

Factors affecting Higher Education Branding in Engineering and Management Institutes in the state of Punjab – A Recruiters’ Perspective.

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Abstract

Majority of the existing research on the topic of higher education branding has been conducted keeping in mind only the viewpoint of students. However the perspective of recruiters visiting the HEIs for recruiting graduates deserves attention too as they are the providers of campus placements; one of the major promises made by an HEI prior to admissions. This study focuses on the perception of recruiters regarding higher education branding. The purpose of this study is to understand the perspective of recruiters, regarding the factors that create or elevate brand positioning of HEIs in higher education market. A survey was conducted with 40 recruiters who have visited various institutes/universities of Punjab for campus recruitment drives. Exploratory factor analysis was used to find out various factors that they consider being most important for branding of higher education institutes. Findings suggest that existing image and reputation of the institute/university was the most important factor followed by their experience with the placement cell.

Introduction

Brand is the idea or image in the consumer’s mind about the services, products or activities of a particular company. Philip Kotler defines brand as, “A name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competitor.” This paper explores the idea of branding in the context and environment of higher education market. An enhanced and impressive academic brand image not only attracts the best of students and staff, but also opens up new potentials of recruiters for campus placements and various other forms of academia-industry interface. So HEIs must focus on articulating and clearly projecting a brand that effectively resonates with not only potential students, but all its stakeholders.

Student employability being an actual core deliverable is an important aspect of the HEIs existence and identity. So higher education branding can never be completely successful without paying due importance to the employer’s or recruiter’s perspective. The branding efforts made to bring more and more multi-national companies for placements and academic collaborations form a continuum and loop of sorts as the reputation of any professional education institute is significantly impacted by its corporate collaborations (Rajkumar et al, 2015). The branding perception of employers is inadvertently linked to branding perception of students as employers not only prefer the campuses where students are able and skilled, but are also available in good numbers so that they have large pool to choose from (Sapra & Maheshwari, 2013). Despite the recruiters being such key stakeholders, the number of studies conducted on higher education branding from their viewpoint is surprisingly limited.

Literature Review

Some studies showed that the recruiters’ experience with the placement team was what impacted them the most and hence formed the basis of their decision to visit again or not. Infrastructure, efficiency and effectiveness of placement drives were considered to be highly important. (Tajudeen & Kumaran 2015, Gordon et al 2011). Skills of

the students with special focus on communication and soft skills also came up as an important factor. (Archer & Davison 2008, Harvey 2000, Irwin et al 2019, Smith & Lam 2013). Yet another set of studies talked about networking in form of MoUs, guest lectures, trainings etc for academia industry relations to be highly significant. (Irvine & Verma 2013, Shenoy 2016)

Purpose of research

The purpose of the research was to find out the factors affecting higher education branding according to the recruiters visiting engineering and management institutes in Punjab for campus recruitments. As stated above the number of studies taking into account the recruiters' perspective is very limited. It's a clear indication that this research base needs to be expanded. Studies need to be conducted that explore how the recruiter who visits a campus in search of graduates views branding in the context of higher education. An endeavor is made to see if a new factor emerges that has not been discussed in the existing literature available on the topic. This would enable the HEIs to effectively execute their branding strategies keeping in mind the preferences of an often neglected stakeholder i.e. the recruiters.

Research Methodology

Primary data was collected through a questionnaire. A sample size of 40 recruiters from various sectors was taken. An attempt was made to include prominent companies visiting colleges of Punjab over the years. Detailed sampling plan is presented below:

Table no 1: Sampling plan of the study.

S.No	Industry/Sector	No. of recruiters
1	Banking/ Finance/ FinTech	16
2	Manufacturing/Logistics	6
3	IT/Consulting/Analytics	8
4	Ecommerce/Retail	6
5	Education/EdTech	4
	Total	40

Respondents were requested to provide response regarding the elements they considered important for branding of the HEIs/Universities. Normality testing was done with the help of the values of kurtosis and skewness. Z-value was then obtained through the value of standard error. Reliability testing was also done using Cronbach's Alpha. These results have not been tabulated here. The data was found suitable for further analysis. Exploratory factor analysis was then applied using the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) technique with Varimax rotation, in order to find out the factors affecting higher education branding considered important by recruiters.

Analysis and Findings

This section of the study highlights the various factors considered important for Higher Education Branding by the recruiters of engineering and management students of Punjab. According to these factors and elements, they choose the campus for graduate recruitments.

Table no. 2: Total variance explained by each statement

Total Variance Explained									
Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	6.641	15.444	15.444	6.641	15.444	15.444	5.708	13.275	13.275
2	5.780	13.442	28.886	5.780	13.442	28.886	5.358	12.461	25.736
3	4.927	11.458	40.344	4.927	11.458	40.344	5.287	12.296	38.032
4	4.227	9.831	50.175	4.227	9.831	50.175	4.714	10.964	48.995
5	4.061	9.443	59.618	4.061	9.443	59.618	4.568	10.623	59.618
6	3.622	8.424	68.042						
7	3.546	8.248	76.290						
8	2.802	6.517	82.806						
9	1.871	4.351	87.157						
10	1.525	3.545	90.703						
11	1.261	2.934	93.636						
12	1.072	2.494	96.130						
13	.909	2.114	98.244						
14	.755	1.756	100.000						
15	.412	1.458	100.000						
16	.327	1.029	100.000						
17	.301	0.621	100.000						
18	.156	0.254	100.000						

19	.093	0.019	100.000						
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.									

