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A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ESSENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS' SERVICE QUALITY

Syed Ali Abbas¹

Abstract:

The purpose of the research is to investigate the contribution of service quality and brand awareness on Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs') brand loyalty, thus giving lead in future to come up with Matrix/ model that may ensure HEIs' brand loyalty in the long run. Methodological tools encompass recursive abstraction technique. The data was gathered across the span of 2 years of research, whereas the object of research includes universities (HEIs) from Pakistan. The qualitative findings reveal that service quality contributes more towards brand loyalty and stress the need to enhance HEIs' brand loyalty. The findings may be applicable on countries with similar demographics. The results of the research can be useful for Higher Education Institutions, students, and guardians as customers, and for State Accreditation bodies and consultancy firms for informed decision making in their respective domains. It also gives lead to future research for developing scientific models in the field of Higher Education branding.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions, Brand Management, Brand Loyalty, Service Quality, Brand Trust.

Introduction

As the current era demands brand management of product and services to the highest level, branding higher education institutions (HEIs) is turning out to be significant in its own ways, as promotional campaigns and advertisement budgets are not just limited to FMCGs but to educational brands as well (Simoes & Soares, 2010: 372). Attracting customers/ students is one of the top tasks of HEIs' management irrespective of HEI being large or small, state or private, and the geographic constraints are also not counted as well

¹ School of Business, Beaconhouse National University, Lahore – Pakistan.
aabbas724@gmail.com

(Elliot & Healy, 2001: 4). Not only the quality remains to be a valuable factor for students, it's the familiarity and recognition of HEI as a brand as well, which is also the demand of modern-day customer/ student (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013: 214). As customers and consumers (students/ guardians) are wanting a familiar educational brand, HEIs are responsive to this change that every promotional means from conventional to innovative marketing strategies are adopted to win customers' trust (Mavondo, Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2004; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004: 90). Though, nothing wrong with branding, however the other aspect of this promotion orientation could lead to familiarity or recognition of less quality providers, which may outplay the quality educational institutes. As this phenomenon may result in non-familiarity of quality service providers lacking in promotional run, it becomes significant for these institutes to work on their brand awareness as well (Chen & Chen, 2014). The discussion can be extended further to curtail the best combination of both brand awareness and service quality so that loyalty of students can be achieved, as both factors can contribute to student decision making and ultimately to brand loyalty. Students can be attracted for initial intakes courtesy heavy promotional campaigns, though the need is to find what happens to HEIs' loyalty in long run? What can enable students to go for future purchase of educational service i.e., enrollment in next degree programs/ courses etc.? These research questions may lead to identify the best combination of brand awareness and service quality attributes and this happens to be the research aim also, so as to come up with strategies which may aid HEIs not only in attaining but retaining students in the long run.

1. Branding of Higher Education Institutions

There is no disagreement on the fact that undergoing consistent brand management is valuable to universities (Duesterhaus & Duesterhaus, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007), however there is still lot to be done for research comprising of university's image, reputation, identity and in totality about university as a brand (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003; Melewar & Akel, 2005). Reflecting the prior research, the use of updated communication tools in higher education branding impact not only the stake holders (Chapleo, 2011: 112) but also the employees working for its betterment (Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, & Gordo, 2009). As according to Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka (2006), Nguyen & LeBlanc (2001) & Rindfleish (2003) there can be experienced relevance of brand love

in higher education research and future studies should include this brand love mechanism about HEIs as well (Vaette-Florence, Guizani & Merunka, 2011; Batra, Ahuvia & Bagozzi, 2012), this brand love proves out to be vital in determining loyalty of students.

Taking into consideration the development of brand identity of an HEI, promotional tools such as brand symbols, brand name and mission statements are used to create a distinct identity (Bosch et al., 2006; Melewar & Akel, 2005). As per Melewar & Akel (2005) higher education corporate identity is based upon four following sub constructs i.e., culture, market conditions, behavior and communication & visual identity, but Bosch et al. (2006) stresses that verbal expressions is another key determinant of HEI brand identity along with visual expressions.

The challenges for Higher Education Institutions' branding are numerous that ranges from brand architectures (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007) to varying demands of stakeholders (Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). Though the branding of education services may encounter number of challenges contrary to a commercial service provider (Vijander, 2007), Chapleo (2010) suggests the use of commercial branding methodologies. Secondly, most of the education branding has not been the focus and center line of case studies or scholarly articles; however, they can be cherished as a commodity brand when the demand exceeds the supply (Anctil, 2008). Also, in case of conventional product like cola or biscuits the product differentiation is very less which increase the scope for branding whereas in educational branding the element of differentiation could be high i.e., number of degrees, courses offered etc. which ensures a limited branding scope of higher education (Grohmann, 2009). As far as diversity and strength of students are concerned the study institutions ambitions, aim and involvement may vary from portion of society to certain limit, whereas lot of students may not like these offerings (Warwick, 2003: 123) which makes branding of educational institutions a little tough. The element of similarity cannot be neglected irrespective of constant claims by different institutions as being "best",

1.1 Retaining Brand Loyalty and its Significance

Though it is being discussed so far in this study that students are considered as customers of higher education, yet the idea is not that welcoming or appreciated equally across all sets of higher education community. The advocates of this idea have strong belief on increased university image by considering student as customers

(Hennig-Thurau, Langer & Hansen, 2001) while as per Emery, Kramer & Tian (2001), payment of tuition fee must not be considered as an equivalent or alternative to getting a degree. Dealing students as customer may result in compromising of quality on part of both faculty and students, which may result in less hard work by both the parties - governed by lack of shared responsibility (Clayson & Haley, 2005). However, in other scenarios a student considering him/herself as customer might blame teachers for his/her failure. So renowned quotes like “customer is always right” might not best reflect the situation in terms of student as customers (Bay & Daniel, 2001) and to that academic quality can somehow or greatly be dependent on students’ choice and terms (Sirvanci, 1996).

