Reconditioning the Freshman Gene: Can a “Positive Visualisation Course” Successfully modify Freshmen Students’ Perceptions of a University’s Brand Image?

Marilia Kountouridou¹ and Dino Domic²

Abstract

Branding in higher education has proven to be an effective strategy that has received considerable attention in recent years, and a growing number of articles on the subject have begun to appear in the literature. However, a clear gap within the literature indicates that the concept of students’ perceptions of university brand image has not been thoroughly researched. Consequently, this research focuses on investigating the impact of a positive visualization course in brand identity upon the perception of freshmen students of a university’s brand image. A Qualitative Grounded Theory methodological approach has been employed consisting of semi-structured interviews specifically targeting first-year university students. The preliminary findings resulting from this research, reveal a beneficial influence of the positive visualization course in brand identity upon freshmen students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image. Investigating this topic is greatly beneficial since it has enabled the researcher to provide substantial insights into how freshmen students formulate perceptions.

Keywords: Marketing; higher education marketing; perception; branding; brand image

Introduction

Within the current century, branding has played a predominant role and constitutes an integral component that determines the success of a business (Williams and Omar, 2014). The business external environment is constantly advancing from multiple perspectives thus, firms utilize marketing strategies to compete effectively (Parahoo et al., 2013). Since universities are operating in a highly competitive and dynamic environment (Rutter et al., 2017), the Higher Education sector is becoming more marketised, with the concept of branding to play a vital role in the university’s strategic plans (Williams and Omar, 2014). Rutter et al. (2017) support that the role of marketing communication is crucial since it can influence the perceived brand image of the university. Adding to this, Williams and Omar (2014) assert that a strong brand image is a top priority for many universities. Therefore, a growing number of universities adopt marketing strategies to compete effectively and attract more students (Chapleo, 2011; Rutter et al., 2017). In addition, a successful brand image enables universities to stand out from the competition, increase market share, and gain and maintain competitive advantage (Aghaz et al., 2015). Although Higher Education marketing research has previously been recognized as underdeveloped, Higher Education branding has gained considerable attention in recent years and a growing number of research papers have begun to appear in the literature (Chapleo, 2011; Aghaz et al., 2015; Gai, et al., 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016; Rutter et al., 2017; Xie and Teo, 2020). Yet there is little research on how students’ perceptions of university

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brand image can be affected by marketing strategies. This study aims to investigate how a positive visualisation course in brand identity can influence freshmen students’ perceptions of university brand image. A positive visualisation course in brand identity refers to a course where brand’s history, past achievements, recognitions, awards, values, and mission are presented. An investigation on this pivotal concept is greatly beneficial since it will enable the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding concerning branding in higher education.

**Literature review**

Branding is a profound term used extensively in the world of business and marketing. One of the most frequently cited definitions delineates branding as being a distinctive name and symbols such as trademark or logos, were developed to identify a brand’s products or services and to distinguish them from the competitor’s products or services (Keller, 2020). The concept of branding in the Higher Education sector has received an increased interest due to its positive influence on students’ willingness to enrol (Aghaz et al., 2015). Being a well-recognized educational institution with a preeminent and unparalleled brand image, this undoubtedly results in a higher enrolment rate (Rutter et al., 2017). Additionally, when students have a positive perception towards the university’s brand image, it will positively affect the Word-of-Mouth which is a significant source of information (Herold et al., 2017). It is, therefore, essential that universities should employ effective marketing strategies to empower their brands and attract more students (Dollinger et al., 2017). Perception is one of the oldest concepts in psychology that refers to the process through which an individual understands the information received from the sensory receptors (Ou, 2017). Consumer behaviour is an imperative concept that enables marketers to comprehend the way that consumers perceive, judge, and feel about different brands (Aslam et al., 2018). Through extensive and experimental studies, it has been observed that the concept of perception and consumer behaviour are closely correlated. To be more precise, perception is a pivotal element that must be taken into consideration during the branding process (Ward et al., 2020; Hulten, 2017). According to Aslam et al. (2018), a brand is represented by the perception that individuals display of organisations, products, services, location, and the personality of the brand. As far as brand perception is concerned, this can be defined as the overall experiences, thoughts, and feelings that consumers have with the brands. In other words, brand perception refers to the way that consumers perceive a certain brand. The information received through the sensors is transferred to a mental impression that affects the perception of customers about the quality of a brand, its value as well as the reputation of the brand (Aiswarya and Krishnan, 2019). Hence, it is significant to affect their perception to achieve a positive brand image (Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, 2019).

