

Investigating Students' Perceptions of their University's Brand

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Abstract: The role of branding in higher education is increasing, as the requirements of the target audience (university stakeholders) are constantly changing. Modern universities have to meet complex needs and expectations. This calls for reviewing branding strategies designed by senior education managers, which are aimed at building and maintaining a strong institutional brand. Brand, being a complex phenomenon, includes various aspects, or “building blocks”. A holistic approach to the development of a marketing strategy (integrating various marketing activities) presupposes that different brand-building elements have to be considered. Through brand responses managers will obtain necessary information about what customers think and feel about the brand. Brand responses can be obtained in the frame of the customer-based brand equity model, through exploring customers' perceptions of a particular brand. The obtained information will later be applied in the agenda of updating branding strategies created by senior education managers. The aim of the study conducted in two higher education institutions of Latvia was to investigate students' perceptions of different aspects of their university's brand from a customer-based brand equity perspective. The paper is based on 1) literature review on branding, including branding in the higher education sector; 2) a survey conducted in two technical universities of Latvia – state (Riga Technical University) and private (Transport and Telecommunication Institute). The results of the empirical study demonstrate that in general, the students of both state and private higher education institution perceive their university's brand similarly; besides, it is of a high importance of every institution brand's service to pay more attention to their students' needs and expectations in order to prove having a highly efficient communication process with the students.

Keywords: brand-building blocks, branding strategy, customer-based brand equity model, higher education.

Introduction

Today, ensuring the quality and competitiveness of education are considered as one of the most topical concerns (Jurgena, Cedere, Katane, 2019). In the context of intensified competition in the global higher education sector, senior educational management must design effective marketing strategies aimed at creating a trustworthy university brand based on high quality of educational services and programmes (Roskosa, Stukalina, 2019). The increased competition for students and academic staff makes universities to focus on branding in higher education (Hemsley-Brown, Oplatka, 2006; Hemsley-Brown, Goonawardana, 2007; Woyo, Obert, Frank, 2014; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). The role of branding in higher education is growing, as the requirements of the university stakeholders are continuously changing. Contemporary universities are becoming more concerned with the requirements and expectations of their stakeholders, which results in enhanced marketing orientation (Hall, Witek, 2015). In this context, it is necessary to build and sustain positive relationships with applicants and students, as primary stakeholders (or “customers”) in the higher education sector. Students are regarded as the most interested party concerning educational outcomes, as they will determine their competitiveness in the global labour market (Roskosa, Stukalina, 2018). So, the way prospective students select and assess a higher education institution and their attitude towards the university's brand deserve close attention of higher education managers.

According to K.L. Keller (2009), marketing managers are now using more diverse marketing communication options and models. One of the brand-equity models aimed at better understanding of the role of marketing communications is the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (Keller, 2001; Keller, 2008), which presumes that brand equity is basically determined by the “brand knowledge” that is generated in consumers' memory through different marketing activities (Keller, 2009). Brand, being a complex phenomenon, includes various aspects, or “building blocks”. A holistic approach to developing a marketing strategy (integrating various marketing activities) presupposes that different brand-building elements have to be considered. Through brand responses managers will obtain necessary

information about what customers think and feel about the brand, which in turn, will be used for interpreting and evaluating marketing activities aimed at building a strong institutional brand. Brand responses can be obtained in the frame of the above customer-based brand equity model, through exploring customers' perceptions of a particular brand. The obtained information will later be applied in the agenda of revising and updating branding strategies created by senior education managers.

The aim of the study conducted in two higher education institutions of Latvia was to investigate students' perceptions of different aspects of their university's brand from a customer-based brand equity perspective.

Methodology and theoretical framework

The paper is based on 1) the analysis of research papers on branding, including branding in the higher education sector; 2) a survey conducted in two higher education institutions of Latvia – Riga Technical University (RTU) and Transport and Telecommunication Institute (TSI). The research population involves 125 RTU students and 126 TSI students of the following programmes: Transport and Engineering, Economics and Management, and IT.

An original questionnaire was developed by the authors on the basis of the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model proposed by K.L. Keller (2001; 2007; 2008; 2009). According to K.L. Keller (2007), from a customer-based brand equity viewpoint, marketing communications activities may contribute to brand equity in a variety of ways. This can be done through creating awareness of the brand, connecting the right associations to the brand image in consumers' minds, stimulating positive brand judgments or feelings, as well as enabling a long-lasting "consumer-brand connection" (Keller, 2009); these elements represent main brand-building blocks (Keller, 2001).

The questionnaire was designed around the five (out of six) brand-building blocks integrated in the CBBE model – brand performance, brand imagery, consumer judgements (quality, credibility, consideration and superiority of the brand), consumer feelings and consumer brand resonance (loyalty and attachment, community, engagement). The sixth element (brand salience – the first phase of building brand equity) was excluded from the questionnaire; because it was accepted by default that the students are aware of the brand, and the extent to which the brand is recognized is quite large. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the students' opinions on their university's brand with regard to the above brand-building blocks. This information is supposed to be later used by marketing managers for their brand tracking and assessing their brand-building efforts in the agenda of updating their marketing strategy.