The idea of absorbing students as customers is not as simple as described because the repercussions could be severe for the demanding teachers in terms of student feedback (Yunker & Yunker, 2003), whereas on the other hand less competent teachers may use the same argument for justifying their poor performance as well. However, Marsh & Roche (2000) have found the existence of positive co relation between students’ grade and teachers’ feedback, Yeo & Li (2014) believe that making student going through hard times and competitive study schedule can prove out to be vital for rising student intellect. So, for Bogler & Somech (2002) it is better to focus on government or general public or other locales as customer rather than students, but with in-depth analysis it is worth understanding that students; even though considered as customer, might not be given all the liberties which an ordinary customer can, unless an HEI is a predatory institute. The word customer for student is rather a metaphor used for marketing literature and that HEIs get aid with these terminologies to work on their branding. Also, being proponent of this concept, student can be considered as customer if it gives HEI motivation and capability to stand out as top-notch institute which is directly related with HEI’s quality services; though HEIs should avoid following marketing quotes as “Customer is King/Boss”.

Aiming to establish a sound image of an HEI appears a demanding task as according to Galinienė et al. (2009) attributes such as type of university, competitive admission procedures, versatility in programs offered, financial budgets possessed by HEIs and tuition fee contribute to an HEI image, whereas Polat, Arsalan & Yavas (2016) include core academic features like quality of studies, faculty quality,

research activities and academic achievements of university graduates as a multiplier to university image.

According to Oliver (1999) loyalty is the repurchase behavior of customer that is not affected by situational influences or marketing efforts of competitors. The moment customer repurchase makes company believe of its service with the motivation of continued value addition in its products and services. This repurchase sets a certain biased behavior of buyer towards a specific brand among other existing brands (Hawkins, Best & Coney, 2000). He further discusses that brand loyalty forms basis for low marketing budgets which would have been required at initial stages as it can generate new customers and better trade advantages. No wonder HEIs are running after brand loyalty measures and making spending over brand awareness and service quality like never before. Another interesting finding has come into branding literature by Dick and Basu (1994) according to which favorable word of mouth and customer resistance to competitive strategies are termed as one of the key outcomes of brand loyalty.

Presented below is the table mentioning the previous studies and results measuring brand loyalty construct with the independent effect of branding related variables. Also, the studies are selected post 2000 (in terms of years) considering it an era where branding in higher education became noticeable to emerging trends.

There have been some studies regarding satisfaction of students and service quality of HEIs and in particular about brand management of Higher education Institutions, however, the comparison of brand awareness and service quality refers to scarcity in literature that needs to be analyzed. So, presented below is the table 1 mentioning the previous studies and results measuring brand loyalty construct with the independent effect of branding related variables. Also, studies from other sectors have been discussed as well so to see the effect of these constructs in other sectors and to provide lead for future research i.e., the contrasting effect. Also, the studies are selected post 2000 (in terms of years) as this is considered to be an era where branding in higher education became noticeable to emerging trends.

Comparison of studies measuring brand loyalty construct

Author	Topic	Construct	Method	Questionnaire Type
Knox & Walker (2001)	Measuring and Managing Brand Loyalty	Brand Loyalty	Quantitative	Survey
Mekic & Mekic (2016)	Impact of higher education service quality on student satisfaction and its influence on loyalty	Student Loyalty	Quantitative	Survey
Emel Yildiz (2017)	Effects of service quality on customer satisfaction, trust, customer loyalty and word of mouth	Loyalty	Qualitative	Face to Face Interview
Chi, Yeh, Yang (2018)	The Impact of Brand Awareness on Consumer Purchase Intention: The Mediating Effect of Perceived Quality and Brand Loyalty.	Brand Loyalty	Quantitative	Survey
Ehsan, Warriach & Sehribanoglu (2016)	Measuring Brand Loyalty in Cola Market	Brand Loyalty	Quantitative	Survey

Table 1. Source: author's own construction, based on prior literature

The table 1 above has shown the outcome of brand loyalty as an input of service quality, trust and brand awareness in common. The literature regarding these input constructs have been discussed in detail in this study. As these predictors (SQ, BA, BT) are generally found to be common in measuring brand loyalty as far as Management studies is concerned, the need arises to analyze the comparative effect of brand awareness and Service quality in assessing the brand loyalty, especially in the education sector and that together with the mediating role of brand trust, which comes once the service is experienced and the customers gets awareness of brand. The usage of qualitative approach appears to be the novel aspect in this study, as higher education branding has mostly been discussed using quantitative approach in past. As brand awareness refers to capability and familiarity of a brand about which customer has knowledge, this is considered first step towards brand attitude and its recognition. According to Aaker (1996) aspects encompassing “recognition, recall, and first recall” can best be employed to analyze brand awareness, as initially, customers are found to be interested in remembering brand name. Also, it is important to mention that creating awareness amongst masses could be an expensive task to do, the expense of which can be compensated if it is done effectively to increase the brand equity. From the literature and discussion above, the qualitative hypothesis can be formulated as “Brand Awareness and service quality contribute to HEIs brand loyalty, with service quality effecting students’ loyalty in the long run”.

2. Previous Studies in Higher Education Branding

The following is an overview of previous studies – in full or partial relation with higher education brand management. This section - keeping the issue of Higher Education branding alive includes students’ dissertation work to identify gap and aids this study to further move ahead, ensuring the need for developing brand loyalty matrix. Also, the demographic aspect and research methodology will be discussed to analyze as what factors contribute to brand management and loyalty of HEIs.

Evaluation of Newly Established Universities’ Reputation Strategies: A Sample of Giresun University (Ozen, 2018)

This study analyzed the reputation of Giresun University by overviewing its ongoing strategies. The published news content by the case university was examined as a source of general image. As

per figures from descriptive statistics it was analyzed that university published news content about seminars, events, projects related to disable people and about minority rights etc. Since more news content contributed to CSR by Giresun University, its image and reputation as socially responsible institute is obvious. The further elaboration from the findings of the study reflects the focus on Corporate Social Responsibility. Though, the use of social responsibility activities for indirect marketing and promotional purpose is debatable in Social sciences, it is worth to notice that it's still considered a viable tool for brand promotion and can continue to be practiced by the time it keeps adding to the value addition of both i.e. the society and for the company as a brand; and that even a brand in education sector.

