

## **Branding in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

This study generates a new perspective on the subject of branding in higher education and it is based on a large number of research studies from different countries on several continents. The aim of the study is to look at the Romanian university's image as the outcome of their branding efforts, and to assess differentiation and positioning strategies deployed by high education institutions in our country. The study focuses on the most important components of universities' brands, logos and straplines (tagline), welcome addresses and how they present their own academic performance. We have taken a sample of Romanian universities and looked at the colours of their logos and the content and style of their straplines or welcome addresses. Based on Searle's Speech Act Theory (1969, 1979), three types of speech acts have been identified in the context of Romanian higher education branding: assertives, directives and commissives. We have analysed some other components of the university brand, which were identified in previous studies: the social identity of the university, the placement of the educational institution, the employability of its graduates and its general climate. Reputation, extracurricular activities, sports and social facilities, learning environment, courses offered and community links were also assumed to represent important factors of a university's brand. Higher education institutions can obtain responses to questions of how they should represent their image in the public perception and how they can build a strong brand. We have found that Romanian universities have similar brands and our conclusion is that a better differentiation and positioning is required in higher education.

**Keywords:** Marketing, Brand, Higher education, Logo, Strapline.

**JEL classification:** M31.

### **1. Introduction**

This article describes a piece of qualitative research on the branding efforts several higher education institutions in Romania. The article also includes a theoretical background on the subject of marketing and branding in higher education.

The target group is composed of 10 Romanian universities, five of which are large (over 20.000 students) and well-known, and five are small or new faculties, with 3000-4000 students. The aim of this study is to find out if there are any differences between the large and small universities in terms of strapline, logo or welcome addresses and the way they present their academic performance on their websites. The logo and the strapline are very important branding instruments. We have studied the logos' colors and the content and style of the straplines.

The study analyzes the content and form of expression of the strapline message with reference to J.R. Searle's Speech-Act Theory, the dominant colors found in logos, and the presentation of academic performance. Our conclusion is that there are marked similarities between the brands of Romanian universities, and a better differentiation and positioning is required for Romanian higher education institutions.

### **2. Marketing in higher education**

There are many debates about marketing and branding in universities and colleges. In this paper I will focus on branding. The marketing of Higher Education Institutions has been discussed in the scientific literature for some decades, at least since the late 1970s and the early 1980s by Riesman and Keller. Like businesses competing for talented staff, universities

compete strongly for talented students and teachers and are striving to find ways to increase the number of enrolled students and to keep stakeholders engaged.

The last decade has been a difficult time for Higher Education Institutions in the USA. After the “Golden Age” of the 1950s and 60s, when those institutions developed at a quick pace, the 1980s saw a reduction in governmental financial funding for higher education. Enrollment projections for the ensuing decade also decreased due to lower post-baby boom birth rates. Significant demographic changes led to a decline in student population, resulting in stronger competition between universities. This led to the publication of several papers about the kind of consumer marketing previously seen only in industry (Riesman, 1998; Keller, 1983). In that period of time, Keller listed various major forces impacting higher education: “the changing student clientele; the disintegration of the liberal arts curriculum; imperative technological changes and the increase of external control of higher education” (Keller, 1983, p. 12-25).

Riesman suggested some solutions for universities: decreasing, and in some cases even eliminating admission requirements; increasing marketing efforts towards better enrollment and taking steps to decrease attrition rates. “Potential students were barraged by mailings, recruiters, phone calls from alumni and others” (Riesman, 1998, p.108-109). Higher education institutions had to develop a better understanding of marketing techniques, which meant that they had to begin engaging in branding strategy and stepping up their marketing activity. According to G. Roshental, the need for marketing was reiterated by studies conducted at the Institute of Research on Higher Education (IRHE) of the University of Pennsylvania.