For the purpose of forming factors for this study, Eigen values greater than 4.00 have been considered. As can be inferred from the results in table no. 2 there are 5 components with Eigen values > 4.00. So the appropriate number of factors which could be extracted out of the given statements is 5. The total variance explained by these five factors is 59.618%. This means that 59.618% of the variation in the responses of the recruiters can be attributed to the factors so constructed in this study while the remaining variations can be a result of the aspects which have not been included. This is a reasonably fair degree of variation explained by the factors so formed to explain the phenomenon (perception of the recruiters) under consideration.

The Rotation Component Matrix shown below in table no.3 reveals the factor loadings.

Table no. 3: Rotated Component Matrix

Statement	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
The on the job performance and productivity, joining ratio and tenure of the previous recruits coming from an institute/University determine whether to visit that campus again or not.	0.767				
We visit only already established and reputed names in education industry for recruiting freshers directly from their campuses.	0.646				
The accreditations and rankings of the universities by statutory bodies are important criteria for its selection for campus recruitments.	0.551				
Institutes/Universities that make the students go through a reliable selection test before granting admissions are preferred	0.523				
The number of students, diversity in the campus and International exchange students is an important criterion for selecting campus for recruitment.	0.511				
Proper infrastructure in the placement cell and the whole campus in general is important.		0.722			
An IT enabled Placement Management System is preferable as it facilitates connecting and communicating with Institute/University and ensures a smooth recruitment drive.		0.607			
The placement rate of the institute in the past with our company as well as otherwise affects our decision to select it for recruitment drives again.		0.602			
A full time career counsellor/academic advisor with industry experience is always beneficial and results in better prepared students.		0.568			

Institutes/Universities offering slots on day 1 of their campus placement are preferred by us.		0.517			
We keep a tab on updates, developments and achievements of the Institutes/Universities put out on social media.			0.681		
Representatives of the Institute/University visiting our office or headquarters and inviting us or strategically marketing them are given a chance.			0.663		
We always try to visit our alma mater for campus recruitments.			0.512		
During our interviews and interaction with the students, we have a detailed discussion with them on their training project: the learnings from the research and experiences from the company they did their training with.				0.723	
Institutes/Universities should be offering a separate course in career counseling, interview and group discussion skills.				0.559	
We look out for students with good entrepreneurial skills and start up ideas and are willing to associate with them.				0.536	
Institutes/Universities focusing on industry oriented curriculum are given a preference for campus recruitment drives.					0.613
The faculty of the campus to be visited should have good amount of teaching and research experience.					0.545
Our ex colleagues or people from industry now working as a faculty with the institute, and our relationship with them affects our choice.					0.521
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.					
a. 5 components extracted.					

As shown below in table no. 4, the various factors gathered from the Rotated component matrix have been given a name and presented along with their components.

Table no 4: Factors along with their components and % Variance explained

Factor No.	Factor Name	Statements	Factor Loading	Variance explained
1.	Existing Image and reputation of the HEI.	Past experience with the alumni of the institute/University	.767	15.44
		Already established and reputed names in education industry	.646	
		Accreditations and rankings by statutory bodies	.551	

		Make the students go through a reliable selection test	.523	
		Number, diversity and International exchange of students	.511	
2.	Placement Cell Activities	Proper infrastructure in the placement cell	.722	13.44
		An IT enabled Placement Management System	.607	
		The placement rate of the institute in the past	.602	
		A full time career counsellor/academic advisor	.568	
		Slots on day 1 of campus placement	.517	
3.	Marketing & Networking	Updates on social media	.681	11.46
		Representatives of the Institute/University visiting our office	.663	
		Visiting alma mater for campus recruitments	.512	
4.	Skill Development of Students	Learning and experiences from Training Projects	.723	9.83
		Course for career counseling, interview, group discussion	.559	
		Entrepreneurial skills and start up ideas of students	.536	
5.	Academics and Faculty	Industry oriented curriculum	.613	9.443
		Teaching and research experience of the faculty	.545	
		Ex colleagues in faculty	.521	

Source: Author's own based on results of factor analysis.

As can be seen in the table above, five important factors have been offered which can be classified as the ones affecting Higher Education Branding according to the recruiters. These factors indicate towards the significant dimensions of credentials recruiters consider important to create a brand in higher education sector. Existing image and reputation of the institute/University is on top with 15.44% of total variance explained. Other important factors are Placement cell activities with 13.44 %; Marketing and Networking with 11.46%; Skill Development of students with 9.83% and Academics & Faculty with 9.44%. of total variance explained.

Conclusion

The results show that the existing reputation of an institute/university in the higher education market and among the corporate circles, impacts recruiters' perception regarding its brand in the most significant manner. The overarching effect of this reputation weakens the impact of cost, processes, infrastructure and even services as far as recruiters are concerned. Successful alumni, decent placement records, reputed faculty, credible selection test are some of the few aspects that can help with building reputation. However, the recruiters must keep in time that this is done over a period of time with relentless efforts made year after year and no quick fix approach can help here.

Recruiters prefer to trust the HEIs who have managed to build an enviable reputation over the years assuming they must be doing things right in various areas like skill building, academics, faculty etc. So they go ahead with campus recruitment with utmost confidence that they will get the best talent here.

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