

BRANDING IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES AT EL SALVADOR: BRANDS THAT THE PUBLIC FALL IN LOVE WITH

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Abstract

This research was carried out to examine the role of educational brand capital applied to private universities in El Salvador. For this purpose, the main contributions of the literature related to the study of brand capital and its application in the educational sector were analyzed, identifying which variables determine brand capital in the higher education sector. Once a suitable model was established, an empirical study was realized through a questionnaire in digital format, using a sample of 381 valid responses from undergraduate students from a private university in San Salvador (El Salvador). In order to validate the proposed construct, structural equation modeling will be applied, using SPSS v.19 and EQS 6.2 as working tools. The results obtained will show the repercussion of each variable of the brand capital relative to the determining variables, which are: brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

Keywords: *Marketing, brand capital, higher education, private universities, El Salvador.*

1. Introduction

From the 1990s to the present day, it is possible to appreciate an important trend towards the diversification of higher education, which has benefited the private university while discouraging the development of the public university model (Ortíz and Rúa, 2017). Thus, the contribution of private higher educational institutions is vital to satisfy the needs of an increasingly globalized and internationalized society (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada & Freeman, 2015). And this, added to the apogee of research on teaching and learning of management and business from the XXI century (Díez, 2018) and, especially, to the need to pay more attention to research in educational management, in order to add relevant value to the business world (Adler and Harzing, 2009).

With this, and given that universities are operating within dynamic and challenging environments, the marketing strategy becomes a priority to ensure strong recruitment and retention of students and teachers (Asaad, Melewar, Cohen and Balmer, 2013). There is consensus that understanding the university brand and its clear development and communication provides great value for universities (Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus, 2014). Therefore, the strategic management of the brand becomes a key piece within the educational sector and, especially, in higher educational institutions (Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin and Ivens, 2016).

Following this line, Küster (2012) considers that higher education also provides an interesting and important context for marketing research, since universities around the world are increasingly oriented towards marketing strategy and students are, increasingly considered as potential customers. Thus, it seeks to obtain results in terms of value, effectiveness, and long-term benefits, which have been very important in the business world through the achievement of competitive advantages and the conquest of a wide segment of the international market. In other words, it seeks to generate a feeling of love for the brand by consumers and thereby improve sales figures (Esteban, Ballester and Muñoz, 2014).

Focusing our attention on the role that public higher education plays in El Salvador, their National Education System indicates that today there are 20 private universities in the country. Thus, according to Ávalos (2010), the country has had in recent years a considerable increase in university students, as well as improvements in infrastructure and the appearance of new private universities.

Thus, Yamada, Castro, Bacigalupo, and Velarde (2013) consider that private universities require more research regarding their brand capital, mainly due to the excessive importance that has been given to maximizing income money from customers and the low weight of quality in services provided. Thus, the brand constitutes a key strategy to achieve the purchase preference of potential customers, although it is true that its management is difficult (García and Bergantiños, 2001). Thus, and according to Retamosa (2018), the need to build an educational brand to differentiate itself from the aggressive competition and to cover more student market share and talent attraction is revealed. Therefore, any brand that has a significant capital value can considerably lengthen the life of an organization and transform, in the eyes of consumers, the products/services offered into pure gold (Casanoves, 2017).

In this framework, the objectives of the present research are to (1) establish which are the most determinant variables of brand capital in the higher education sector, and (2) decipher which are the most outstanding variables by private university students in El Salvador. Thus, and after reviewing the seven major proposals on brand capital models in the literature (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993; Faircloth, Capella, and Alford, 2001; Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Delgado and Munuera, 2002; Buil, Martínez and De Chernatony, 2010), we have considered four elements that are identified by these authors and were also deemed to be of importance in previous studies. These are: (1) brand awareness, (2) brand image, (3) perceived quality, and (4) brand loyalty.

To sum up, this research represents a scientific advance in the marketing discipline since to date, although there have been specific investigations of brand capital and the variables that comprise it, there are very few investigations that exhaustively analyze the perception of brand capital through the undergraduate students of a private university in El Salvador.

2. The perception of brand capital among private university students in El Salvador

After reviewing the seven main proposals on brand capital models made by the literature, four elements have been considered that shared by the authors, and taking into account the importance given in previous studies, we understand that their contribution to brand capital is key. These are: (1) brand awareness, (2) brand image, (3) perceived quality, and (4) brand loyalty. Each one of them is detailed below.

2.1. Brand awareness

In the specific field of education, several authors (Brunzel, 2007; Brewer and Zhao, 2010; Mourad, Ennew and Kortam, 2011; Furey, Springer and Parsons, 2014; Pinar, Trapp, Girard and Boyt, 2014) find that branding in higher education is a very important variable for universities, in order to generate greater preference for consumption in educational services and, therefore, increase sales. In other words, greater brand awareness will mean greater brand equity. In view of the above, it is possible to raise the first research hypothesis: H1. The perception of brand awareness influences the perception of brand capital among private university students in El Salvador.

2.2. Brand image

In the specific field of education, several authors (Cervera, Schlesinger, Mesta and Sánchez, 2012; Williams, Williams and Omar, 2013; Denegri, Etchebarne, Geldres, Cabezas, and Herrera, 2014; Alwi and Kitchen, 2014; Hemsley, Melewar, Nguyen and Wilson, 2016) have shown that the image of the brand in private and public universities is a very valuable asset for organizations, and effective and rapid measurements of the image transmitted to target audiences must be carried out since this perception may be different in both areas. This image, as it improves, will lead to increases in the brand capital of the university institution whose image is favored. In view of the above, it is possible to raise the second research hypothesis: H2. The perception of brand image influences the perception of brand capital among private university students in El Salvador.

