

Review Article

UNIVERSITY BRANDING: THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSITY PERSONALITY ON UNIVERSITY DISTINCTIVENESS AND UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract

The present research examines the influence of brand personality or a set of human characteristics associated with brands in a university branding context. To test the hypothesized relationships among three focal constructs (i.e., university personality, university distinctiveness, and university identification), data were collected from a survey research in Thailand. The study results reveal that the university personality dimensions of sincerity and liveliness have significant impacts on university distinctiveness and university identification while the other four dimensions (prestige, appeal, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan) do not. In addition, university distinctiveness appears to mediate the influence of university personality on university identification. The results from this study provide a number of theoretical and managerial implications in brand personality and university branding.

Key words: brand personality, brand distinctiveness, brand identification, university branding

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing and branding were traditionally viewed as strategic tools for profit-oriented business organizations. More recently, however, universities or higher education institutes have gradually adopted the branding concepts and practices due to recent changes in circumstances in the higher education sector (Balaji et al 2016). First, there has been more competition among universities in attracting new students. Next, governments have increasingly limited their financial support for universities and implemented the policy of self-autonomous university where a university may have to seek its own budget to a larger extent. Moreover, due to the effectiveness of birth control policy, the number of university-going population is diminishing. Therefore, a university nowadays may have no choices but be inclined to allocate more resources and efforts for their brand building because branding may help the university to more effectively convey its persuasive message to the target audience such as potential students, probably by signaling the value to be gained from its educational offers (Casidy 2013).

One of the branding concepts with high potential in marketing communication in the university context is *brand personality*. This construct employs human personality traits to describe a brand (Aaker, 1997). Although brand personality has long generated interests among marketing scholars, the application of brand personality to non-traditional products or non-profit-oriented service appears relatively scarce. More recently, nevertheless, researchers have started to apply this construct to more various contexts including, for example, temples (Polyorat & Miwichian, 2018), political parties (Rutter et al., 2018), cultural festivals (d'Astous et al., 2006), sport teams (Tsiotsou, 2012), tourist destinations (Upadhyaya, 2012), and cities (Amatyakul & Polyorat, 2016).

One area that may deserve more studies in brand personality is education marketing where this construct may be examined in a university context and a focal university is treated as a brand. Therefore, the personality of a university or university personality may reflect how a university is viewed by using personality trait

descriptors (e.g., sincere, exciting, competent). When a university is considered a brand, brand personality can be useful for describing a university. By putting a university's characteristics together and explaining them as a human being, personality traits can be very important for university branding, for example, in attracting potential students, soliciting alumni's donation, and eliciting favorable perception from public.

Based on the important role of brand personality for university branding, the present research attempts to examine the influence of university personality dimensions (prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan) on potential students' perception of university distinctiveness and university identification. In addition, this research also studies the mediating role of university distinctiveness in this set of relationships. Data were collected from a survey research in Thailand, a country underrepresented in international marketing (Polyorat & Sophonsiri 2010).

Theoretical Framework
University personality

In branding literature, brand personality is defined as a set of human characteristics potentially associated with brands (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality communicates symbolic meaning of brands (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). For example, Absolut Vodka could be viewed a 25-year old person with a cool and modern personality (Balakrishnan et al., 2009). As brand personality is often more difficult to imitate than tangible or physical product attributes, it can thus lead to a more sustainable advantage over competitors (Ang & Lim, 2006).

Brand personality has been found to be related with several important marketing variables including brand loyalty (Farhat & Khan, 2011), brand attachment (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012), image of product user (Parker, 2009), acknowledgement of product quality (Ramaseshan & Tsao, 2007), brand image (Chernev

at al 2011), brand persuasion (Guevremont & Grohmann, 2013), and brand attractiveness (Sophonsiri and Polyorat 2009).

In her influential work, Aaker (1997) conducted a series of surveys and uncovered five major dimensions of brand personality: sincerity (down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, and cheerful), excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, and up-to-date), competence (reliable, intelligent, and successful), sophistication (upper class and charming) and ruggedness (outdoorsy and tough). These five dimensions are found to be robust across different genders and age groups, as well as across brands and product categories. Numerous brand personality studies conducted after 1997 have drawn, at least in part, from Aaker's (1997) framework (Azoulay & Kapferer 2003; Parker, 2009) despite some criticisms (Heine, 2009), one of which is the study context where these five dimensions may not be proper or replicated.

