

Implication of Branding Initiatives in engineering colleges -An empirical study

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Abstract: Many educational institutions all over the world are trying to create an image or reputation to attract students. Due to increased competition branding has become more relevant in promoting an institution's reputation. In India, as the state Karnataka is becoming an educational hub, there are an enormous number of institutes flourishing in this field, both government and private entities. In this endeavor the branding of educational institution helps in differentiating one institute from others. This research sheds light on branding initiatives by engineering colleges across Karnataka. Students are investing their precious time, while at the same time parents are investing their life savings to create a better future for their children. Therefore, selecting the best college to secure a student's future becomes life-death decision to many. It is vital for the top management of higher educational institutions, to understand what students expect from them and accordingly strategize the brand building activities, so that a brand name or reputation for the college is built up which will be valued by the stakeholders. The purposive sampling technique is used for this study. The population consists of engineering colleges which offer the four year engineering degree. The study is done from both student and institution perspective. The institutions participated in the study are in the effort of differentiating themselves from the competitors using branding initiatives. The gap is identified between institutions' branding initiatives and students' perception about these initiatives. It is found that performance of the institution can be used to create reputation for the institution.

Keywords: Branding, choice, higher education, marketing, strategy.

I. introduction

In recent years, massive changes in policy, governance, structure and status of higher education have taken place all over the world, including India. Due to this higher education institutions are experiencing environmental changes, such as privatization, diversification, decentralization, internationalization and increased competition. Higher educational institutions are under growing pressure to recruit new students, increase their endowments, and advance the institution's reputation regionally, nationally, or internationally. These changes impacted the operation of higher education institutions and seen as the driving forces for intense competition. These challenges have forced institutions of higher education to exploit marketing strategies for achieving competitive advantage and ensuring customer satisfaction, [1]. Marketing in higher education is needed to mitigate the effects of decreasing government funding and increase in competition [2]. In order to survive and to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, higher education institutions should use a marketing framework [3]. At the same time the motivating factors for students in choosing a university also have undergone change and the role of marketing in student recruitment has become increasingly important. As competition increases in the higher education sector, public and private universities increasingly started viewing students as consumers and try to market their institution intensively. A higher educational institution or HEI (engineering college in this context) brand is 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 higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrolment decisions [4]. In recent years, emphasis on educational institute branding has increased substantially consequent to governmental demands on institutes to attract and enroll greater numbers of students, rising tuition fees, the proliferation of courses on offer, the growing internationalization of education, escalating advertising costs, financial pressures, and, in many universities, heavy reliance on income from foreign students [5]. It has been suggested that branding is particularly important.

1.1 Problem definition and Problem statement

India has made tremendous progress in the field of engineering and technical education over the last twenty years. Engineering is a laudable profession which has contributed significantly for the improvements in the quality of life of the common man. The substantial growth of IT industry and its contribution to the country's economy has been phenomenal. In this endeavor Karnataka has a significant contribution, thus fetching the brand 'Silicon Valley of India' to the state. There was a significant need to develop the talent in engineering

domain. This has led to the increase and flourishing of engineering institutions across the state. In Karnataka out of 211 engineering colleges, 200 colleges are affiliated to Visvesvaraya Technology University (VTU) out of this 183 colleges do not have autonomy in terms of the programs or the content of the syllabus. This restricts them in positioning the college in terms of the availability of the programs. At the same time increase in number of colleges has led to competition and considerable amount of seats are vacant. This scenario in engineering education domain requires branding which can help to give the college the unique position in the market and help in gaining competitive advantage. A few issues that need resolution in this regard are what the expectations of students are in terms of brand reputation, and if the 7 P's strategy of marketing mix by Kotler and Fox are sufficient to brand a college. Problem statements are:

1. Academically superior institutions do not invest sufficient resources in communication and thereby lose their perceived competitive advantage.
2. Certain education institutions focus only on brand building, extensive use of media which leads to heavy cost and proliferation of revenue.
3. Academically superior institutions especially in remote areas are not in the position to attract potential employees and employers due to inadequate brand building.

1.2 Need for study

In Karnataka majority of the colleges are affiliated to VTU and they do not have autonomy in terms of the programs or the content of the syllabus. This restricts them in positioning the college in terms of the availability of the programs. At the same time increase in number of colleges has led to competition and considerable amount of seats are vacant. This scenario in engineering education domain requires branding which can help to give the college the unique position in the market and help in gaining competitive advantage.