Brand Building of Higher Education Institutions Case study: Islamic University of Gaza – MBA students' perspective (AISharofa, 2017)

This study investigated necessary touchpoints in developing higher education brand. The unit of Analysis was MBA students for case university i.e. Islamic University of Gaza. Results were categorized following pre-admission, during the course and post passing stage. In total, factors like university reputation, level of satisfaction and career growth proved out to be the key determinants for brand development along with overall items for "influencing touch points". The study recommended the case university to focus on organizing seminars, conducting workshops, faculty training, alumni reunions and assigning a brand marketing executive manager for developing the case university as a brand to next level. From analytical perspective this study has clearly dissected the importance of brand management of HEIs irrespective and independent of demographics and political scenarios in which the HEIs operate; thus, increasing the overall essence of branding as one of the key determinants in student decision making.

Competitive Positioning of a Higher Education Institution in Zambia: The Case of ZCAS. (Kayombo, & Carter, 2017)

This study aimed at identifying the branding factors valued by students in Zambia for selecting their destined HEI along with the means for competitive advantage among Zambian HEIs. As a result of this qualitative study, it was concluded that factors ranging from teaching quality to fee structures, course options to job placements, reputation, location, alliances, curriculum development etc. were

found to be important while for private institutes, the students were more concerned about recognition and accreditations along with the formerly discussed factors. It was further discovered that peers, media (print and electronic) and educational expos were the most sought sources of awareness whereas the opinion maker group for students include parents and friends. Also, it was proposed for HEIs to go for local and international strategic alliances with credible bodies and institutions. Taking notes from this study it won't be wrong to analyse that survival of private or non-state HEIs demand high competition in contrast to public HEIs. Especially in highly denser regions where sufficiency of resources could be a question and education budgets are squeezed, students are found to be more concerned with reputation of a university as a brand considering job placement as the core aim of students, and that even right after their graduation. Also, it turns obvious that factors like positive 'word of mouth' become valuable for students, and it should be on priority of HEIs to consider this element which can mainly be achieved through provision of quality services.

Internal brand co-creation: The experiential brand meaning cycle in higher education (Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri, & Pich, 2016)

This study explored as how employee's behavior encompassing their experience and social interactions are responsible for co-creation of a brand. The employee relationship, brand and the organization in total termed as key determinants for study. The respondents were selected from Mexican Higher education sector. The study depicted that employees themselves act as part of brand at micro level as they pass on this brand meaning to their colleagues and stake holders, both internal and external, thus becoming brand author. This is then further transformed to brand identity that ultimately turns into brand reality. The higher education institutions are suggested to effectively involve employees by boosting their motivation and commitment in co-creation of a reliability and longevity of a brand. From the findings of this study, future scientific literature should head towards developing effective models and strategies for employee training and development needs for creating, maintaining and enhancing brand longevity of HEIs. For sure, a competent faculty member leaves an impression of a quality-oriented brand of the institute which can further be associated for targeting prospect loyal students as customers.

Factors Contributing to University Image: The postgraduate students' point of view. (Aghaz, Hashemi & Sharifi Atashgah, 2015)

This study was about examining the factors valued by post graduate students for university's image with further assessment of factors' impact on trust on the institute. As an outcome, necessary factors appeared as faculty, academic planning, international reputation and university environment in general. As it was concluded that overall image of the university contributes to enhanced students' trust to maximum, this trust further leads them to apply for PhD studies in the very institutions. The study was conducted in Iran. From the perspective of commentary on this study, it can be stated that not only the significance of higher education branding appears independent of geographical region (as discussed in previous studies), instead it can be independent of the intellect and study level of respondents as well. In previous studies discussed, it was mainly bachelor study students vowing for brand promotional factors, whereas as per this study, post graduate students are found to be concerned for HEI's reputation as well. Though, it is worth remembering that academic planning is another added feature which has been discussed by these post graduate students, which clearly shows that loyalty of students can demand more and more quality and management of curriculums as the education level of customers (students) increases.

2.1 Theoretical Models with Implication in Higher Education Brand Setting

2.1.1 AIDA Model

The renowned AIDA model (see Figure 1) is used as another theoretical concept for this research which discuss the process and steps involved in customer decision making towards specific brand. Historically, the first three steps of this model i.e., Awareness, Interest and Desire were discussed by Lewis in the year 1898, whereas Strong (1925) is credited for the acronym of AIDA in literature by involving fourth step i.e.,

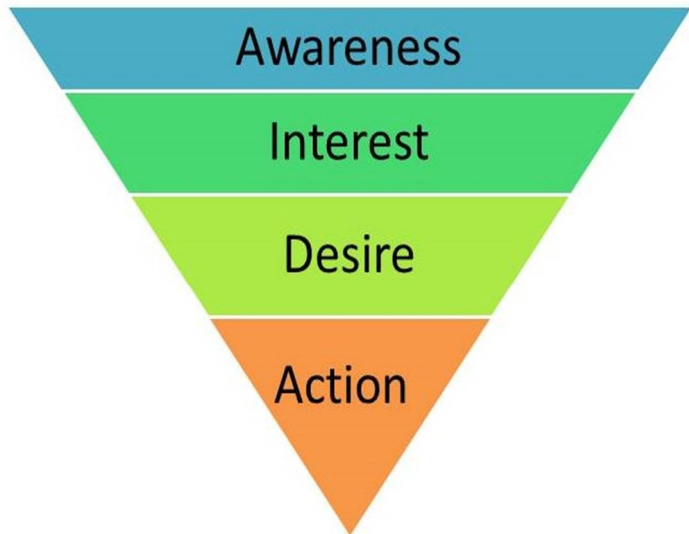


Figure 1. AIDA Model (Strong, 1925)

Attention/ Awareness

The first stage in AIDA model is termed as “Attention” stage. This stage aims at generating awareness about the product/ service in general. A very first step after the finished good/service which has not yet entered in the market. This is a stage where potential target market is selected and depending upon various demographic and psychographic features, strategies and campaigns are designed. At this initial and crucial stage where the product/ service needs to be pitched and is presented first time, it is very important for marketers as how the product will be launched. By making sure of communicating all critical success factors and value-added features of this product to customers, marketers need to utilize all modern methods of marketing and promotional tools that create a positive image of this product in customers mind (Kotler, 2002). While all pre-testing homework is done prior to this stage, the attention step is wholly solely a result of effective marketing and advertisement campaign that are required to introduce product, a category of product line or brand extension in the market. Renowned strategies like gorilla marketing, discount offers, billboards, souvenirs, social media or SMS channels etc. are some of the commonly used tools to

set a stage for perfect meeting of this new product/ service with the customer. Normally, it is considered that the greater these awareness campaigns and their scale, the larger will be the probability for their general awareness amongst its target audience.

