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UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE BRAND-IMAGE OF A BUSINESS SCHOOL BRAND: A Recruiter Prospective

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ABSTRACT

This research paper studies the factors that influence recruiters' decision making about potential employees due to brand-images of business school brands. It employs a descriptive literature design to list the impact of brand image on recruiters' decision-making processes, the impact of alumni on the perception of recruiters, and the impact university ranking has on the recruitment and selection of business school students as employees during recruitment drives by recruiters. As such, it evaluates the factors that recruiters look for in a business school brands, the weight of these factors and then how the institutions' alumni affect the recruiters' decisions. The paper synthesised some of the factors through extensive literature review that effect recruiters' decision-making. It has become essential for all organizations to brand themselves in the spat of competition being experienced globally; thus, becoming a need for business schools too to create brand-images. The research paper briefly describes some of the literatures; from the impact of brand image on recruiters' decision-making process, the impact of alumni on the perception of recruiters, and the impact of university rankings on recruitment and selection processes. It employs inductive and deductive research approaches to evaluate the data from the literatures and draw conclusions from it. The major limitation of the study is its heavy reliance on the conducted literature review. The credibility of the study could have been enhanced by adding data obtained during the interviews.

KEYWORDS: Brand-image, Recruiters, Perception, factors effecting recruiter decisions, Business School.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper is based on the research study by Agrawal & Swaroop (2009). The study starts by appreciating that all organizations need to highlight their distinct functionalities in market places; and that the primary goal behind a brand image is that customers purchase a certain good or service alongside its associated image (Agrawal and Swaroop 2009). It describes brand imaging as one of the ways organizations depict their distinct functionality in global markets and offers various definitions of brand image (Balmer and Wang 2016). The most elaborate among these definitions of brand image depicts it as ‘the mark left on the heart and mind of consumers when they regard a certain product or service’. This definition conveys the essence of a brand-image as the influencer on the hearts and minds of the consumers anytime they interact with products and services produced and presented by a certain brand. Therefore, brand-image is associated with influencing the consumers’ consciousness and attempting to make the brand-image comprehensive and recognisable.

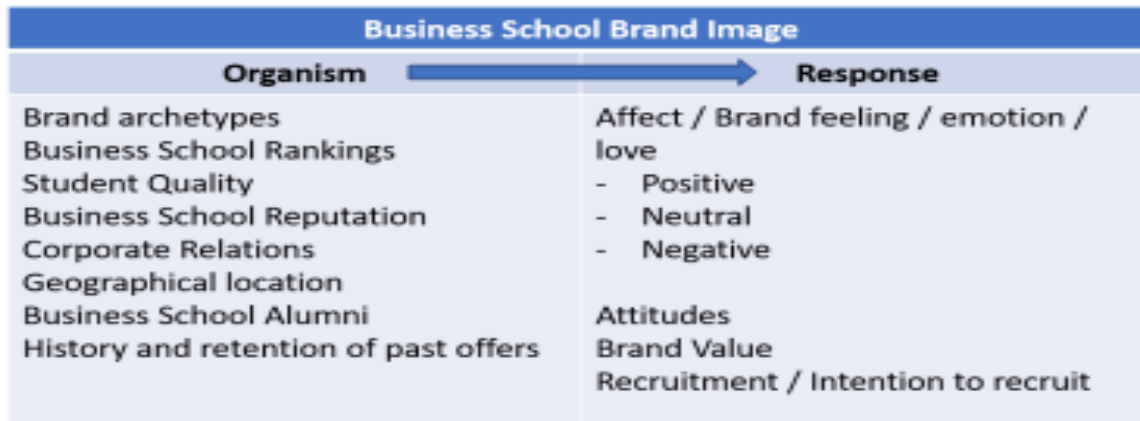
The paper moves on to synthesise the importance of brand image for business schools. It suggests the presence of various factors that have influenced recruiters’ decision-making processes. Moreover, those factors could lead to the ability to charge premium tuition fees to their students. The mechanism is just similar to the process when branding contributes to increased sales revenues for organizations through premium branding pricing strategy (Yeoman & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). Similarly, business schools also benefit greatly by building their brand images. Thus, brand image is a long-term investment for all entities whose Return-on-Investment (ROI) should be calculated just as other assets (Cruz and Lee 2014). This research study found that the education sector is not left out in brand imaging with universities taking the lead in order to be able to establish a niche market (Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2011). This study also synthesises that establishment of such niche markets also affects recruiters’ decision-making processes, while recutting the fresh graduates from various sources (Lee 2007).

