institutions than advertising, as it is regarded as more convincing or trustworthy. Moreover, investing in publicity pays back more than investing on commercials.

Noting the role of dynamism and innovativeness, SMCM explains how they create, sponsor and organise special events to be visible all the time:

Every year we plan to come up with something new that can make people talk about us. This year it was ‘Apply X’ project, last year it was something different. Next year we’ll come up with something new. It is not only valid at the university level but also at the faculty level. Being innovative is our strategy and when we produce something new, something innovative and undertake important projects; we make sure that people know about it. We organize launching events; invite the press and the ministers. We often create, sponsor and organize events, as these are the only chances for educational institutions to remain alive in the minds of the people.

SMCM further noted that writing editorials for the newspapers’ education and economy columns or showing up in TV programmes or in radio broadcasts are other PR strategies employed frequently. He argued that writing an interesting editorial on changing trends in education or explaining the implications of an educational policy for the country under the signature of the institution or attending TV or radio programmes as a guest speaker especially right before students make their university choices is much more effective than expensive commercials. Noting the power of word of mouth marketing and social media, he argued that their main PR strategy is creating something new all the time to make people talk about the institution.



As expressed by SMCM, findings also revealed that ‘collaborations with the well-known brands’ is part of their PR strategy speeding up the branding process: ‘I think we partly owe our brand recognition to our international connections and collaborations with worldwide brands’.

As professed by SMCM, the target market of the university is composed of both local and international students. While the university strives to recruit above average students both by socio-economic status and achievement, as explained by SMCM, since the university is aiming to acquire a worldwide reputation by having a high population of international students, the university tends to be less selective in its international recruits. They allocate a significant sum of money to attend international student fairs and open information offices in foreign countries for international student recruits. While the university prefers to host prospective undergraduate students on their campus and send invitations to high school administrations for on-site student visits, they also visit some high schools with their brand ambassadors composed of academics, students and the Corporate Communication team. They also contact their partner universities and companies both for local and international graduate recruits.

Theme 3. Brand management principles (BMPs)

BM is the management of how a brand is perceived in the market by introducing long-term effects as criteria for evaluating the relevance of short-term decisions and ensuring that the brand is associated with positive results (Kapferer, 2008). The university’s BMPs rely on both vertical (being better than competitors) and horizontal (differentiating yourself based on your uniqueness that adds value for a client) management strategies and are built on the university’s vision which participants declared as ‘Ranking in the top 500 universities in the world’. The following quote from the founder captures the essence of the vision and the BMPs adopted by the university: ‘We work really hard and aggressively to be ranked among the top 500 universities in the world. We hired the top-class academics, chose the best possible location, designed novel and stimulating programs and tried to attract the best performing students’.

As professed by the participants, the BMPs adopted by the university were as follows: ‘Investing in institutional brand continually’, ‘improving and sustaining the quality of offerings through innovations and improvements’, ‘investing more in high-tech research and increasing the number of registered patents and research publications’, ‘internationalization policy with appropriate pricing and student selection policy (e.g. setting lower tuition fees and matriculation requirements for internationals than locals)’, ‘increasing graduate quality by raising students’ intake quality and graduation requirements by setting higher matriculation requirements especially for local students (but lower for international students due to the internationalization policy)’, ‘image, reputation and quality conscious HRM programmes and internationalization policy in HRM’, and ‘complementary brand strategies drawing upon the university vision’.

Note the following excerpt, in which the president stated the importance of investing in high-tech research and increasing the number of research publications with their related HRM strategy: ‘Our next priority is high-tech research. We aim to produce high-tech, value added, patented products. Therefore, we plan to invest more in the faculties and students who can help us with it... We try to recruit professors and doctoral students who can help us improve our world university ranking by increasing the university’s number of patents and research publications’. The following statement from SMCN is also striking and explains the university’s image and quality-conscious HRM programmes and the internalisation policy in HRM as a part of their BMPs:

Faculty qualifications and ‘who they are’ are extremely important. Students want to know that they’ll learn from ‘the best’ ... This is actually why we’ve transferred the top-class professors with outstanding records — big names in the media. Most of our professors are well-known people who are columnists in well-known newspapers. Their names are brands in their own right ... One of our VPs, for example, was the former CEO of one of the most reputable companies in Turkey.

DSSI, on the other hand, drew attention to the importance of ‘investing in the institution’s brand continually’ and ‘improving and sustaining the quality of offerings through innovations and improvements’ to circumvent barriers to successful university branding. He asserted that any university can become a brand overnight as long as it can come up with a novel idea, but the real question remains whether it can continue to be a brand in the long term. He also explained why sustaining a brand can be more costly than creating it:

Especially in a country like Turkey, with an innovative idea you can easily create a brand. However, preserving the brand reputation is always more important than creating it. First, whatever you produce, you need to make sure that its quality is above the average. Second, you will closely watch the local and global trends in your sector, and build your brand on the global values. Yet, while adopting global trends, you must be sure that everything fits together and is in harmony with local expectations. Otherwise, you risk your brand looking superficial. Third, everything has a cost. Sustaining a brand requires substantial investments. Yet, these investments should be made without expectation of an immediate financial return. These are quality investments required to keep your brand alive.