In precise, as an outcome to these awareness campaigns, customer attention is achieved at first spot. This attention about the existence of product/ service in the market is a first step towards making prospect customers, in case the product or brand is new in the market, while for an additional product in the product line this stage caters the existing customer (user) to turn into loyal customer. Aligning this stage with students as customer in Higher Education market, HEIs not only need to have an efficient marketing campaign rather a skill full marketing department should be established to foresee the demands from traditional/ conventional to modern awareness campaigns. Like every other brand's awareness, HEI brand awareness is also important and is a definitive initial step in student/ customer decision making process, backed by AIDA model; the impact of which is aimed to be discussed in wider perspective as brand loyalty in this study.

Interest

The classical explanation of letter "I" as interest in AIDA is written as the stage in which consumer gets interested by learning about brand's benefits and its fixation with that of the buyer's lifestyle. This definition gives important input to the fact that how awareness campaigns are designed while their focus should be truly on customers' benefits and their lifestyle, so that customers can associate the brand with themselves. This also leads us to consider the cultural constraints which these marketing campaigns should abide by as well as the sensitivity of message in the marketing campaigns.

Coming back to the interest part, so as soon as customer gets interested about the product, his intention to purchase that product/ services increases. Given the perspective of higher education setting, quality teaching and updated curriculums may best be designed to enhance student interest, which must be backed by efforts of marketing departments at HEIs as well. Delivering quality and communicating the quality happening at HEIs may be experienced by the coordinated efforts of quality control and institutions' marketing team. The successful execution of this "Interest" factor on lines of AIDA model may contribute to Brand

Awareness of HEIs with its implication on Brand Loyalty of HEIs as well.

Desire

As discussed, that AIDA is the linear progression model having effect of one step over the other, the third capital letter or stage in the model denotes “Desire” which is generated through the effect of step two i.e., Interest. In the marketing and business terminology at this desire stage, the interested audience/ viewer/ person can be called as prospect customer. Though s/he has not made the purchase decision, yet s/he is at the stage of considering the very product/ service as useful one that can meet all the benefits and demands of this prospect buyer through the previous two steps. It can be safely said that the assumed run ad campaign had been successful as it has made prospect customer to desire of product which can soon be turn into final purchase. The merits being spoken well, communicated through desired channels, bearing all the ingredients of proper marketing with the slice of promotional offers etc., are all set to make this brand a desirable offer for the prospect buyer.

Before taking this desire aspect in the light of HEIs, Betancur’s (2014) model, though starts with need analysis, puts the “trust” factor before this desire creation. According to him, it’s the trust element that makes customer to desire the product. This argument from Betancur signifies the importance of this research for discussing the brand trust (BT) factor as a mediating role for creating brand loyalty, which will be discussed in detail in research methodology section. So, altogether with this inclusion of trust factor to foresee prospect customer’s desire, there exists huge room in higher education sector to analyze as what contributes to students’ trust and how long the nicely crafted and well channelized marketing messages play a role, that even for long term, in student decision making. In terms of literature reviewed up to now, marketing message encompassing educational quality i.e., service quality seems to be of critical importance to have an impact on student’s trust.

Action

As the name indicates, the last step in this sequential and affect model occurs, when buyer has a purchase intention, shopping around, reviewing the options and is all set or has made (realized) the purchase. In psychological domain of decision-making models, this stage is called behavioral aspect. The action stage is the outcome of all the previous efforts by marketers which have brought

the prospect to become a customer (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). Customer, who has been continuously connected through ad campaigns etc. discussed in the previous sections has finally responded to the brand and has chosen it as a brand of his/ her choice. It is important to mention here the environment of perfect competition or red ocean of competition, if the product/ service has many substitutes in the market. The greater the amount of competition in the market, the tougher it will be for prospect to be a customer and also equally challenging for marketer/ manufacturer/ firm to convince buyer to take action. That's why all the previous efforts from idea to final proximity of product service in the market needs cohesion and coordinated activities; a loophole in which can avoid buyer to reach action stage.

Apparently, the AIDA model finishing at Action stage actually gives start/ lead to not only this but many researches which have already been and will be developed in future. This is the core and unique significance of this model that nearly every other decision-making study brings AIDA into practice. As discussed above after the "action" stage, it's the satisfaction that can further be studied as how good the experience was when the product/ service was consumed in real. Did the marketing message was just another claim for business returns or was the aggressive ads worth the purpose? Whether customer will repeat its purchase or whether it was one-time dismal experience? These are all the questions which AIDA leaves for rest of the studies to take lead from and that's where this research work will bring its contribution in the field of higher education setting. Concepts like brand awareness are well supported as the AIDA starts its proceedings and as every attempt is being made to make a purchase through this brand awareness, it will be fruitful to see that how this awareness turns into brand loyalty i.e., turning prospects into customers and then customers into brand loyal or committed customers. The role of added Brand trust is also originated and taken into consideration from the criticized spaces between 2nd and 3rd step in AIDA, thus in this way, the impact of Brand trust in this research will further be complemented by AIDA. On the whole AIDA acts as one of the bases for theoretical framework for incorporating the impact of Brand awareness (BA) and propositions of Service quality (SQ) in enhancing consistent Brand loyalty (BL) for Higher

Education Institutions.