**Research Methodology**

The education sector in Cyprus has recently expanded, making it a critical area that the government is determined to further develop. Universities compete to offer new programs and recruit new students. The University of Cyprus was the first higher education institution in Cyprus, founded in 1989. Today, the situation has changed dramatically, with eight rapidly expanding universities, five of which are private. In the last decade, the number of students has climbed by more than 80%, reaching 47,000 in 2018 (Siathas, 2020; Busfield, 2020). More recent data showed that the total number of students studying in Cyprus for the academic
year 2019-2020 was 53,262 (Cyprus Ministry of education, culture, sport and youth, 2020). This influx helped transform the country into a world-renowned educational centre.

In terms of the data collection, the present research adopts a qualitative methodological approach, consisting of semi-structured interviews specifically targeting first-year university students. The methodology used for the study of the aforementioned area is Grounded Theory in order to provide an in-depth understanding about how freshmen students formulate perceptions of a university’s brand image. This methodology is appropriate when a respective theory is not available to expound a process and thus the theory is generated from the available data (Creswell, 2002).

Sampling Design

The sample identification emerged using the snowball technique. Snowball sampling refers to the process during which research participants recruit other participants for a certain study and it widely accepted that is constitutes the most appropriate method when the potential participants are not easily accessible (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). The researcher had undertaken data analysis alongside data collection. After carrying out the first interviews and analysis of the collected data, a repetitive pattern was observed in the coding process, also known as theoretical saturation. The term ‘theoretical saturation’ was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) which refers to the process during the data collection when no additional information or insights have arisen from the data and all the concepts and categories have been identified. In other words, saturation occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives or information. In addition to this, theoretical saturation can determine the appropriate sample size.

The Participants

Forty-two students have participated in the research among which twenty-five women and seventeen men. Participants were divided into two groups (an experimental and control group) based on programme of study to eliminate any possible interaction between the study participants of each group. The participants of the experimental group attended the positive visualization course in brand identity whereas the participants of the control group did not attend the course.

Research Design

A detailed experimental procedure is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. The experiment

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-course semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>The participants of the experimental group attended the positive visualization course in brand identity</td>
<td>Pre-course semi-structured interviews</td>
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<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Implementation of the course</td>
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<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>Post-course semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>Post-course semi-structured interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage 3/Part 1</td>
<td>One week after the course</td>
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<td>Stage 3/Part 2</td>
<td>Four months after the course</td>
<td>Four months after the first interview</td>
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Stage 1: Pre-Course Semi-Structured Interviews: Prior to the implementation of the course, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim to identify students’ perceptions of the university brand image. A total of 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted, in March 2020. This stage was implemented before the COVID-19 lockdown. Therefore, all interviews were implemented face-to-face in a private study room to ensure that nobody would interrupt the process.

Stage 2: Implementation of The Course: The ‘positive visualisation course’ was conducted with the participants of the experimental group only (twenty-one students). During the course, the university history, past achievements, recognition, values, and awards were presented. Due to the restrictions (e.g., social distance and absence of face-to-face interactions) imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a 25-minute online presentation was shown to students in March 2020, via the Zoom platform.

Stage 3: Post-Course Semi-Structured Interviews: The third stage of the experiment is called post-course semi-structured interviews and this stage comprised two parts:

Stage 3 – Part 1: One week after the course, online semi-structured interviews followed with the participants of the experimental group. The aim was to identify whether students’ perceptions had been influenced after the course completion. Therefore, one-to-one video interviews were implemented, in March 2020.