In a university branding context, in an attempt to uncover a new measurement that is specifically designed for higher education institutes, Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens's (2016) study reveal that university personality is composed of six dimensions: prestige (e.g., leading, reputable), sincerity (e.g., friendly, trustworthy), appeal (e.g., productive, special), liveliness (e.g. lively, creative), conscientiousness (e.g., organized, effective), and cosmopolitan (e.g., international, networked). Furthermore, their study reports the relationships between university personality and three other marketing constructs: brand love, alumni support, and word-of-mouth. The present study adopts this framework as it deems more appropriate in the context of university marketing.

University distinctiveness

As numerous higher education institutes may generally focus on two major elements: academic strengths and offered degrees, the brand building of universities may lack diversity or differentiation. As a result, university brand distinctiveness could be a major component for brand building in higher education to achieve competitive differentiation. As brand distinctiveness reflects the brand's perceived uniqueness (Stokburger-Sauer et al 2012), university distinctiveness thus reflect how a focal university is unique and different from other universities. In this sense, university distinctiveness could be a critical organizational characteristic from an identity perspective (Bhattacharyu & Sen 2003) for a university to solicit favorable responses from the target market. Therefore, the degree to which a student perceives a university's identity to be unique and match his or her own identity could be an important antecedent to a student's desire to identify with that university. In this regard, university personality could be an important tool in building university distinctiveness.

University identification

A strong university brand may be capable of eliciting favorable marketing outcomes including brand preference and behavioral intention. As a consequence, the proper management of brand identity could be an important element of branding for universities because brand identity may encourage students to develop a stronger relationship with the brand through brand identification (So et al 2017).

In a university branding context, university identification reflects student's identification with a university or a student's psychological state of belonging with a particular university brand (Lam et al 2013). Students may not select a particular university solely because of its educational functionality. Rather they may also choose it because of its meaning or symbolic quality that can

be added to their lives and thus can be used to express their self-concept or identity. This symbolic aspect may, in part, be related with university personality.

The link among university personality, university distinctiveness, and university identification

While prior brand personality research may examine the impact of this construct on several dependent measures, the indirect or mediating role of brand distinctiveness in the brand personality-brand identification relationship has not specifically proposed and empirically tested. Nevertheless, such knowledge can help understand what roles university personality plays in building university identification through the elicitation of university distinctiveness. From a managerial perspective, this insight will help determine what actually drives the desired consumer's outcome or how students identify themselves with universities.

As university personality reflects the degree to which students perceive the university as possessing human-like characteristics, for example, being friendly, stable, practical, and warm (Sung & Yang 2008), university personality can therefore be perceived through the interaction between the university and students. For example, student's interaction with faculty members and staff (Sampaio et al 2012) may elicit a perception of specific university personality such as competent, professional, and helpful. Moreover, university personality can also be developed and perceived through its logo, heritage, history, architecture and location (Melawar & Akel 2005) as well as through various marketing communication materials.

Because the management of university personality includes systematic planning and implementation of creating a positive and unique personality of a university, the present study seeks to examine how this perception may lead to student's reactions as university personality can facilitate the differentiation and competitive positioning. As a consequence, thanks to the university effort to build university personality, students may be better at recognizing a focal university's distinctiveness and choosing to identify themselves with the focal university they select in order to express their own personality. For example, Sung & Yang (2008) report that students are more likely to develop supportive attitude of belonging to the university when they evaluate the university personality as favorable and congruent with their personality. This sense of belonging, in turn, leads to a stronger identification with the university. In addition, Polyorat (2011) report that the sincerity and the competence dimensions of university personality have a strong influence of university identification. Furthermore, Huang and Mitchell (2014) report that consumers are able to more easily to identify and connect with a brand with strong personality.

The degree to which a student identifies with a university could be influenced by university distinctiveness which reflects intentional marketing practices of a university to create, manage, and communicate its brand to arrive at a favorable unique identity of the university (cf. So et al 2017). Stephenson and Yerger (2014) report that when the university brand is viewed as distinctive and unique, university identification will be more likely to increase. The importance of university distinctiveness implies that, in building university brand, a university may need to create a unique and clear identity that respond to the desire of potential students. Such a distinct identity may encourage a sustainable and attractive differentiation of its education. Therefore, marketing communication emphasizing the university brand's visibility and

reputation through university personality may increase university distinctiveness and thus university identification.