2.3. Perceived quality

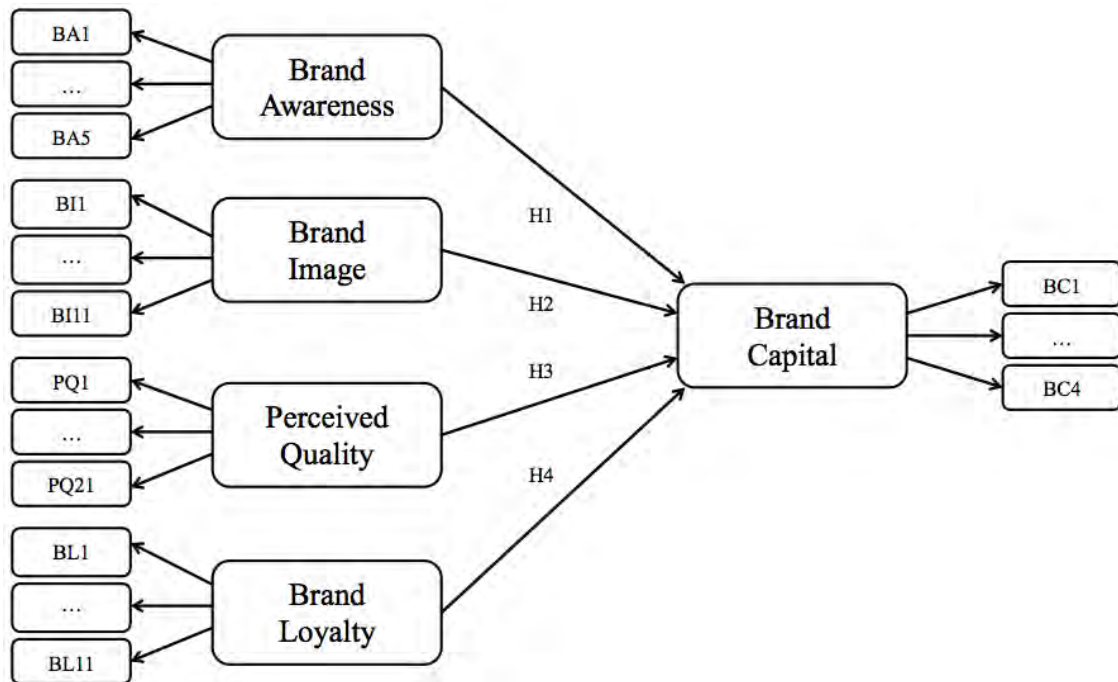
In the specific field of education, several studies (Chen, 2008; Hasan, Ilias, Rahman and Razak, 2009; Calvo, Levy and Novo, 2013; Sultan and Yin Wong, 2013; Pinar, Trapp, Girard and Boyt, 2014) show that the quality perceived in private and public higher education is a variable that also depends on the fact that it is up to educational institutions to obtain greater satisfaction from their users. Quality, therefore, is another key source in the configuration of the brand capital of the university institution, insofar as higher perceived quality will translate into greater brand capital. In view of the above, it is possible to raise the third research hypothesis: H3. The perception of perceived quality influences the perception of brand capital among private university students in El Salvador.

2.4. Brand loyalty

In the specific field of education, several contributions (Paswan and Ganesh, 2009; Conejeros, Leonor, Rojas, and Segure, 2010; Schlesinger, Cervera and Calderón, 2014; Montoya, Torres, Berrio and Montoya, 2020) highlight the relevance of brand loyalty in the higher education sector, which implies that this variable is very important in generating educational brand capital. Audiences that are more loyal contribute to increasing brand equity. In view of the above, it is possible to raise the fourth research hypothesis: H4. The perception of brand loyalty influences the perception of brand capital among private university students in El Salvador.

In view of the above, Image 1 shows our proposed theoretical model designed to defend the present investigation.

Figure 1. Theoretical model proposed for the present research.



3. Methodology

In order to corroborate the established hypothesis, we conducted empirical research quantitative in nature, by means of a survey in the Spanish language aimed at a group of 381 undergraduate students from one private university in San Salvador (El Salvador).

Grade 5 Likert scales were used to measure the concepts of (1) brand awareness, (2) brand image, (3) perceived quality, and (4) brand loyalty. These scales are based on the measurement scales proposed by Aaker (1992) and Keller (1993) and were adapted to our field of study, higher education. The techniques for data analysis were based on descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis, using as a working tool SPSS v19 for Windows for descriptive techniques of data and EQS 6.2 for executing multivariate techniques.

4. Conclusions

As a work in progress, it should be noted that we are currently in the analysis phase, through the application of different methods of analysis depending on the information to be obtained, distinguishing between (1) psychometric characteristics of the measuring instrument, divided into an analysis of the quality of the items and the validation of the scales; and (2) hypothesis testing, using a Structural Equations Modeling (EQS).

Once we finish this, we will document the conclusions and business implications for each variable proposed for our brand capital construct (brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty). With this, we will discuss the limitations of our research as well as future research, in order to open a new way for the scientific community.

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