DESI, on the other hand, explained how the university’s leadership strives to raise graduate quality by increasing the quality of student intakes and raising the graduation requirements:

We’ve raised our matriculation requirements and provided scholarships for the best students ... We have now come to the point we aimed for. We now get



students from the top of the list [National Examination Score List] ... Because we are a foundation university with high tuition fees, people think that neither entry nor graduation is challenging at all. Some people think that we just register whoever applies and let them graduate even though they perform poorly ... We are fighting against this perception. We cannot let this assumption settle in ... It is an issue of prestige.

SMCM explained their efforts to increase the university's favorability both in the local and international market by adopting a more 'international look' and their related pricing and student selection policies (for example, lower tuition fees and matriculation requirements for internationals than locals).

We say that 'we are an international university at the heart of Istanbul'. And we work really hard to make it happen ... We make special discounts to attract international students. They even pay less than our Turkish students. It may sound unfair but we need them. Without them, how can we claim to be international? Turkish students want to see international faces around them too ... Today, we are indeed the university with the highest population of international students in Turkey.

Frequent communication of the vision both to the public and the faculty and making the right investments accordingly was pointed out as one of the most important BMPs both by SMCM and the founder. The following statement by the founder shows the importance of the communication of the mission, vision and brand values: *From the very beginning, we had a mission and a vision that we believed in wholeheartedly ... and we shared this belief with the public at every opportunity.* Findings also showed that communicating the brand components (realities, promises and symbolic representations) via the right channels to the right people, delivering these promises and making people believe in these promises are as important as the brand components themselves. The most striking remark offered in this regard was, perhaps, from the founder himself:

This year, for example, we were the first choice of the highest-ranking student in the university entrance examination ... He enrolled to our one year old faculty of medicine. People made a big fuss about it. Via twitter, they asked me what I offered to this student to make him choose us. I tweeted that I offered him a mansion near the Bosphorous! [Laughs]. He chose us because he knew that he would receive the highest quality medical education. We told him that we could send him to Yale's genetic lab, to Harvard for brain operation, and Geneva for cardiology. He believed in us and chose us. It was like a revolution in the Turkish HE sector. Even though there were many reputable, deep-rooted medicine faculties in Turkey, he preferred our one-year-old faculty. It shows how strong our reputation is. It is an outstanding achievement for such a young university.

Conclusion

Drawing upon the brand-building efforts of one of Turkey's youngest and most well-known foundation universities, this study explored how the leaders of this university conceptualised branding in the HE sector and how they engaged in the establishment, communication and the control of the institution's 'brand'.

First of all, the findings showed that the basic notion of brand is highly related to sector-specific conditions, accreditation, reputational heritage, institutionalisation and country conditions (for example, stability and the level of development). Findings under the first theme suggested that brand conceptualization has important implications for how a university designs its BSs and drives the BMPs of a university.

The leaders' experience revealed that the BMPs and BSs that are deployed to circumvent barriers to successful branding for a young institution are diverse. Naidoo *et al.* (2014) suggest that the degrees conferred by the universities are worth only as much as their brand. Confirming Naidoo *et al.* (2014), the findings suggest that in an era of rankings, metrics and student fees, attracting the right calibre of academics and students and ranking high in the world university rankings plays an important role in branding and thus relying on such a ranking-focused vision in formulating the BMPs may facilitate a successful branding for young universities by providing the university with a strong and concrete focus. Confirming Balmer and Gray (2003), findings implied that BSs communicate the institution's values (often seen as a promise), act as a means of differentiation from competitors (by realities), and enhance the esteem and loyalty felt by the stakeholders (especially by symbolic representations) and affect how the institution is judged by the community. Moreover, since the 'what?' strategies help reflect the university's capacity to satisfy students' needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of HE, and since the young universities lack the advantage of older brand-name universities in this respect, young universities must be very careful in planning their investments in brand components from the very beginning.

Findings also suggested that unlike old, prestigious name brand universities, active PR is particularly important for young universities in order to get noticed. Especially if a young university decides to compete in the premium league it should carefully calculate how much it has to invest and how much it can afford to do so from the very beginning. Because, despite to its appeal, competing in the premium league with deep-pocketed and deep-rooted brand name universities will not be easy and it is not without a cost. It requires a substantial amount of money, time and energy. Findings also suggested that PR and advertising strategies can help a young university get noticed and remembered, yet they do not make it sell. So, if a young university does not continually create anything worthwhile to publicize, engaging in PR or advertising activities does not necessarily contribute to the 'brand' of the young university. Investing in brand components, on the other hand, is what can



make the clients choose the young university. Finally, the findings showed that to create a strong brand, to be credible and convincing with the brand promise, BMPs of the young universities should serve the university's vision, must fit closely with the BSs, and must be mutually complementary.

Note

1 According to 2,547 Higher Education Law, Article 5, foundation universities are founded by foundations that use their profits only for educational purposes. They are dependent on the higher education principles and legislations of the country except for administrative and financial matters.

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