2.1.2 Customer Loyalty Model by Aaker

Aaker (1996) categorizes the loyalty of customers into five different domains showing the intensity of customers being loyal to their respective brands. These five different stages represent different scenarios and the habits of buyers who lie on different levels of loyalty. This model also attempts to identify the major reasons for customers' switching cost, thus making organizations/ firms to adjust their strategies as per their target audience. Also, it enables the firms to look at various dimension of competition as how their competitors make their customer loyal and what they can opt to retain and maintain their loyalty (see Figure 2).

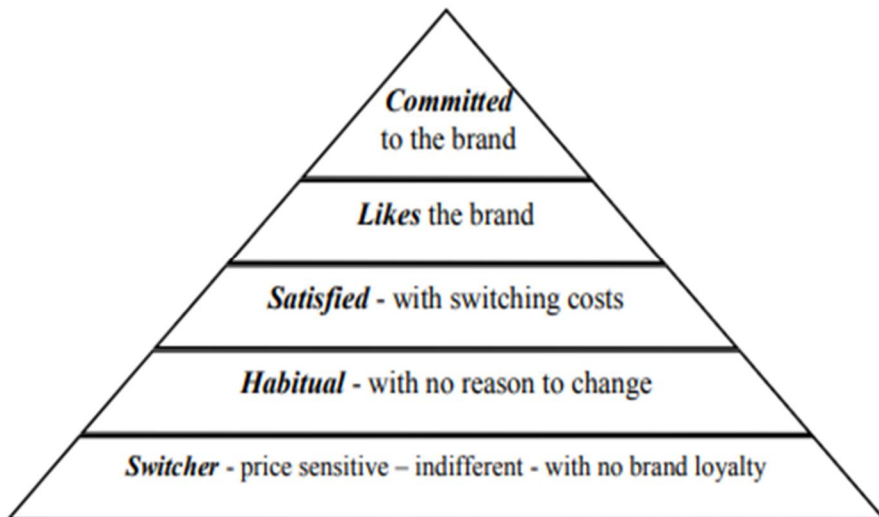


Figure 2. The Loyalty Pyramid (Aaker, 1991)

Starting from the beneath i.e., the lower end or the base of the pyramid, Aaker puts switcher on first spot. According to him, "Switchers" are the price sensitive customers. As the name indicates switchers, the only motivation these customers have is the low price. Wherever low price, sale deals and discounts are available, these customers tend to shift towards these products or services. Hence, this makes them disloyal to their past purchases in terms their loyalty is fluctuating with minor price difference as well. Further discussing

their attributes, it's not only the price, though majorly, it can also be the other incentives and promotional aspects of competing brands for which these buyers are willing to leave their current brand. So, the question arises for companies as what to do to retain their loyalty for little, long or in simple words how to avoid their disloyalty status? Many companies opt for price wars and aims for continuous cost leadership. Their efforts to increase economies of scale and producing as mass manufacturers act as a source to enjoy their loyalty for comparatively longer span of time than the competitors who are little inefficient in their optimum utilization of resources. All the apparent sales promotion campaigns i.e., buy one get one free, Festive discount etc. are mainly targeted at these switchers so that their attention is grabbed. It will be interesting to know in this research as how HEI and what categories of HEIs target these types of customers/ students in education market, what these HEIs have to offer to them and what are the expectations of these switchers from these institutions in general.

The second row in Loyalty Pyramid from down accounts for comparatively loyal customers than the discussed previously. The customers lie in this row are termed as satisfied or habitual buyer who have no reason to change. These are those routine customers who have an indirect, unwritten contract with the company in terms of satisfaction and quality they get for the offered price. They are pleased with their purchase and don't find any specific reason for adventure by switching towards some other product even at the same price. However, their loyalty can be tested in terms of company's under performance or the claims set which cannot be met or fulfilled by company anymore. So, unless and until company has offered what it offered previously, these customers are there to stick with the company thus adding to the profits of company every time they make a purchase. Actually, these are the kind of customers which these companies want specially at initial or at their growth stages. Companies always tend to convert these satisfied buyers to a long term committed buyers as it requires less effort because these are already satisfied. These customers are also profitable for company because companies require less marketing and spending on these customers for futuristic sales. At this stage of loyalty company can plunge for product development, as at least for once, these customers will be willing to make a purchase and the rest is dependent on the quality. That's how these profitable customers can let company to cut their market budget to some extent and focus on diversification. One of the possible advisable strategies for company

is to keep the existing level of standard of their product or service so that this habitual customer doesn't find any need to switch.

Again, linking the very class of customers to this research work justifies enough arguments to consider as how satisfied students with the existing level of brand awareness and service quality can contribute to the brand loyalty of HEIs and how much responsive these HEIs are to their satisfied students. Is the satisfaction of students making these HEIs reluctant and stagnant or whether it has motivated the HEIs to keep innovating in terms of new courses and training modules, opportunities etc. for the students? This stage of customer loyalty pyramid is surely going to set a tone for this study from here onwards.

The third stage at Aaker Loyalty Model denotes "Satisfied Buyers with switching costs". These are the customers whose satisfaction level has been met and customers are on a spree of re purchase attitude, yet their loyalty is not at the highest of level. However hard, yet their loyalty can be shifted based upon some genuine reasons to switch depending upon what values to them at what point of time. The competitors of their loyal brand make all necessary efforts i.e., from marketing to product innovation and from loyalty programs to customization, it's always one of the available ingredients in the product/ service which can be exploited by competitors, because of which their loyalty is switchable. As discussed above, they must not be mixed with price sensitive customers rather it's the increasing technological or personal demands of these satisfied customers that need to be maintained. In more analytical terms, these types of customers are beneficial for entire sector considering their logical reasons to shift make company's more proactive in approach. And to keep winning the trust of these customers the companies continue to be more customer and R&D oriented. This scenario builds up the platform for perfect competition while increasing the standard of market in general. This stage is actually like a middle part of funnel which is filtering the companies from being normal to better and leading them to be excellent or extra ordinary.

