

Most Wanted Brand Attributes: Student Perceived Values of Private Universities in Surabaya

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ABSTRACT: The rising quantity of private universities in Indonesia creates heightened competition in delivering the added values most wanted by, especially their potential students. Although most universities strive to create a point of distinction, the marketing department often communicates this advantage in a corporate-centric manner, neglecting the perspective of the recipients (i.e., the potential students). Literature has shown that most previous studies have adopted service quality or customer perceived value constructs to measure higher educational values and linked it with students' behavioral intentions. This study aims at finding out what students want from selected private universities in Surabaya in terms of added values and brand attributes. A series of in-depth interviews with university students was conducted to confirm predetermined and develop new themes from the conversations. A thematic analysis applied to the verbatim transcripts revealed five major student perceived values: functional, social, epistemic, emotional, conditional, and three emerging values: monetary, symbolic, and pre-university experiential values.

Keywords: brand attributes, student perceived values, brand trust, brand satisfaction, enrolment intention, private university

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, private universities account for 68% of total higher education institutions in Indonesia [1]. They compete with their counterparts in public universities for prospective students. Strong private universities dominate the category not only on the perceptual level but also at the experience level that must be sufficiently differentiated and innovative enough to build their reputation (i.e., the brand). Unfortunately, the marketing communication or public relations department often uses a vertical approach (that is, from university to stakeholders) in promoting their differential advantages. This neglects the perspective of the prospective students on which brand attributes are advantageous for them among alternatives, which affects their trust and ultimately, enrollment intention.

Private universities can, to the rescue, adopt a horizontal approach where brand attributes are defined from the perspective of the top three audiences; current and prospective students as well as parents. This perspective is referred to as the perceptual strength in the minds of those audiences who make up a strong, favorable, and distinct associative network [2] with respect to a particular university in a specific enrollment consideration. This network of associations contains attributes that, hopefully, are strongly and uniquely linked to the respective private university brand. These attributes can significantly represent the unique values that are not only offered by the university but also experienced by the students, or in short, student perceived values, which bear consequences to trust and ultimately, enrollment intention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Customer Perceived Value (CPV)

Customer perceived value (CPV) is the customer's overall assessment of a product's (or service's) usefulness based on perceptions of what is received and provided [3]. According to [4], there are five dimensions of customer perceived value: functional value, emotional value, social value, conditional value, and epistemic value. CPV can be measured as a uni-dimensional concept, using only one statement (e.g., value for money) to evaluate overall value [5,6], or as a multi-dimensional concept [5]. In the educational context, tuition fees and benefits received from services, imperative, innovative, and valuable content of courses, and the contribution of lectures to the improvement of students' hard and soft skills have become an indicator to measure the perceived value of students at universities [7,8].

2.2 Brand Trust

One of the most important antecedents of trust is satisfaction [9-11]. In this study, brand trust is positioned as a key process variable that explains the causal flow of the influence of student perceived value on enrollment intention. If the perception of added value is cognitive, the confidence level of prospective students is deeper and emotional. Defined as the willingness of consumers to rely on the ability of a brand to perform the functions or promises it sets [12], brand trust is a key process for prospective students to build confidence in the ability, reliability, and integrity of a university/faculty in realizing the added value it communicates. In various previous studies [13-15]; at least two categories of customer perceived value (hedonic/emotional and functional/utilitarian) are essential antecedents of brand trust.

2.3 Enrollment Intention

In the context of student enrollment in tertiary institutions, there are various determinants such as institutional characteristics, technology, and risk perception [16], demographic factors, such as gender differences, prospective student interests, and career path considerations [7,17]; reputation factors, such as institutions, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [7,18]; and psychological, factors such as emotional aspects or communal experiences [8,10]. Other researchers, such as [7,19], found exploratively that career path factors, previous student experience, work-study links and matches, and institutional support in student learning life affect prospective students' decision to enroll in a higher education school. In the studies mentioned above, the researchers have narrowed their focus to a few key elements that influence enrollment intent, such as institutional reputation, risk perception, psychological factors, and teaching and learning processes. Thus, a comprehensive image of brand attributes with accurate performance is needed to predict enrollment intention. The grouping of these determining factors should be done by referring to the concept of the value and the theory of consumption values. Thus, a holistic picture of the brand attributes that need to be considered and communicated to prospective students is obtained.

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative study with a phenomenology method with an in-depth interviews approach to explore the lived experiences of the current students and focus on the students from the faculty of economics or faculty of business and economics from the big three private universities. Predetermined themes guide the research using constructs from previous studies; student perceived values, brand trust, and enrollment intention. Particular university attributes taken into consideration prior to enrollment were developed, which consecutively affect their level of satisfaction during their study. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve current students of universities in inquiry to find the underlying themes. The interviews, lasting 20 mins to one and a half hours, were conducted virtually and achieved saturation at the 8th informant. All the interview conversations were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed through three stages as prescribed by [20].