Therefore, a student who believe a university has a distinctive characteristic is more likely to find it more attractive and are thus more likely to identify him/herself with that university. Based on this line of reasoning, university distinctiveness may act as a mediator in this set of relationship.

On the basis on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are offered:

H1: University personality influences university distinctiveness.

H2: University personality influences university identification.

H3: University distinctiveness mediates the influence of university personality on university identification.

These hypothesized relationships are graphically displayed in Figure 1.

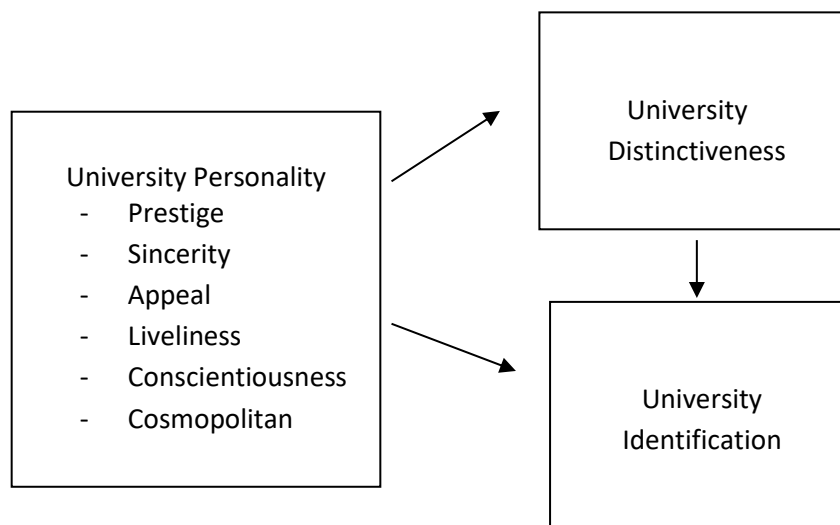


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

Overview

A survey research was conducted to examine the relationships among independent variables (university personality dimensions) and dependent ones (university distinctiveness and university identification). After reliabilities of the measures being used were ascertained, a series of regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses.

Samples

Four hundred and forty-two high school students in northeastern Thailand were approached at various cities via judgmental sampling. The respondents were first informed of the study description, then asked to complete the measures of university personality dimensions, university distinctiveness, and university identification. Finally, the respondents provided their basic personal data at the end.

Measures

University personality was measured with Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens's (2016) 24-item university brand personality scale. The respondents were instructed to think of the focal university (University X) as if it were a person and indicate the extent to which each of the 24 university personality traits describes the focal university brand (1 = not at all descriptive, 5 = very descriptive). "Leading", "friendly", "special", "creative", "organized", and "international" were examples of items used to assess the

dimensions of prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan, respectively.

University distinctiveness was measured with six items adapted from Yoo, Donthu, & Lee (2000). The respondents were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the six items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). "Some characteristics of University X come to mind quickly." and "I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of University X." were examples of the scale items.

University identification was measured with three items adapted from Jones & Kim (2011). The respondents were instructed to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the three items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). "I find it easy to identify with University X." and "University X has a great deal of personal meaning for me as it will help me become a type of student I want to be." were examples of the scale items.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of the variables are displayed in Table 1. All scales exhibited Cronbach's alphas higher than .70, thus suggesting the adequate scale reliabilities (Nunnally 1978). In addition, variation inflation factors (VIF) were all lower than 3 in all three regression models which were well below the recommended cutoff point of 10 (Neter, Wasserman and Kutner 1985), suggesting that multicollinearity was not problematic for interpreting the results from multiple regression analysis.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities

Variables	Means	Standard Deviations	Reliabilities
University Personality			
-Prestige	4.23	.63	.89
-Sincerity	4.04	.65	.88
-Appeal	3.96	.77	.85
-Liveliness	3.94	.71	.87
-Conscientiousness	4.10	.67	.88
-Cosmopolitan	3.86	.74	.84
University distinctiveness	3.78	.84	.90
University identification	3.58	.98	.85

Impact of university personality on university distinctiveness (H1). To test this hypothesis, university distinctiveness was regressed on prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan dimensions of university personality. The multiple regression results are shown in Table 2. The results reveal that

only sincerity ($\beta = .20, t = 3.51, p < .000$) and liveliness ($\beta = .19, t = 2.75, p < .01$) dimensions of university personality influenced university distinctiveness while prestige ($\beta = -.06, t = -.87, p > .1$), appeal ($\beta = .04, t = .64, p > .1$), conscientiousness ($\beta = .08, t = 1.24, p > .1$), and cosmopolitan ($\beta = .06, t = 1.08, p > .1$) did not.