MAIN SUBJECT MATTER

Introduction

The influence of business school brand image is captured by the stimulus effect that the brand image offers recruiters assessing and interviewing job seekers for various positions. A stimulus in this case can be defined as the external content about business school brand that a recruiter hears or sees that influences their decision making regarding a job seeker who has gone through the institution (Chapleo 2008). A Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework from a previous study helps understand this scenario (Meenaghan and Shipley 1999). For a business school (the organism), some of the stimulus of brand image could come from the business school brand

archetypes, school rankings, student quality, school reputation, corporate relations, geographical locations, school's alumni and history, and the retention of past offers among others. The response of this stimulus could be a positive, neutral or negative affect on brand feeling, emotion or love; bringing about attitudes, brand value, recruitment or intentions to recruit among other effects. The Stimulus-Response-Organism for a business school brand image would thus be described as follows:



*Figure 1: Some major factors identified by recruiters for business schools and their responses
(Source: Personal collection)*

It is worth noting that the brand-image for various recruiters is different and exists independently in their mind, making it difficult to succinctly capture and describe; thus some refer to it as ‘the little black box’ (Skinner 2008). A positive brand image is however one that exceeds consumer expectations concerning the product or service making it more likely to experience increased purchases. These expectations of what people require from brands depend on the rational, emotional and functional benefits the brand gives them (Balmer and Wang 2016). Rational benefits relate to what a brand does better than others in the industry, functional benefits that cover the outperformance of the brand over competitors, and emotional benefits, which identify the way the brand makes consumers feel.

This study focused on three key research aims in an attempt to understand the diverse factors that influence the recruiters’ brand-image perception of business schools. The first of these aims sought to list the various factors, the second to uncover what recruiters look for in business school brands, and the third to weigh all the factors identified with the objective to understand their relationship, and their significance to how recruiters perceive the brand-image of business schools’ graduates seeking jobs. The study also assessed the impact of alumni on the perception of recruiters. The whole rationale behind conducting the research was to capture the impact business school branding has on recruiters’ decision-making processes.

Literature Review

Recruiters are faced with more challenging operating environments every day as the competition in job markets intensifies due to the assortment of skills. Noting that if recruiters hire unqualified and incompetent staff they may make organizations fail to attain their competitive edge to achieve their goals and in turn lose their market share, the pressure to deliver on recruiters is quite high (Cruz and Lee 2014). It is for this reason that business schools too have been investing so much in trying to build their brand images so that they can be more appealing to recruiters.

Recruiters constantly seek out business schools and add them to their list of colleges, planning to visit their campuses for recruitment drives. Their selection criteria to ensure attraction of highly qualified graduates and their healthy placement is very comprehensive; going over and above pure academics to the relevance of courses offered, the courses content reviews and feedbacks done among other factors (Mosmans and van der Vorst 1998). An example of this is a survey study conducted by an Australian QS which showed that MBA students are usually hired and trained quickly and systematically with high risk as companies attempt to ensure that they get the best workforce that will last longest in their organizations (Deus and Josephine 2014).

The literature review focused on the criteria that recruiters' organizations use when listing colleges from which they intend to conduct recruitment drives. Primarily, the listing is based on the quality of learning and skills the learning institutions offer. It is also based on other factors such as the performance of alumni from the schools (Barron 2015), and the ability of the students to utilize minimal times and resources to train for suited jobs in the market. The quality of education offered by institutions is gauged by recruiters based on the courses offered and the number of times these courses have been reviewed with feedback, the qualification of the institutions' tutors, and also primarily, the conduct of other alumni from the schools. These factors that recruiters' focus on also make up the business schools' brand-image; by virtue of the fact that the brand image is constituted by the business strategies, vision, mission, goals and objectives, the performance of alumni and the schools business practices, all of which affect the business schools' ranking on recruitment and selection drives. *The Impact of Brand Image on Recruiters' Decision-Making Process*