II. Review Of Literature

2.1 Education Marketing

Most educational institutions now recognize that they need to market themselves in a climate of competition, and substantial literature on the transfer of the practices and concepts of marketing from other sectors to higher education has been developed [6]. There was also much debate about who the customers of higher education were: "students can be either considered as customers (with courses as the higher education products) or as products with the employers being the customers" [7]. There was also some resistance to the notion of students as consumers. In some cases, opponents of the introduction of market forces in education believed that the business would morally contradict the values of education; therefore, they would argue that educationalists ought to oppose any form of marketing in their institution. Later, it was recognized that higher education was not a product, but a service, and the marketing of services was sufficiently different from the marketing of products, to justify different approaches [8]. [9] Focused on the nature of services, and services marketing and has highlighted the key characteristics that provided a basis for services marketing: the nature of the service.

2.2 Importance of branding in higher education

Brand is "the promise of the bundle of attributes that someone buys". These attributes may be real or illusory, rational or emotional, tangible or invisible [10]. Brand involves a collection of promises concerning the brand's physical and emotional benefits to buyers. A university's brand is 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 higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrolment decisions. [04] define higher education brand as "perception or emotion maintained by a buyer or a prospective buyer describing the experience related to doing business with an academic." University's brands generally include its name, logo, publicity materials, advertisement designs and other visuals seen by the public, which communicate the aims, values and 'meaning' of the organization. These symbols are inbuilt in the institution's marketing communications as part of developing brand image. "The behavior of students and staff members, the research output by different disciplines, facilities on campus, skill development policies the advertising efforts of different sections of the institution, institutions' equity will influence the brand building effort of educational institution". [11]

In the higher education domain branding as it is in commercial business [12]. Branding provides an institutional identity and differentiates it from competitors [13] A strong brand increases an institution's ability to compete for the best students, gain alumni membership and financial support from donors. From the students' viewpoint, branding serves as a promise to meet their expectations and facilitates decisions relating to the selection of institution to attend.

[14] Says "The reputation of a brand also influences customer loyalty among buyers of services as well as business and consumer goods". Further, branding helps educational institutions to differentiate themselves

through serving the needs of different segments with different offerings. For a college or university, the name and all the symbolism attached to it, either through longevity, reputation, quality, or some other factor, represents its brand [15]. The marketing strategies in the long run should lead to the creation of brand. "The development of a marketing strategy involves the coordination and combination of the marketing mix elements" that enables organizations to meet customers' need and provide customers value. [16]. as a service, higher education marketing is sufficiently different from the marketing of products and it needs different marketing mix. [17]Have developed a version of a marketing mix which is designed specifically for education institutions, and which seems to address the limitations set by marketing mix for products. This marketing mix is "7Ps" viz., program, price, place, promotion, processes, physical facilities, and people.

2.3 Conceptualization of variable

Going through the literature, the researcher was exposed to variables like courses, cost, location, reputation, promotion, facilities and social factors (parents/friends/teacher). Type of life, professional advancement, family opinion and expectation, family financial support, better chances to find a job, choice of a university, marketing efforts, professional advancement, university tradition, university reputation, cost of studies and accessibility of financial aid, satisfaction from studying, courses offered, educational facilities, social conditions, faculty's educational and research (E&R) achievements etc. these variables were clustered under 7 P's of services marketing [17] as program, price, place, promotion, physical evidence, people, and process.

2.4 Research gap

The review of literature reveals that, the research on higher education branding is still very much at a primitive stage. "The reviews of the literature expose a gap in knowledge among the audience" [18]

1. No authoritative studies have been conducted examining perceptions among multiple stakeholder groups of HE brands. Also, no effort has been made to analyze the gap between students' expectations about university brand and management perception about students' expectation. [19].
2. Most of the studies on branding have been conducted on branding of universities. Thus there is insufficient understanding about brand management on the program level, [20].

2.5 Research Objectives

1. To establish the relationship between students' choice of engineering institutions and branding strategies portrayed by the institution.
2. To analyze the importance of 'Performance' of the institution as one of the branding strategies.

III. Research Methodology

Six colleges from in and Dakshina Kannada district, known as educational hub of Karnataka, Indiaparticipated in the study. The Chairmen from two of the colleges, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) from one college, and the Principals from three colleges were the respondents in the data collection process. The data was collected using the questionnaire and personal interview. Along with these, 100 students from the different branches of second year engineering participated in this study. The response of students was taken using a separate questionnaire prepared specially for this study. Most of the questions in the survey instrument are developed on 5-point Likert scale where the participants rate the responses from 1-"Strongly disagree" to 5-"Strongly agree" or 1-"extremely unimportant" to 5-"extremely important".