Since the strategies have been discussed in precise as how to avoid the shifting of these satisfied customers from becoming disloyal, it will be thought provoking for HEIs to device plans to keep these types of students who are satisfied with the quality of education yet have a chance to be disloyal. This accounts for gap in the existing literature that how education markets need to be agile to be updated to retain its existing graduates and that is exactly the reason for

conducting this research to analyze, and to predict the concepts of brand trust and brand loyalty in Higher education setting to next level. The fourth stage at Aaker Loyalty Model happens to discuss the liking aspect of customers towards specific brand. It's a stage where customer actually starts taking brand as a relation and initiate their association with the features and attributes of the brand. Customers not only find it easy to use and get benefited of the brand features, rather they believe it as one of the rare options in the time of need. And with the fulfilment of this ever-increasing need customers do consider this brand a friend indeed. Their liking to this brand is above board and at this stage other competitive brands are finding it really tough to make it to customers' heart. It is a time when customer has made the view of brand as something which offers it a best possible fit for the price offered compared to ease of use, durability of product, the longevity and the value-added aspects. The former discussed phenomenon are the strong touch points which the brand and customer have associated with each other. With this row of association there is no reason as why these companies won't be continuing this friendly coherence and that's where concepts like customer relationship management and relationship marketing are practiced.

In precise and simple words, it is the stage where companies are aiming at or already it's the outcome of established relationship with the customers through membership cards, reward and points-based promotions, airlines with free mileage or frequent flyer campaigns etc. This particular period might put companies in a relaxing mode compare to the previous stages as their efforts have started paying off. So, the prime objective at this point is to keep providing their customers with what have made them as their friend while not letting their customers' trust down through current or new offerings in future. The set level of standard in customer's mind is something which these companies need to maintain to cash on their new products/ services in future. As this paves way for companies to opt for related and even unrelated diversification, there is no point of losing these customers as friends, because the way keeping them from here can convert them into committed buyers (discussed in next section), similarly losing them from here could take company back to previous stages where regaining trust might not be as easy as it was at introductory stages.

The first from the top and last if starts from the end of the loyalty pyramid is termed as "Committed" buyers. As the name indicates, this category of buyer denotes the highly committed, engaged and

extreme loyal cases who in thick and thin and in any given circumstances opt for their respective brand. As previous section discussed the relation of brand with customer as friend, the relation at this stage is even more severe i.e., more than friendship. The connection of the buyers here is beyond satisfaction as they find their emotional attachment with brand. It's that relishing time for marketers when customers have started identifying their personality traits with that of the brand features. The element of emotional attachment is obvious here and anything against the brand is more or like question on choice and selection of customer. Even after few turbulences considering marketing, economical or technological dynamics, the buyers are right there to choose and speak for their committed brand. Such is the level of acceptance and admirability of these brands have developed in customers' mind that despite a brand with equal or sometimes better attributes, are considered left over by these loyal customers. Arguments for and involvements in debates about these committed brands are something common that these loyal buyers continue to do. The height of loyalty is so ascent that minor price changes doesn't affect the confidence of customers as a result of which the customers are willing to pay even higher price. That's the extreme brand loyalty which every company aims for. However, it's not as easy to achieve as written here because it takes enormous efforts both strategically and financially to enjoy the status of firm whose products and services have great brand loyalty. It can for sure be the efforts of ages where such brands have made their mark in masses or in case of newly established brands it can be the result of highly marketed and technologically innovative product that has catered the needs in all possible ways, which customers might haven't even thought off.

As written above about the commitment of customers with these giant brands, it becomes challenging for new entrants or even other old players in the market to snatch their loyalty. The benchmarks set by these brands create monopoly of itself and theses brands become source of inspiration for their competitors as well. Beating them though, may not be impossible as there is always a room however, in most cases these loved brands lose their customer base due to their wrong moves or sometimes being unresponsive to the market changes. So that's probably the exact time when competitors can take a lead over them while focusing on guarantying better quality. Taking this committed brand into consideration for HEIs, it will be thought provoking for HEIs as how to deal with these committed students who have an established faith over these HEIs, which can

be a result of trust depending upon generations' experience and satisfaction. Also, for competitors, this research open ways for excessive research and development to make their place among committed buyers, whose trust for sure could be difficult to attain yet its long lasting, if in case achieved.

Methodology

This study is based upon qualitative approach, as author has already tested the impact of brand awareness and service quality on HEI's brand loyalty in another scientific paper. Semi structured interviews from experts in the field have been conducted. The reason for choosing semi structured interview lie on its ability to generate leads and developing more insights about unexplored areas of the topic in hand (Galletta, 2012). Seeing the importance of Higher education branding as a trending topic and expected ways in which an HEI can pursue branding options, conducting semi structured interviews by the author meets appropriateness of method selection. The experts' profile in relation to academia and industry, their JDs (Job Descriptions etc.) conform with the research theme for meaningful analysis.

Expert interviews

The expert interviews are employed to get details and in-depth knowledge about the problem/ issue in hand from the experts in the respective field, considering that the experience and knowledgebase of experts may provide valuable insights for research question as well as it can aid in interpretation and imparting conclusive remarks on study as well (Linderman, Baker & Bosacker, 2011). As branding of higher education institutions and loyalty of students as customers are under observation in this research, experts in this study are chosen as educationalist and administrative, who are involved in admission committees and having rich exposure being part of running successful admission campaigns, encircled years of experience. Their experience in understanding of students' expectations at the time of admissions and about the varying nature of student loyalty as per the claims and actual delivery of services, could best be used to align the statistical findings and various attributes of promotion and quality services that can affect the HEIs' brand loyalty.

The analysis has been pursued using recursive abstraction i.e., a technique to analyze qualitative data in the form of summary (Leshan, 2012). Recursive abstraction, though having its limitations like other methods, have its merit of being suitable for summarized details, thus enable to extract huge information from interlinked concepts which can further lead to conclusive and meaningful analysis.