A recruiters' decision to list and rank a business school on its recruitment and selection list is influenced by the institutions' Unique Selling Propositions (USP). Education institutions build their brand images primarily in order to build their USPs that appeal to recruiters and other potential students; helping them have a high ranking amongst recruiters, and increase their tuition fees from the demand-pull caused as students rally behind the institutions (Tas

and Ergin 2012). A USP identifies the competitive advantage one competitor has over the other (Niu & Wang 2016). For example, the USP point for a university could be the value of the degrees which they offer their students as compared to what other universities offer with consideration of the lecturers, learning environment, general perception of the university among other factors.

In the study, the USP point for business schools in influencing the recruiters' decision to enlist them for recruitment drives is their brand-image that makes them stand out from other business schools. Another element of this USP that the business school brand-image brings about is the perceived value of the school's degree. When students perceive their university degrees to be of a good high value, they become more proactive towards their future careers making the school's alumni excel in their careers (Tas and Ergin 2012). On the contrary, students from schools that do not conduct brand-imaging do not value their degrees, and recruiters do not value them, thus do not hire them, making such institutions less appealing and discouraging others from joining them. As a result, such schools are unable to charge higher tuition fees.

Impact of Alumni on the Perception of Recruiters

Alumni are a major stimulus when assessing the perceived values of students from an institution. This is so much so because in the recruiters' eyes, alumni are a perfect representation of an education institution. Thus, they are regarded as the institutions' representatives (Wilkins and Huisman 2011). If recruiters can identify several responsible individuals from society to be alumni of a certain educational institution, this builds the perception of the worthiness and competitiveness of the institution. Therefore, promoting the brand-image of the educational institution to influence the recruiters' decision-making process. The brand of a business school, which is the stimulus for recruiters to favor the students of that school for recruitment drives, is affected by the alumni of the school conduct in a number of ways. Schools with highly reputable alumni in society thus have better brand images. Some of those ways are instigated by the institutions themselves, while others are instigated by the alumni of such schools.

An example of such practice is that universities often cooperate with their alumni to arrange seminars and workshops to promote their students and attract potential recruiters (Bock, Poole and Joseph 2014). Universities often interact with their alumni who are highly revered in society, requesting them to inform them of possible recruitment exercises that would benefit the graduates of the courses they offer. With the alumni's help, universities are able to attract companies that undertake recruitment drives and invite them to the universities' workshops and seminars (David, David, & David 2011). When most recruiters learn of the actions of such reputable companies

attending the universities' workshops and seminars that potentially seek out skilled and talented students and graduates to join their workforce, they rush to do recruitment drives in such institutions. The actions of the alumni thus influence the perception of recruiters on the university, which in turn influences the recruiters' recruitment decisions.

The Impact of University Ranking on Recruitment and Selection

SOR discussed earlier attempts to explain the reason why an individual chooses something over the other from their perceptions. This SOR framework (Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta & Dwivedi 2018) suggests that recruiters perceive business schools with a higher ranking on a higher pedestal than those with lower rankings, and thus seek to visit them for recruitment drives (Mosmans and van der Vorst 1998). According to the model only those factors that have a positive perception influence a decision, when high university rankings are viewed as positive merits by recruiters. Therefore, it influences the recruiters decision-making process. This in turn, makes recruiters visit such institutions for recruitment drives or offer their alumni more jobs than other institutions.