The statistical software SPSS version 20.0 is used to perform data analysis. Collected data was analyzed by both descriptive and multivariate techniques. Descriptive techniques such as mean and standard deviation were calculated to draw interpretation on various constructs and variables. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique was performed taking choice as exogenous/latent variable and 7 P's of services marketing and performance as endogenous variables, to evaluate the determinants of choice.

The collected data has been analyzed and each of the factors in the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha (1951) as suggested by [21] to know the reliability of the factors presenting the questionnaire. The questionnaire for management revealed Cronbach's alpha value as 0.834 and the questionnaire for students got Cronbach's alpha value as 0.887.

3.1 Limitations

This study is the initial or the pilot study of the research, conducted on 100 students, and only 6 institutions from Dakshina Kannada district participated as respondents. So, the further research by taking more number of respondents may shed light on the reality and may contribute to the world of knowledge.

IV. Analysis And Interpretation

(a) Product

There is a strong relation between the programme offered and reputation of the institution, as it establishes the institution's identity. Important attributes of program which influence students' decision to choose a college are unique of the curriculum, value added courses, Reputation of the university offering degree, availability of variety of course, future employability, co-curricular activity which support learning of core subjects. The management is neutral in their opinion regarding the product of the institution with mean of 3.00 ± 0.73 but the students opinion is that they do consider the product of the college, most importantly, future employability (mean 4.16 ± 1.14), academic integrity (mean 3.76 ± 1.07) and co-curricular activities supporting the core subjects (mean 3.83 ± 1.25).

(b) Price

Price is the amount of money that the buyer exchanges for a service provided by the seller [22]. In higher education, price usually is related to tuition fees offered, and any monetary related issues. Pricing has a major influence on marketing strategy as most students and their parents are concerned about the financial implication of attending university [23]. Important factors of pricing strategy are Scholarship, fees concession for top ranked students, arrangement for bank loan and fees in tune with other colleges. Management opines that they rarely communicate about the pricing strategy of the institution (mean 2.5 ± 1.0) though they communicate scholarship (mean 3.3 ± 0.8). But students have neutral opinion about the price (mean 3.09 ± 1.10). It is to be noted that management rarely communicate the fees structure in comparison with the competitors (mean 1.8 ± 1.3) but students show the neutral opinion (mean 3.09 ± 1.26).

(c) Physical evidence

Physical evidence is very important because of the intangible nature of the service offered by higher education institution. The environment in which the service is delivered, both tangible and intangible help to communicate, perform and relay the customer satisfaction to the potential customer [24]. Important attributes of physical evidence are campus facilities, external ambience and landscape, facilities for students. Further [25] add that the condition of the physical location contribute greatly to the image of the institution. Management gives great importance in communicating the physical evidence of the institution (mean 4.67 ± 0.42) and students also opine that physical evidence is importantly considered (mean 3.86 ± 0.76) during their choice of the college.

(d) Place

According [26] in higher education place refers to the availability of education/program to potential students in the most convenient and accessible way. A typical delivery mode for education services is for the institution to present courses at one location, with students gathering for classroom instruction [17]. Important factors which influence student decision to select a college are: location advantage, uniqueness of the campus, proximity to home, green campus, availability of Instruction facilities. Management is just above neutral in their opinion about location advantage (mean 3.33 ± 1.86) but students opine that it is very important in their choice decision (mean 4.09 ± 0.90). Uniqueness of the campus is very important (mean 3.23 ± 1.14) but management is found to be communicating about the same rarely (mean 2.83 ± 2.40). Both the respondents found to have given importance regarding green campus.

(e) People

The people element of the higher educational marketing mix refers to the employees in the university which include all the members of teaching and administrative staff through which the service is delivered and customer relation is built [17]. The importance of people arises from the fact that the staff members are the most crucial factors for successful service delivery. Management most importantly, communicate about their visionary leader and success story of the institution being the first priority (mean 4.83 ± 0.41) and about the other people like faculty profile, students diversity, alumni achievement (mean 4.33 ± 0.50). However, students' opinion is above the neutral and below being important (mean 3.68 ± 1.13) and faculty profile is given importance during the selection of the college by the students (mean 4.06 ± 0.90). [27] Claim that people of the institutions are not weighted to be an influential element in the mix on the part of prospective students, other researchers do not agree with this fact.