The challenges facing U.S. universities is shown by several studies published over the last few decades. For example, a Kellogg Commission report pinpoints institutional engagement as a necessary condition for improving higher education. Another commission reported: “As other nations rapidly improve their higher education systems, we are disturbed by evidence that the quality of student learning at U.S. colleges and universities is inadequate and, in some cases, declining.” (Lockwood R.C. and Hadd J, 2007)

Financial pressure has become a typical challenge for higher education in many countries, including the Nordic countries, along with expansion and diversification of enrolments, participation rates, types and numbers of institutions, as it is shown in an Unesco study (Fagerling, I./Stromqvist, G (ed.) (2004). This has resulted in low and declining university financial income, overcrowding, low-paid, unpaid faculty, lack of equipment or libraries. “Higher education institutions have experienced pressures for increased market orientation, to compete for students and obtain additional non-governmental resources.” (Unesco)

More recently, “European higher education has been transforming into a competitive environment, in which those institutions are forced to compete for resources” (Molesworth/Nixon/Scullion, 2011).

In this complex situation, there are debates about marketization in higher education, and the subject is still current. One very important component in universities’ marketing is the brand, because the brand helps universities differentiate from competitors, reduce competition and get access to resources. Consequently, branding and differentiation are becoming increasingly relevant (Chapleo, 2010).

### **3. Branding in universities**

Definitions of brand concept are numerous. I will present some of those brand definitions found in prominent dictionaries and papers, which are applicable to higher education.

Oxford Dictionary defines brand as:

"A type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name. "

A brand name.

A particular identity or image regarded as an asset.

A particular type or kind of something.

In Merriam –Webster dictionary a brand name is defined as:

1: "an arbitrarily adopted name that is given by a manufacturer or merchant to an article or service to distinguish it as produced or sold by that manufacturer or merchant and that may be used and protected as a trademark"

2: "one having a well-known and usually highly regarded or marketable name"

There are many perspectives on brands. As Aaker says, a product can be copied by a competitor, a brand is unique. "A product can be quickly outdated; a successful brand is timeless" (Aaker, 1991).

The following table presents the various brand themes found in literature:

*Table 1. Synthesis of Thematic twelve themes of brand definitions*

Classification	Firm's perspective	Consumer's Perspective
Themes	Brand as a logo; Brand as a legal instrument; Brand as a company; Brand as a Identity system; Brand as a image in consumer's mind; Brand as value system; Brand as a personality; Brand as relationship; Brand as adding value; Brand as an evolving entity.	Brand as a shorthand; Brand as a risk reducer; Brand as an image in consumer's mind; Brand as a personality; Brand as relationship; Brand as an evolving entity.

Source: Maurya U.K., Mishra,P. 2012, p. 133

For a university, the name and all the symbolism attached to it, either through longevity, reputation, quality, the placement of the educational institution, the employability of its graduates, the image of the institution and its general climate represents its brand. An Indian study identifies six fundamental factors that intervene in the selection of universities by students and those factors represent the components of the brand: service, external exposure, image, price, quality and innovation. (John, F.S/Senith, S., 2003)

A brand may include new courses or new organizational culture, for example an entrepreneurial culture in universities. "A lot of reasons stayed at the foundation of turning universities to an entrepreneurial culture or attitude: the growing competition in a more globalized world, the shortage of governmental resources oriented to research university, an increasing demand coming from students not only for a longer employability, but rather for an attitude that permit to enter in the world of business." (Zaharia, R., Grundey, D., 2009). In order to succeed, higher education institutions must create a consistent, strong identity. Their identity gives them a competitive advantage. The university brand must show to the public what unique qualities the university has.

In theory, established universities have well defined and strong brands. However, being complex and flexible organisations, higher education institutions are sometimes inconsistent when it comes to their identity. It has even been argued that, in this type of organization, image is more important than substance (Alvesson, 1990) or that "looking good" is more important than "being good" (Gioia/Corley, 2002). (Mampaey, J., Huisman, J, 2016). Therefore, branding is an image, a symbolic strategy that does not necessarily represent the substantive, organizational culture, rules, internal activities or the identity of the universities.