Findings

Interviewee # 1:

The first interviewee is serving as head of admissions committee for Business department of a state university, where his JDs (job description) range from developing admission campaigns to address applicants' concerns and maintaining procedures for efficient conductance of entrance exams. He is also involved in student affairs i.e., post admission. As per his estimates, in every semiannual intake, there are around 2000 applicants, out of which only 200 are selected as successful candidates.

Analysis

This expert strongly emphasized upon importance of branding in Education Market. He believes that HEIs have made brand promotion an integral aspect of their strategy while spending extra budget on promotional and advertisement campaigns. He rather expects these HEIs to limit their marketing expenditure to the extent

it gives them recognition and focus on quality. He specified the dilemma about institutions, especially the newly established ventures that get good intake initially but with every passing year the students' motivation turns into dissatisfaction. He rather advises these institutions to spend that budget on teachers' training and course modules.

On asking about his opinion regarding factors increasing the trust of brand, he reinforced that it is the quality of educational standard that is counted by students thus the effective teaching is directly proportional to the brand trust of HEIs. He also elaborated that brand trust quantifies the fact that how many students are ready to believe all the new offerings that universities offer them, how much student speak good about their universities and how much they expect that the degree from their current HEI can assist in securing the job. He quoted it as an outcome of routine talk with students especially who are in their first and last semesters. This shows that brand trust is an important factor to be considered while accounting for students' brand loyalty. Even direct marketing to college students can be initiated by those institutes with low brand awareness despite high brand loyalty.

Discussing with him about what it takes to retain high loyalty of students, the interviewee linked it with multiple factors with the quality of students. By terming that students' expectations vary from their intellect level, the loyalty is deemed to come through quality teaching and learning at the institute. Adding his input to Brand loyalty, he assures HEIs to make student feel leaving home when they are finishing their studies. Also, he found to be advising these newly established institutes from refraining to be vanished by wholly solely raising the education standards. He even named some private institutes which started well but today these are considered to be the choice of rejected students who can't get themselves in top rated institutions. Extracting key findings from this expert, factors like education quality which we are discussing in this study as service quality, seem to be the ultimate area that can foster Brand loyalty for existing students. As students are brand ambassadors, it is the quality that will actually become brand awareness in the long run. Though, by any means he is not against using Marketing strategies but in terms of gaining students' commitment, the efforts are to be made more towards service quality. A quote extracted from his finishing remarks say, "awareness creates pool of student while quality creates pool of loyal students".

Interviewee # 2:

This interviewee is in the field of academics from 20 years. He has also served corporate sector and involved in providing consultancies and marketing planning to corporate firms and education sector. Currently, he is associated with a renowned private sector HEI in the capacity of director administrative affairs, which extends his functions to overlook strategic planning for recruitment of prospect students and exploring new avenues for industry academia linkages.

Analysis

Sharing his expert opinions and vast engagement in running admission campaigns and dealing with student affairs, this interviewee shared a unique approach towards higher education branding. He went on to quoting the examples from USA and traced its roots from there where every other commodity is marketed. Not only he vows for the need about every HEI to properly market itself, but he stresses on hiring the professional staff for branding HEIs. He is, by no means disagreeing with provision of service quality as a must but ensuring the inclusion of Brand awareness as a first step in student decision making. Mentioning the term of perfect competition during the interview, his opinion about seminars, awareness workshops, arranging student fairs and participation of HEIs in education expos by establishing their stalls etc., are some of the ingredients for communicating the brand value.

As per progression in the interview he was found to be convinced with the idea that future belongs to those institutions who keep knocking and reminding their customers about their existence. A quote presented by him i.e., “some universities go for whales while other goes for sparrows’ helps in analyzing the fact that it’s the universities that target different students as per their offerings, which actually set the standard and future roadmap for these HEIs. These students, when passing out actually let the world know about the standard of education received from their respective HEIs. From this it can be interpreted that HEIs can be further classified as highly, low or non-recognizable based on their students’ intellect.

Another information to be extracted from his talk was options for HEIs and industry linkages. Institutes which are lacking in both brand awareness and service quality are advised to link corporate sector for academic training. Another key finding includes the importance of students’ job placement which is the testimony of how well employers are aware of the University brand. Sometimes brand could be quality education provider, but the apparent name is not familiar. Other situations that were discussed comprised the fact that

student ultimately comes out as a product from institutes and the overall look of him/ her reflects the perceived identity of the HEI as a brand and vice versa, therefore ignoring brand promotion in current educational setting is not desirable. Responding on the question about an educational institute continuously losing its trust in the market, he made it clear that the moment HEI let customers forgetting it, it will lose trust. So again, his arguments in favor of brand awareness were crystal clear.

In a nutshell, this expert opinion backs the findings of quantitative work in this research, vowing for brand awareness and service quality having their impact on brand loyalty of HEIs. Notable inputs from this interview about brand promotional tools for a quality institution which is losing its loyalty include Social media campaigns, event organization, liaison with reputable visiting faculty and arrangements with corporate sector for job placements.

Interviewee # 3:

She is an emerging marketing professional, with prior experience for state owned institution. Currently, she is acting as Marketing lecturer in a public university with additional tasks of arranging seminars and conferences. She acts as an integral member of highest committee for admission intakes and has often led as head of marketing strategy for admission campaigns.

Analysis

Interview from this expert was not that different from the experts above yet it had some great inputs and new way of expressing the brand awareness. As per her experience it was interesting to know that Government/ state institutions which are not concerned about finances need brand promotion as well. The private institutes are increasing in number and that their market efforts are commendable as well. These private institutes through constant knocking appear to be more recognizable than state institutes. She stresses the fact that before student start forgetting the institution name, state HEIs should continue to market and advertise themselves to be a brand of upcoming generation. Her dissection of different marketing approaches being adopted by state and private HEIs could be a very valuable finding in recommendation part of this research.