Business schools' brand-imaging helps institutions enhance their positive perception amongst potential employers and recruiters. Developing and maintaining a brand image helps business schools stay connected with corporate entities, which are the major employer for the institutions' graduates. During brand development and evaluation, business schools get most valuable feedback from corporate entities. Such feedback helps model the coursework studies taught to suit the corporate entities' job market. As quite a number of these corporate entities contract recruiters to source labour for them, they instruct recruiters that they would prefer candidates who have undergone certain course works, the same as those they had advised the business schools to include in their curriculums. Recruiters thus favor such business schools as their graduates possess a better readiness to join the corporate world job market, for which they were prepared using the revised curriculums. This practice makes the business schools ranked higher than others do in recruitment and selection drives.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Within the course of the literature review, this research concerned itself with three objectives. The first objective was to list the various factors that affect business schools' brand image. The second objective was to grasp what recruiters look for in business school brands when in the due course of their work. In addition, the third objective was to weigh the factors identified with the goal of understanding how these factors relate to each other and how recruiters perceive the business schools brand images' from these factors. This discussion informs more on the way the relationship between all these aspects of brand image affect the recruiters' perception of the business

school brand images (Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen & Wilson 2016), and, in turn, influence their recruitment decisions when met with graduates of the institutions concerned.

For the first objective to list the various factors that affect business schools' brand image, the study identified the USP of business school brand images as the schools' alumni and the university ranking. The study found that recruiters consider the positions and conduct of the alumni a business school brand image because they perceive the schools' alumni as the perfect representatives of an institution (Hawawini 2005). A predominant study by Wilkins & Huisman (2011) gave the best insight to the way recruiters use alumni to assess business schools' brand images denoting that the presence of several reputable individuals in society that are alumni from certain institutions make recruiters view and revere the brand images of the schools they attended. This study also took note of Bock et al. (2014) who reported that alumni of business schools could build their schools' brand images by arranging seminars and workshops with recruiting companies. As per the university ranking, the study noted that the ranking on the quality of educational institutions work independently, and oversight authorities affected the schools' brand image. Schools ranked higher generally enjoy better brand image perceptions than those that are ranked lower.

On the second objective to understand what recruiters look for in business school brand images, the study employed the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Framework. The study listed some of the major stimuli that recruiters relate with and help them gauge business school's brand images. These included the business school rankings, alumni and student quality, the schools' reputation and geographical location, the schools' history, and brand archetypes among others. Considering these factors as the stimuli, and the recruiters and business schools as the organisms in the framework, some of the responses to these issues could be perceptions of high brand value, recruitment or selection for recruitment drives, and changes in the attitudes of recruiters on how they perceive the school in general. These responses are based on the positive, neutral or negative effect they have on the recruiters brand feeling, emotion or love towards the brand.

On the third objective to weigh how these practices affect the recruiters' perception of business school brand images, the study came up with two main USPs that influence recruiters the most. These are the alumni, and the university rankings of the schools. The presence of alumni in society that stand out in their professions and careers has the most impact on recruiters when assessing business school brand images. The more the recruiters can identify several high profile individuals who have graduated from business schools, the more they value the schools and want to carry out recruitment drives in them. The universities ranking also weigh-in heavily when perceiving brand

image as recruiters view these as credible statistics on the worth of the business schools, thus their brand images too.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The main limitation for this study was that the study relied heavily on literature review. This was mainly because of time and resource constraints. Even if the literature review method is very credible and give accurate findings for such studies, one could not help but feel the use of other methods too such as interviews, would enhance the credibility of the study. For example, interviewing several recruitment firms and employers would give more credence to the study as their views are what actually control recruitment practice. It is suggested that future research employs such methods to give enhance the credibility of already existing literature review.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that business schools' brand-imaging influences the recruiters' perceptions of the schools which in turn influences their decision-making. When it comes to recruitment matters on the schools. It is thus important for business schools to build their brand images, as this would help them attract recruiters. This involves but is not limited to revamping the business schools' visions, missions, goals and objectives, business strategies, marketing strategies, communication programs and other relevant procedures that the entities would undertake to boost their brand images. This would help the business schools be able to even charge premium fees compared to other institutions. Furthermore, the research also found that success or failure of the alumni of a business school also affects an institutions' brand image. Noting that, when there are several prominent individuals in society from a business school, recruiters' rank the school higher, which enhances their brand image influencing them to favour a particular business school. The study was limited because of the chosen research method – a literature review. The perspectives for future research include the conduction of the interviews with the successful alumni, recruiting organisations, and top ranking employers to determine their objectives for decision-making in recruiting.

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