Stage 3 – Part 2: Four months after the course, online semi-structured interviews were carried out among the participants of both groups with the aim to examine whether the students’ perceptions had changed throughout the four-month period. Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted online in July 2020. It should be mentioned that six students withdrew from the study prior to these interviews.

Data Analysis

Data has been analysed by following the principles of Classic Grounded Theory, which consists of two main stages: substantive coding and theoretical coding. Substantive coding is the first stage of Grounded Theory’s coding process and is composed of two levels namely open and selective coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It focuses on data analysis to identify preliminary categories and data properties that can then be analysed for greater abstraction and generalisation (Walker and Myrick, 2006). Theoretical coding is the final level of coding, whereby theoretical codes are used to “conceptualise how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p.72). Once the core category emerged, theoretical coding is undertaken to connect, and build theory. By utilizing codes developed during the substantive coding stage, after saturation has occurred, the researcher relates those codes to each other to identify a relationship, whilst significantly relying on the constant comparison of data (Holton and Walsh, 2017).

Findings

Five categories of students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image were identified. More specifically, these are: (1) negative perception, (2) no perception, (3) neutral perception, (4) positive perception, (5) excellent perception.
Experimental group

Figure 1 illustrates freshmen students’ perceptions concerning the university’s brand image and how this has been affected throughout a four-month period. The first column presents students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image before joining the university, the second column shows students’ perceptions after joining the university, the third column illustrates students’ perceptions after the course implementation and the fourth column displays students’ perceptions four months after the course.

**Figure 1.** Freshmen students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image - experimental group

Students Perceptions Before They Joined

During the analysis of the students’ perceptions before joining, 14% of the participants in the experimental group (three students) had a negative perception towards the university and this is mainly since they underestimated the level of the private universities in Cyprus.

*Participant 038: To be honest before I joined, I underestimated the university’s level and I believed that the public universities were much better.*

Additionally, 14% of the participants (three students) had no perception of the university’s brand image, 14% (three students) had a neutral perception (neither positive or negative), and 57% (twelve students) had a positive perception since other students had recommended the university to them.
Participants 001: I had a positive perception because other students had recommended the university. Therefore, I decided to register.

Participant 021: I had no perception. I liked the course and so I decided to enrol.

**Students Perceptions After Joining (Beginning of March 2020)**

A perceptual transformation was occurred, after enrolling and interacting with the university. More precisely, the initial negative perception of three students (14%) was transformed into a positive after entering the university, experiencing the facilities, the amicable environment, the positive behaviour, and satisfactory and punctual support they received from professors, consultants, and other staff.

Participant 038: When I came here and saw the rankings and how organised it is my mind had changed. Indeed, people who have not joined the university now regret it.

In addition, three students (14%) with no perception at all and three students (14%) with neutral perception stated that their perception became positive after they joined and interacting with the university environment. The twelve students who had a positive perception before they joined, their perception remained stable because they were initially aware of what to expect from the university, and the university met their expectations.

**Students Perceptions One Week After the Course (End of March 2020)**

The findings suggest that the students’ perception of the university’s brand image was positively affected one week after the implementation of the course with only two exceptions. In particular, 90% of the students (19 students) stated that their perception was significantly improved after the course. Students were initially unaware of the university’s achievements, awards, recognitions, history, and their perception was improved after being informed about them. This is evident from the following transcriptions excerpt from the interviews carried out with the specific participants.

Participant 038: Yes, my perception has changed because I thought that this was a private university and there was nothing special about it. After learning all of them (awards and recognitions), my perception changed; it has been improved.

Participant 026: My perception has been improved, going from this to this (gestures with her hand). To me this is the best university in Cyprus after everything I have heard.

Participant 011: The presentation managed to change my whole perception.

In addition, participant 017 pointed out that their perception was not affected at all. However, during the interview, it became apparent that this participant was not completely focused on the presentation since she was not aware of the university’s brand identity.