Another important factor discussed by her was about number of admissions which she believes are being won by private institutes and one of the reasons for this is the great brand awareness by these HEIs. Other reason for this comes out to be the limited number of places offered by state institutes. Along with it, state institutions had been disliking marketing and advertising efforts in the past which

has now costed them in terms of decreasing brand loyalty. This point is of magnificent importance as she mentioned the case of a student who preferred to choose a big brand over quality acclaimed teaching. The reason justified by her was the renowned brand of university in the job market. Situations like these made this expert believe that even before quality teaching it's the familiar name of HEI that needs to exist in the market. The familiarity is very important though it will come later by quality services, but first it needs to be marketed well.

Talking about various scenarios of a HEI being famous in connection with its loyalty on the other hand, the expert expressed it a very dangerous condition for institutions having more brand awareness but with low brand loyalty. As per her opinion, there is a case of continuous "negative word of mouth" which will cost institution more than anything. All the efforts of highly paid marketing activities getting nullified at the same rate through this negative word of mouth as student comes once in the institute and leave with the bad taste. In the inverse case for HEIs with high brand loyalty and low brand awareness, the expert term these institutes as being "limited in their circle" which needs to be increased. Without awareness campaigns these HEIs will become outdated in future to come. There were other situations discussed in which a failing institution in both name and quality needs to pick up the pace by working on its minimum infrastructural need initially and faculty training on continuous basis. Also, institutions at the peak of their glory need not to be slow down as upgradation of study courses and continued marketing is still required by them, before these are forgotten by next generation which is going to be their future client.

Interviewee # 4:

This interviewee holds the office of state university for the industry liaison. Previously he possessed the rich experience of serving in multiple private sector HEIs as Asst. Professor, where he has been responsible for managing admission procedures. His connect with both the average and brilliant students makes him understand their pre and post admission expectations in convincing way. Being part of both i.e., public, and private sector, he has witnessed the changing dynamics of higher education branding from its intermediary to present extent and the involvement of business tycoons in education sector as well. Along with rest of the interviewees, his opinion can be very effective for recommendation part of this study.

Analysis:

The best pick from this expert could be the usage of word "Academic Audit" that might be a useful contribution as one of the findings in this

research. His emphasis for this phenomenon may act as a guideline to the recommendation section because “Academic Audit” is something which ensures all aspects of a strong brand. Brand Awareness, Brand Image and Brand perception etc. are all linked with quality academic audit. In fact, it’s the initial step inching towards service quality that is proportional to ultimate brand loyalty. This academic audit keeps institution in line with modern updating in terms of quality curriculum audit, the effective teaching evaluations and the infrastructural arrangements required to meet the standards of modern educational environment. “Students”, according to this expert too, have been called as a brand ambassador thus signifying the importance of word of mouth marketing as another outcome of this interview. From his experience, proper brand setting must be adopted by HEIs through all available marketing channels while stress was made to not to turn these HEIs a product of aggressive campaigns only. Achieving trust has been given great importance while means to achieve it should be multi channelized through industry linkages, extracurricular activities, formation of clubs and debating societies etc. and quality teaching.

As per some industry examples by this interviewee as he named institutes which started off well but now a total disaster because of not keeping their promises. Their brand loyalty is on decreasing trend because of the multiple promises being made with students based on fake or unrealistic claims. In this regard, some scenarios discussed include mentioning of high qualified faculty in prospectus which doesn’t exist, fake claims of accreditations from renowned and authorized bodies and false info regarding industry-academia linkages, are some of the main factors of trust deficit – leading drastically to disloyalty of a respective band. Talking hypothetically about an HEI with decreasing number of admission intakes which also reflects loss of its credibility in market, the expert’s tone rose with comment “close it”. The stance to extract from his argument makes a point for those institutes which have done no progress in recent past and are facing acute shortage of revenues. Not only the marketing effort was minimal but worst service quality resulted in permanent disaster for these HEIs which, despite these happenings, continuing to follow the same path and been unresponsive. If still there exists any motivation by these HEIs aiming for a comeback, they are advised to start with quality of services (SQ) first and then comes into play the awareness strategies. His verdict to support these HEIs with focus on SQ as a main input supports our statistical finding according to which the

impact of service quality on brand loyalty is more in contrast to awareness campaigns.

For HEIs enjoying huge loyalty and recognition in masses, the expert rather coated an example from a benchmark institute which invite stake holders/ customers (parents, guardians) in seminars as well, so to maintain a connect with them. Although this example could be culturally specific, yet this practice from brand perspective gives good insight to ensure continued loyalty on brand as a “caring Brand”, whereas the demerit of this strategy may result in halting those average or insecure students, who want a disconnect of their guardians as far as their academics are concerned. Still this strategy aims at a concerned image of HEI brand even if students being consumer doesn’t enjoy it. On last notes of the interview the expert suggested public universities to be agile with current trends and adapt themselves with marketing environment as they are normally reluctant in promoting a brand like private HEIs, which despite being less quality and comparatively less effective may become first choice, even of the best of students.

To conclude, the qualitative investigations the impact and significance of both brand awareness and service quality on loyalty of students is determinantal; however, the contribution of service quality is found to have greater impact on students’ future purchase decision of educational services.

Conclusion

Summarizing the information gathered during this research, the author hereby concludes that quality of services contributes more towards loyalty or long-term retention, yet the importance of awareness through promotion is significant in its own domain and in varying situations it might be needed the most, even for a specific period. Be it aggressive or rhythmic at times, HEIs should connect itself to all the means contributing towards its brand building. And in that context, provision of quality services and promotional attempts become part of this established brand awareness that aims at cashing future awareness and brand loyalty of students. This further makes the point clear raised by expert panel that awareness does impact the loyalty but for consistent and long-term retention focusing on awareness only can not be the right idea. However, at the same time, this doesn’t allow HEIs to overlook awareness aspects. HEIs need to well define themselves not only being a recognized institute but the one being real quality provider institution. Otherwise, in an era where word of mouth spreads quicker than fire - curtsey social

media, it will be very tough for HEIs to survive if their claim loses the worth.

Summarizing further the research questions can be answered as brand awareness and service quality are significant for achieving student loyalty, while in comparison service quality which mainly include quality teaching and better student relationship management as part of overall study experience increases students trust and contributes more towards long term brand loyalty of HEIs.

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