(f) Process

Processes refer to the way an institution does business and this relates to the whole administrative system [26]. Procedures, mechanism and the flow of activities by which service is consumed are the essential elements of the marketing mix [28]. Process in higher education refers to the way things happen in an institution

such as the process of management, enrolment, teaching, learning, social and even sports activities. Higher education institutions need to ensure that students understand the process of acquiring a service.

Sub factors in process are: pedagogy, Accreditation, grievance handling mechanism, use technology in teaching and learning, administrative process. Grievance handling mechanism is given at most importance in communicating to the students by the management (mean 4.17 ± 1.60) but students opine that it is of low importance to them in making college choice. In fact they give high importance for specialties and ease of teaching learning process (mean 3.50 ± 1.52)

(g) Promotion

Promotion is an institution’s ability to communicate with its markets. Educational institutions need to communicate their services to the target market through promotional strategy. Promotion can be broken down into four distinguished elements: advertising, sales promotion, public relations and personal selling [29]. Important promotional measures of the colleges are website, leaflets of colleges, brochure, social media network, advertisement in print and electronic media, and reputation of people working the college, in campus events in the college there is interesting gap is found in terms of promotional tools. Management of the college uses email moderately (mean 4.00 ± 0.63) but students found to give low importance to these emails in the selection criteria. Also it is found that students consider employees, faculties and existing students of college and their recommendation as very important factor in the college choice decision but management occasionally uses (mean 2.83 ± 1.83) this as the promotional tool. College website (mean 5.00 ± 0.00) and social media (mean 4.17 ± 0.41) are highly used by management as a promotional tool but students gave neutral opinion (mean 3.26 ± 1.20 and 2.95 ± 1.33) to both these tools in making decision and overall management gives moderate importance for publicity and promotion (mean 3.50 ± 0.44) but students give low importance (mean 2.87 ± 0.81) to these promotional tools.

(h) Performance

It is found that performance of the college in always moderately communicated (mean 4.36 ± 0.25) by the college and students give high importance for performance (mean 4.13 ± 0.69) in making college choice. In particular management gives great stress on communicating academic results and in campus cultural / sports / social events (mean 4.67 ± 0.52) but students give high importance for ranking and grading of the college (mean 4.30 ± 0.95) The overall analysis of 7 P’s of services marketing and performance as an addition to the components of branding strategy indicates that as performance of the college is being considered by the students (mean 4.13 ± 0.69) it is important for the college to promote the college based on performance rather than physical evidence (mean 4.67 ± 0.42).

4.1 Summary of analysis of performance and 7 P’s of services marketing

TABLE: All 7 P’s and performance

Sl. No.	Factor	Students		Institutions	
		Overall Mean	Overall Standard deviation	Overall Mean	Overall Standard deviation
1	Product	3.41	0.75	3.00	0.73
2	Price	3.09	1.10	2.50	1.00
3	Physical evidence	3.86	0.76	4.67	0.42
4	Place	3.82	0.60	3.96	0.75
5	People	3.69	0.73	4.33	0.50
6	Process	3.49	0.84	3.52	1.04
7	Promotion	2.87	0.81	3.50	0.44
8	Performance	4.13	0.69	4.36	0.25

The table indicates that as performance of the college is being considered by the students (mean 4.13 ± 0.69) during their decision of college. But it is found that physical evidence (mean 4.67 ± 0.42) is given importance by the institution while communicating the college.

4.2 Structural Equation Modeling

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is a statistical tool used as a confirmatory factor analysis. Here structural model is converted into a simultaneous statistical test to verify the causal relationship between student’s choice (latent variable) and its determinants which are product, price, place, promotion, people,

physical evidence, process and performance. In SEM method, ensuring the model fit is the most crucial step. Specific indices appropriate to decide about the model fit are chi square/degree of freedom, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Normed Fit Index (NFI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI)[30].