Table 2 Multiple Regression Results

Independent Variables	1. university distinctiveness		2. university identification		3. university identification	
	β	t-value	β	t-value	β	t-value
University Personality						
prestige	-.06	-.87	-.06	-.86	-.02	-.41
sincerity	.20	3.51***	.13	2.39*	.01	.27
appeal	.04	.64	.07	.96	.04	.72
liveliness	.19	2.75**	.24	3.68***	.13	2.49*
conscientiousness	.08	1.24	.08	1.21	.03	.56
cosmopolitan	.06	1.08	.10	1.82	.06	1.46
University distinctiveness	-	-			.61	16.39***

Note:

- *. $p < .05$; **. $p < .01$; ***. $p < .001$ (two-tailed)
- (1): $F(6,435) = 16.60; p < .001; R^2 = .19; \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .18$.
- (2): $F(6,435) = 20.46; p < .001; R^2 = .22; \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .21$.
- (3): $F(7,434) = 66.72; p < .001; R^2 = .52; \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .51$.

Impact of university personality on university identification (H2). To test this hypothesis, university identification was regressed on prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan dimensions of university personality. The multiple regression results are shown in Table 2. The results also reveal that only sincerity ($\beta = .13, t = 2.39, p < .05$) and liveliness ($\beta = .24, t = 3.68, p < .000$) dimensions of university personality influenced university identification while prestige ($\beta = -.06, t = -.86, p > .1$), appeal ($\beta = .07, t = .96, p > .1$), conscientiousness ($\beta = .08, t = 1.21, p > .1$), and cosmopolitan ($\beta = .10, t = 1.82, p > .05$) did not.

Mediating role of university distinctiveness (DIST) on the relationship between university personality dimensions (PERS) and university identification (IDENT) (H3). To test the mediating role of university distinctiveness, a series of regression analyses were run according to Baron and Kenny (1986). First, H1 indicates that the sincerity and the liveliness dimensions of university

personality had significant impacts on university distinctiveness: $PERS \rightarrow DIST$. Second, in a simple regression analysis, university distinctiveness was found to influence university identification ($\beta = .69, t = 20.14, p < .000$): $DIST \rightarrow IDENT$. Third, H2 indicates that the sincerity and the liveliness dimensions of university personality had significant impacts on university identification: $PERS \rightarrow IDENT$. Fourth, to test a mediating role of DIST on PERS-IDENT relationship (H3), university identification was regressed on both university personality dimensions and university identification. The results indicate that beta coefficient of the university personality dimension of sincerity became insignificant ($\beta_{\text{sincerity}} = .01, t = .27, p > .1$) and that of the liveliness dimension became less significant ($\beta_{\text{liveliness}} = .13, t = 2.49, p < .05$) while the beta coefficient of distinctiveness remained strongly significant ($\beta_{\text{DIST}} = .61, t = 16.39, p < .000$), thus suggesting the full mediating role of university distinctiveness on the sincerity dimension and the

partial mediating role of university distinctiveness on the liveliness dimension.

DISCUSSIONS

The study results reveal that the university personality dimensions of sincerity and liveliness have significant influences on university distinctiveness and university identification while the other four dimensions (prestige, appeal, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan) do not. In addition, university distinctiveness appears to mediate the influence of university personality on university identification.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes both theoretical and managerial contributions to the areas of brand personality and university branding. In terms of theoretical implications, the current study suggests that each dimension of university personality may exhibit different influences on consumer behaviors. In this regard, the results of the present study thus imply that university personality should be examined at the dimension, rather than at an aggregate/global level because each dimension may have different importance or relevance for the intended marketing outcomes. Consequently, the present study argues that the focal university personality dimensions of interest need to be specified when conducting a university branding study. The results of this study therefore contribute to the brand personality and the university branding literature by suggesting a more refined antecedent (i.e. dimensions of university personality) of university distinctiveness and university identification.