**Students Perceptions Four Months After the Course (July 2020)**

Four months after the course, the findings reveal that 76% of the interviewees (15 students) maintained their excellent perception, and 5% (participant 017) held the same positive perception. Whereas 5% of them (participant 039) had an excellent perception which has slightly changed because the university did not seem to handle the lockdown situation in an appropriate manner, a fact which hugely contributed to negatively affecting her view.
from excellent to positive perception). To be more precise, participant 039 admitted receiving great pressure from the university. In contrast, participant 010 pointed out that their perception improved (excellent perception) because they appreciated the way the university handled the situation during the lockdown.

*Interviewer:* Do your current overall perception differs from the one that you had in mind in our previous interview?

*Participant 010:* I think they are very close; Actually, I believe that now it is a bit better after experiencing how the university handled the situation with the COVID-19.

**Control group** (the participants of the control group did not attend the positive visualisation course)

Figure 2 presents the students’ perceptions concerning the university’s brand image and how this was affected throughout a 4-month period. The first column presents the students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image before joining the university. The second column shows the students’ perceptions after joining the university. The third column illustrates the students’ perceptions four months after the first interview. In the following section more information is presented.

**Figure 2.** Freshmen students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image - control group.
Students Perceptions before they joined

The findings reveal that seven students in the control group had a negative perception before joining the university since they underestimated the private universities in Cyprus. Additionally, six students had no perception, one student had a neutral perception (neither positive nor negative), while six students had a positive perception. One participant (participant 002) had an excellent perception of the university since they were well-informed about the history of the university, its previous achievements, recognitions, and awards.

Participant 033: Basically, before I joined, I had heard some stereotypes about private universities in Cyprus; private universities are underestimated.

Participant 036: I had in mind a different perception. I was biased by preconceived notions about the university, and I was worried because I didn’t know if the university could provide us with the appropriate education.

Participant 022: To be honest I did not have any perception in mind.

Participant 016: I had a positive perception in mind; a good university that will provide us with the appropriate education.

Students Perceptions After Joining (First Interview – Beginning of March 2020)

Analysing the students’ perceptions after entering, participant 002 still had an excellent perception of the university. Apart from the awards and achievements that the university obtained the reason why he considered the university as an excellent option was his interaction with the institution. Among the six students who had a positive perception before they joined, five of them maintained their perception, in contrast to another student (participant 030) who claimed that their perception was negative since they believed that the university was disorganised.

Participant 030: My perception is not that positive [laughing nervously] because I feel like they are really disorganised… the majority of the teaching staff is very organised, but there are some exceptions.

Interviewer: What were your expectations before joining the university?

Participant 030: Ah, because I studied in the UK, I came with an idea in my mind that the university is very organised. In the UK, I had an application on my phone, and I had a full timetable whereas here they do not have this… For instance, if there was a lecture change, we would know weeks beforehand. I could also see it on the calendar that they have on the application.

Interviewer: Does the university meet your expectations so far?

Participant 030: Not really [laughing nervously].

The student who had a neutral perception before they enrolled, mentioned that their perception became positive after joining. Six students with no perceptual awareness at all revealed that they had not formed any prior mental image and now their perception is positive. When it comes to seven students with a negative perception before joining, six of them stated that their perception was improved because they experienced the university better,
nonetheless, one student expressed her negative perception since they did like the environment.

Participant 036: My perception was negative. I did not know anything about the university’s level. I was worried about its level, and I didn’t know if they could give us the proper academic knowledge, but by getting to know the university better, I realised that it has a respectable level.

After entering the university and meeting people, advisors, and professors, I realised that everyone is excellent. So, my actual experience was the main factor which managed to change my opinion about the university.

Students Perceptions Four Months After the First Interview (July 2020)

Evaluating students’ perceptions four months after the first interview, participant 002 maintained the same excellent perception, fifteen students had the same positive perception, and two students had the same negative view (participant 030, participant 032).

Participant 037: I have a positive perception towards the university, because of the professors. This is a university that provides students with everything they need.

Interviewer: What is your current overall impression about the university?