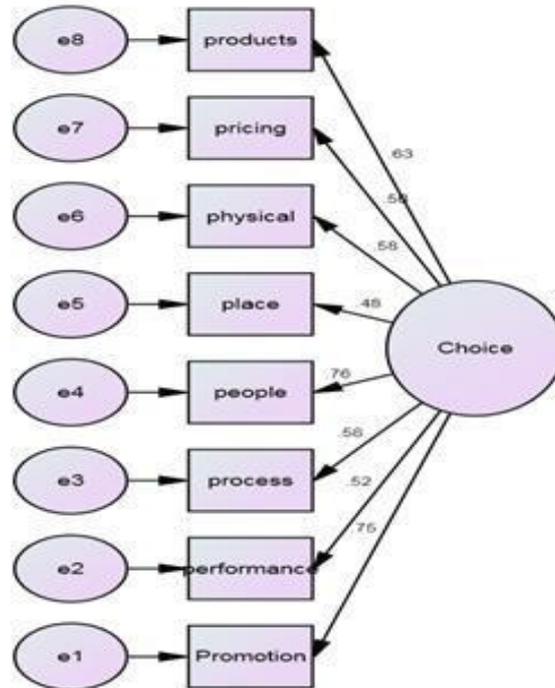


Fig. 1: Structural Equation Modeling.

Probability level = 0.1444671345 > 0.05

As the Chi-square test is extremely sensitive to the sample size [31] and chi-square indices are a poor model fit, the chi-square normalized by degree of freedom (χ^2/df) is used.

$$\frac{\text{Chi-square}}{\text{Degrees of freedom}} = 1.288 < 3.0$$

Thus minimum requirement for the fit index has been achieved.

TABLE: fit indices of structural models

Fit Indicators	value	Recommended value
Probability level	0.144	> 0.05
Chi square/d.f	1.288	< 3.00
GFI	0.929	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.982	≥ 0.90
RMSEA	0.0639	≤ 0.06 to 0.08
NFI	0.955	≥ 0.90
CFI	0.962	≥ 0.95 or 0.90
TLI	0.949	≥ 0.95 or 0.90

SEM analysis (Fig) shows that contribution of product in the students' college choice is 40 percent, ($R^2 = 0.397$), with standardized $\beta = 0.63$. Contribution of price is 25 percent ($R^2 = 0.25$) with standardized $\beta = 0.50$. Contribution of place is 23 percent ($R^2 = 0.231$) with standardized $\beta = 0.48$. Contribution of people is 58 percent ($R^2 = 0.578$) with standardized $\beta = 0.76$. Contribution of Promotion is 56 percent ($R^2 = 0.563$) with standardized $\beta = 0.75$. Contribution of Physical evidence is 34 percent ($R^2 = 0.336$) with standardized $\beta = 0.58$. Contribution of Process is 34 percent ($R^2 = 0.336$) with standardized $\beta = 0.58$. Contribution of Performance is 27 percent ($R^2 = 0.27$) with standardized $\beta = 0.52$. The 'p' value been 0.000 it is highly significant.

4.3 Findings and recommendation

1. The gap is found between institutions perception on students' choice and the actual student's choice factor. The most important objective of the institutions is to increase demand amongst students is ranked 1. Long term stability is the second important objective and gaining popularity is the third important objective. All the six colleges consider only students as their main brand ambassadors and their word of mouth will be the main tool (mean 4.67 ± 0.82) for communicating the brand. Under this situation the gap identified in the research will recommend to understand students need and their perception of choice.
2. The performance is most important factor of the institution which will be consider by the students during their choice of engineering college and students gives least importance to the advertisements (mean 2.87 ± 0.81). Thus, it is recommended for the institution to use 'performance' as the major promotional tool to attract new students' enrolment.
3. The management has the neutral opinion about their objective of branding to look better than their competitors (mean 3.0 ± 1.8). This finding of pilot study contradicts the finding of [32]. He quotes -"In today's higher education landscape, college and university leaders may well consider principles of brand management to assure their positions vis-à-vis their competitors". Since sample size used in study is very small researcher has to work more on this result.

V. Conclusion

The inferences of this analysis will add to the world of knowledge by developing an understanding of brand building strategies, about students' choice, and impact of performance of the institute during decision making. Performance can act as a new element in marketing mix and it can enhance the brand image of a higher education institution. The comparison of students' and institutions' result reveals that there is some gap found in managements' perception about students' choice and students' actual consideration. The future research may identify the strategies to fill this gap. Using structural equation modeling technique it is also found that even there is considerable contribution of performance of the institution on students' choice in addition to 7 P's strategies by the institution. In future, the impact of performance on brand building may be assessed and the brand built on these strategies may help in enhancing the quality of higher education in India which will benefit student fraternity at large and also help parents in investing their savings of life in the right place to create a better future for their children. At the same time this kind of study will be advantageous to institutions as it will stop the proliferation of money into meaningless advertisements which is not valued by students. Small sample size is a limitation of this study but this paper is a part of the research. So, further research will help to overcome this limitation.

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