"It has been argued that brand differentiation is especially important for lowly reputed

HEIs in that they need to develop unique brands to attract specific market segments, whereas highly reputed HEIs have no need to differentiate for they can build on their reputation (Brown/Mazzarol, 2009)” (Mampaey, J., Huisman, J, 2016).

#### **4. Qualitative research on branding in higher education Romanian institutions**

We have conducted a qualitative study on branding in Romanian higher education. We have empirically analyzed the brands of ten universities in the Romanian higher education system. The universities’ straplines are used as our unit of analysis. The straplines are part of the universities’ logos, so they are very visible to website visitors. The logo and the strapline are very important branding instruments. We have studied the logos’ colours and the straplines’ content and style.

The study includes ten universities chosen based on the number of students enrolled in all programs and all forms of education: the first 5 Romanian universities, with 20,000-36,000 students each, and 5 smaller universities in terms of number of students: 2000-4000.

We analyzed the content and form of expression of the strapline message by reference to the Speech-Act Theory created by J.R. Searle, the dominant colors found in logos, and the presentation of academic performance.

Two thirds of the large universities have straplines, and for those that do not, we analyzed the values expressed in the most visible presentation of the university on the dedicated website, like welcome addresses. All straplines are in Latin. All major universities have logos. All major universities refer to their academic performance and their place in international and national rankings.

The content analysis reveals the following terms used in straplines, in order of frequency: tradition, virtue, performance, with at least two occurrences, followed by the terms with a single occurrence: values, creativity, wisdom, truth, freedom. Content analysis reveals the following categories:

Axiology / character (values, virtue, freedom - 4 uses),

Temporality / history (tradition - 3 uses),

Rational / cognitive (truth, creativity, wisdom - 3)

Action / praxis (performance - 2)

The colors that appear in the logos are, in order of frequency, the following: blue, white, yellow, red and cream.

The form of expression of the message is analyzed by reference to the word-action theory created by J.R. Searle, according to which the communication can be:

"Assertive - states things that exist as they exist

Commission - states things they want to do

Directive - states things that others want to do

Statement - when they do things in the world at the time of utterance only by virtue of saying that they do so

Expressive - the expression of the attitude about objects and facts of the world."

Within prestigious universities, the strapline’s style is assertive and commissive. By using assertive communication, universities present their organizational values as objective facts and this contributes to their perceived legitimacy and attractiveness.

Of the 5 smaller and newer universities, only one has a strapline (“Wisdom and Virtue”). The content analysis reveals two areas: first, rational / cognitive and second, the axiological / moral-characteristic. For the universities that do not have straplines, we performed the analysis of their welcome address. The style of the welcome address is directive, future-oriented and rather vague ("We are the best choice.", "Your life journey begins here" etc.). The predominant colors in the logos are white, blue and yellow. In their presentation, the universities refer to the

geographic area where they operate and do not refer to national or international university rankings.

The colours in the logos of small universities are the same as those of the larger high education institutions; therefore it is possible that the small ones were inspired by the image and brand of large, prestigious universities.

## Conclusion

The large, prestigious Romanian universities have brands that relate to the past, history, traditions, while the brands of the smallest and newest universities relate to the future. All universities have logos, but their colors are very similar. Almost the same colors are used by both large and small universities. The colors that appear in the logos of Romanian universities are: blue, white, yellow, red. Cream appears only in one logo of a prestigious university.

Universities operate in an environment with many constraints related to educational policies, demographics, the national economy and culture, etc, which is why there are many similarities within higher education brands. But a certain brand differentiation can be noticed, for example in terms of the message and the image they convey.

Universities have similar brands, in conclusion, a better differentiation and positioning is required in higher education in Romania and that is an important issue for universities management.

This study can be continue with qualitative and quantitative researches in high education institution from Romanian and other countries.

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