4. RESULTS

Five predetermined codes were found to represent the values that students perceived when they enrolled at the university. First, functional values were reflected in the codes of 1) current student testimonials and 2) the university's image and degree value. In addition to these two predetermined codes, the interviews also revealed the importance of popularity issues considered by the participants when they selected a program to enroll in. That is, the amount of the student body in a program was perceived as the indicator of its popularity, and more importantly, it was an early indication that the program was a preferred choice in the market. Moreover, the value that the participants perceived about the university had encouraged them to think positively about their study experiences with their friends. In higher education, the functional value was related to students' expectations that their chosen course of study would gain them employment or career advancement [21,22]. Second, the social value represented the benefits derived through group interactions, and the value students received from forming friendships with their classmates [22,23]. Third, conditional value was related to the value perceived by students about teaching materials and campus facilities [21,22]. Fourth, emotional value portrayed students' sense of gladness and self-achievement in taking their course [22,23]. Fifth, epistemic value showed the benefits that were derived through an offering's ability of the university to arouse curiosity, provide novelty or satisfy students' desire for knowledge [22,23].

Table 1. Major Findings

Predetermined Codes	Emerging Codes	Themes
Current students' testimonials	Positive word-of-mouth (WOM)	Functional value
University image and degree value	Popularity	
Friends and family support during study		Social value
Campus facilities		Conditional value
Taking course boost self confidence		Emotional value
Highly valuable course content	International opportunities	Epistemic value
	Specialized program or curriculum	
	Value for money	Monetary value
	The internalization of university core values	Symbolic value
	Bridging program	Pre-university experiential value

In addition to those five predetermined themes, the results also found three relevant emerging themes to the most-wanted attributes that students perceived when selecting a particular course or university. These inductively-generated students' perceived values represented the particular university's attributes taken into consideration prior to enrolment, which consecutively affect their level of satisfaction during their study. The first emerging theme revealed was monetary value, which relates to the evaluation of a consumer on the educational fees spent compared to the benefits obtained and experienced [24-26]. Literature has included monetary values as part of the functional value. However, this study saw it as an emerging theme. Functional values relate more to the product and service's utility, while monetary value is closely associated with efficiency (cost-benefit tradeoff). The second emerging theme was symbolic value, which represented the extent to which students would attach or associate psychological meaning to a product that appeals to their self-concepts and self-worth. In this study, symbolic value was reflected in how the university's core values were embedded in the whole teaching-learning process and faculty members-students interactions, and such internalization can be seen by others [27]. The last emerging value that appeared was pre-university experiential value. The interviews revealed that it was important for potential students to have a sort of "trial" of experiences with the course or bridging program, such as living in class with the existing students in class or the labs before their enrolment at the university.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study inform the marketing communication and public relations department of private universities in developing marketing messages with respect to the brand attributes central to the consideration of the potential students. Functional attributes such as university image, student testimonials, or popularity in terms of the quantity of the student body inside a particular faculty or specialized programs receive the most attention and mention in the conversations. The insight received suggests that instead of emphasizing this image, the "carrier" of this image be highlighted. Specifically, current students and alumni are the most effective messengers of trust when it comes to conveying the image or reputation of a private university (in terms of testimonials).

The emphasis on who should signal the value rather than what should be signaled supports the earlier suggested horizontal marketing communication approach. The participants in this study deliberately mention over and over again that it would be more trustworthy to show their current faculty experiences to their younger selves, especially when they are in the market for college enrolment. Private universities' marketing communications can also break through the clutter if they show experiences such as forming friendships with classmates or how entering a particular faculty within a private university reflect the [potential] students' true potential and passion. This is because they can realistically visualize the communal activities and the pursuit or activation of personal potentials that they would encounter and realize within a faculty in consideration.

Finally, although students are largely "forgiving" when it comes to breach of promises, they would appreciate it if the university just walked the talk. For example, a bridging, such as experience day, can help distinguish college experiences from the high school ones. Additionally, any practical deviations from the core university values such as integrity, resilience, or excellence must be resolved thoroughly before they become the negative word of mouth. Hence, it is more effective to visualize these pre-college experiences in the core message rather than verbalize the university values in any form, such as taglines. Although our findings have revealed the most wanted brand attributes in terms of student perceived values, they also informed us that current students within a faculty can, together with the private university, co-create these values, and more importantly, they are the true reflection of these values. This suggests that private universities should consider adopting a more horizontal student-to-student approach in addition to the traditional university-to-stakeholder vertical approach in communicating important brand attributes.

6. REFERENCES

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