The significant impact of university personality on university identification revealed in the present study, however, may seem at odds with those reported in Balaji et al's (2016) research where the impact was not significant. A closer comparison between the two studies may shed light on this discrepancy. In Balaji et al's (2016) study, university personality was not a focal construct. In addition, it was measured with only 4 items and the scores from these four items were aggregated to provide a single value. In this sense, university personality was treated as a unidimensional or global construct. In contrast, in the current study, university personality is a focal construct and measured with 24-items, 6-dimensions scale from Rauschnabel et al's (2016) where an aggregated score was calculated for each individual construct without being summated into one overall, global score. Therefore, the lack of significant impact in Balaji et al's (2016) study may, in fact, reinforce our argument that university personality should be examined at the dimension, rather than at an aggregate/global level because each dimension may exhibit different impacts on the marketing outcomes.

Furthermore, the present study extends previous findings in the impact of brand personality on brand identification (eg, Polyorat 2011; Sung & Yang 2008) by proposing and providing empirical support that brand distinctiveness is a mediator in this set of relationship. Therefore, the distinctiveness construct should be paid special attention when brand personality research is conducted.

Finally, Thailand was considered an underrepresented country in international marketing research (Sophonsiri and Polyorat 2009). Therefore, the present study has also contributed to this research area by examining the brand personality construct in Thailand. Future studies may consider replicating and extending the current study by conducting comparable research in other underrepresented countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Timor Leste (Polyorat & Tassanawat 2017).

Managerial Implications

The use of appropriate branding strategies derived from the student behaviors in the higher education is relatively scarce, suggesting the lack of research on the effect of university branding on the intended marketing outcomes. The university management may thus benefit from the results of the present study by devising more effective branding campaigns based on our findings in order to better shape or solicit students' desired responses (Dennis et al 2016).

The present study demonstrates the differential importance of each university personality dimension in eliciting consumer's favorable reaction to the university. Moreover, the present study provides supporting evidence that university distinctiveness is an important component for universities in Thailand. Thus, university distinctiveness is worth considering when a university seeks to increase its competitive advantages as this central construct could drive desirable consumer outcomes such as students' identification with a university brand.

The results of this study also suggest that, to increase the students' favorable response to a university brand, the university management should pay special attention to improve the sincerity-related image as well as the university's liveliness one by drawing from Rauschnabel et al's (2016) framework of university personality. For example, in order to elicit more favorable reactions based on the sincerity personality, the management may try to communicate the humane characteristic of the university. University faculties and staff could be more helpful and friendly to students. In addition, they should also be trustworthy and fair in their practice. In addition, the university management could also benefit from portraying its lively image by, for example, supporting the university sport teams to stimulate the athletic spirit on campus. Further, the university may consider putting more efforts in building the creative and dynamic campus through the modernization of its campus where digital activities are gaining more important roles. In other words, the university marketing efforts may focus on the selected university personality dimensions to make the best use from limited resources (Sophonsiri and Polyorat 2009).

Furthermore, the results of the present study urge university marketing practitioners to be aware of the importance of a university brand identity created by university personality because university personality may influence both university distinctiveness and university identification. In university marketing where various higher educational institutes may provide similar basic functional utility (i.e., education and degrees), the distinctive identities of the university engendered by university personality could be a strategic marketing tool which further leads to university identification. In this sense, the importance of university distinctiveness implies that, in the process of building a university brand, a university may need to create a unique and clear identity through the creation of appropriate university personality. Such a distinct identity may encourage a sustainable and attractive differentiation of its education. Therefore, marketing communication emphasizing the university brand's visibility and reputation should be built based primarily on the sincerity and liveliness dimensions of university personality.

Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Although the present investigation provides some insights into the areas of brand personality and university branding, some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the results of this study were drawn from survey data alone. Future research

should employ other research methods such as in-depth interviews, experiments, and content analysis (e.g, Polyorat 2019; Opoku, Hultman & Saheli-Sangari 2008; Peruta & Shields, 2018) in order to gain a better understanding of the relative influences of each dimension of university personality. Second, the study scope was restricted to a university in Thailand. Hence, the research could not represent all universities. Future research should examine the university personality perception and its influence with respondents from other part of the world. Finally, with the more pronounced role of social media, university personality communicated in various online platforms such as Facebook could be a fruitful area of study (Peruta and Shields 2018).

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