Participant 030: It is not good. As I mentioned in previous interviews the university is disorganised… Especially now, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lectures are held online, and online teaching is not good. Therefore, I have the same negative perception.

Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups

The following table offers a comparison of the experimental and control groups over the four-month study period.

Table 2. Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before joining EUC</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ perceptions of</td>
<td>Negative Perception</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the university brand</td>
<td>No perception</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>image</td>
<td>Neutral perception</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Positive perception</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Excellent perception</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<td><strong>After joining EUC</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ perceptions of</td>
<td>Negative Perception</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>the university brand</td>
<td>Positive Perception</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>image</td>
<td>Excellent Perception</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<td><strong>One week after the course</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ perceptions of</td>
<td>Negative Perception</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>the university brand</td>
<td>Positive Perception</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>image</td>
<td>Excellent Perception</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Four months after the course</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ perceptions of</td>
<td>Negative Perception</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>the university brand</td>
<td>Positive Perception</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>image</td>
<td>Excellent Perception</td>
<td>76%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attrition</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
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Comparing the results of the experimental group and control group four months after the course, the findings reveal a beneficial influence of the positive visualisation course in brand identity on freshmen students’ perceptions. To be more precise, after the experimental group students had been exposed to positive visualisation course in brand identity, their perceptions of the university were positively affected (90.5% of the participants). Four months after the course, 71% of the experimental group still had the same excellent perception. In addition, one participant negatively changed her view due to the tremendous pressure received from the university during the COVID-19 lockdown (from excellent to positive perception), whereas another participant had an even better perception (excellent perception) due to the professional way the university handled the COVID-19 lockdown. To sum up, 76% of the participants had an excellent perception, and 9.5% a positive perception. Remarkably, one participant decided to terminate his studies, whereas two participants withdrew from the study prior to these interviews.

On the contrary, no significant change in the perception of the participants in the control group was noticed four months after the first interview. More specifically, the fifteen students who had a positive perception, one student with an excellent perception and one student with a negative perception, remained stable in their attitudes four months later. Conversely, one participant with a negative perception had a slightly positive change because of her personal effort and goal to become more optimistic. To summarise, 5% of the participants had an excellent perception, 76% of them, had a positive perception, and 5% a negative perception. Notably, two participants decided to terminate their studies, whereas one participant withdrew from the study prior to these interviews. Therefore, the data strongly suggests that the positive visualisation course in brand identity can positively influence freshmen students’ perceptions of university brand image.

Discussion

In the 21st century branding seems to play a vital role and an inextricable ingredient that ensures the success of a business, especially now that the marketing and business environment is booming and constantly advancing from multiple perspectives. Branding has proven to be an effective strategy for businesses, but the higher education sector appears to not give the necessary emphasis on branding since a clear void in the literature confirms that the concept of students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image has not been researched extensively. This limitation of studies in the field of brand building in higher education, was an opportunity for the current study and subsequent paper. Researching this topic was beneficial since it has enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding on how freshmen students formulate perceptions of a university’s brand image. This study contributes to the existing literature by presenting the relationship between a positive visualisation course in brand identity and the perception of freshmen students of a university’s brand image. The findings of this research reveal a beneficial influence of the positive visualisation course upon freshmen students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image. A possible explanation of this could be that students were unaware of the university’s achievements, awards, recognitions, history, and after learning about them, they shaped a better perception of the university’s brand image. In addition, other factors such as the university environment, the positive behaviour and satisfactory and punctual support they received from professors, consultants, and other staff, the way that university responds to critical events and the quality of education, definitely determine their perception throughout the months. The main conclusion resulting from this
research strongly suggests that, undoubtedly, a positive visualisation course can directly enhance students' perceptions of the university’s brand image. In addition to the theoretical contribution, the findings of this research entail relevant managerial implications. Universities with similar achievements and awards should expose students to a positive visualisation course in brand identity to enhance their perceptions of the specific university’s brand image. During induction week, the university should present a positive visualisation course to all freshman students.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


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