The questionnaire includes twenty multiple-choice questions. The obtained data were then processed using SPSS software package.

Results and Discussion

Literature review

The literature review results indicate that many researchers recognize the importance of discussing the use of market-oriented approach in higher education (Hemsley-Brown, Oplatka, 2006; Stensaker, D'Andrea, 2007; Shattock, 2009; Woyo, Obert, Frank, 2014; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Mihajlovic, Ljubenović, Milosavljević, 2016). A marketing strategy of the university is developed based on the analysis of current trends in the international higher education market (Białoń, 2015; Wu, Naidoo, 2016; Muhcina, Moraru, 2016; Stukalina, 2019).

The research performed by H. Hall and L. Witek (2015) goes to prove that the importance of marketing in higher education is growing; this is associated with the changing stakeholders, and calls for reconsidering marketing strategies and tools to be applied in this sector. According to Ph. Kotler and K. Fox (1995), the main university stakeholders today include current and potential students, alumni, staff, community, government agencies and accreditation bodies. In this context, universities develop and promote their brands to evoke positive associations with different stakeholder groups, prospective and current students being regarded as its primary "customers". The changing global environment has transformed the way higher education stakeholders choose and evaluate a university, their behaviours and attitudes, and their perception of educational quality (Lo, 2014).

The brand status “matters” to its stakeholders (Williams, Omar, 2014), so positive brand image may directly influence consumer behaviour. Developing a robust brand is a goal of many organizations (Keller, 2001). A strong brand can confirm the university’s credibility in the global education market (Kotler, Keller, 2016).

In higher education, branding is linked with institutional image and reputation based on a constructed brand, so strong promotion and communication towards potential students (aimed at increasing enrolment) is now regarded as one of the most important marketing activities in a university (Nicolescu, 2009). Brand being a complex phenomenon, brand elements may come in many different forms (Kotler, Keller, 2012); the same holds for business enterprises and higher education institutions. There are different brand aspects that constitute the brand: brand identity; brand meaning, brand responses, brand relationships (Keller, 2001). Brand identity is associated with uniqueness of a particular brand, which is then communicated with all stakeholders (Tarnovskaya, 2017). So, appropriate brand identity presupposes building brand salience, which results in the stakeholders’ ability to recognize this brand – that is brand awareness (Keller, 2001).

Brand meaning is composed of two types of brand associations – brand performance (tangible brand attributes aimed at meeting some functional needs) and imagery (intangible brand attributes); brand responses (emotional reactions) are associated with what stakeholders (customers) “think and feel” about a particular brand; ultimate brand relationships refer to the consumers’ level of identification with this brand (Keller, 2001).

According to the Customer-Based Brand Equity model, the process of developing a strong institutional brand is associated with the four above aspects; a sequence of steps, through which active loyalty relationship between consumers and the brand is accomplished, are listed below:

- creating appropriate brand identity;
- building appropriate brand meaning;
- stimulating right brand responses;
- developing strong relationship between customers and the brand.

The elements integrated in the Customer-Based Brand Equity model are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Elements integrated in the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (based on Keller, 2001)

Brand aspects	Brand-building blocks	
Brand identity	Brand salience	
Brand meaning	Brand performance	Brand imagery
Brand responses	Consumer judgements	Consumer feelings
Brand relationships	Consumer brand resonance	

The above model can be very helpful in the agenda of planning and implementing a marketing strategy, as it puts emphasis on appealing to both rational and emotional concerns; rational concerns meet practical needs while emotional concerns meet psychological needs (Keller, 2001). So, the model provides a holistic approach to understanding the brand. It can be used for interpreting and evaluating marketing activities aimed at building a strong institutional brand (Keller, 2001). Accepting such key conceptual tool as customer-based brand equity model and the related brand resonance pyramid can help marketers understand marketing communications from diverse perspectives, and design and implement more impactful communication programs in the frame of a competitive marketing strategy (Keller, 2009). The CBBE model seems to be quite flexible for applying it in various situations. However, some customization is recommended (Keller, 2001).

Analysis of the empirical study results

The empirical research was aimed at exploring students’ perceptions of their university’s brand based on the CBBE model. The research findings are presented in Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Figure 1 shows the students’ perceptions of their brand’s performance. According to the first criterion – this brand is unique in terms of educational programmes and services compared to other universities in Latvia – the data of the research prove that, in general, students of RTU and TSI express a quite similar opinion agreeing that the brand of their university and its programmes and services in comparison with other universities in Latvia are unique. Most of students of TSI and RTU answer positively: 71,4 % (TSI)

and 65,6 % (RTU). However, it should be noted that there are rather many students in both institutions who do not have a strong opinion: 29,6 % of RTU and 23% of TSI students neither agree nor disagree with this statement. The number of students who disagree with this statement is small in both groups: 5,6 % (TSI), and 4,8 % (RTU). The reason why students are of a high opinion of their university brand could be explained by the students' motivation and expectations to choose the most qualitative and professional institution for their studies both in terms of its programmes and services. Therefore, most of students consider the brand of their university to be unique.

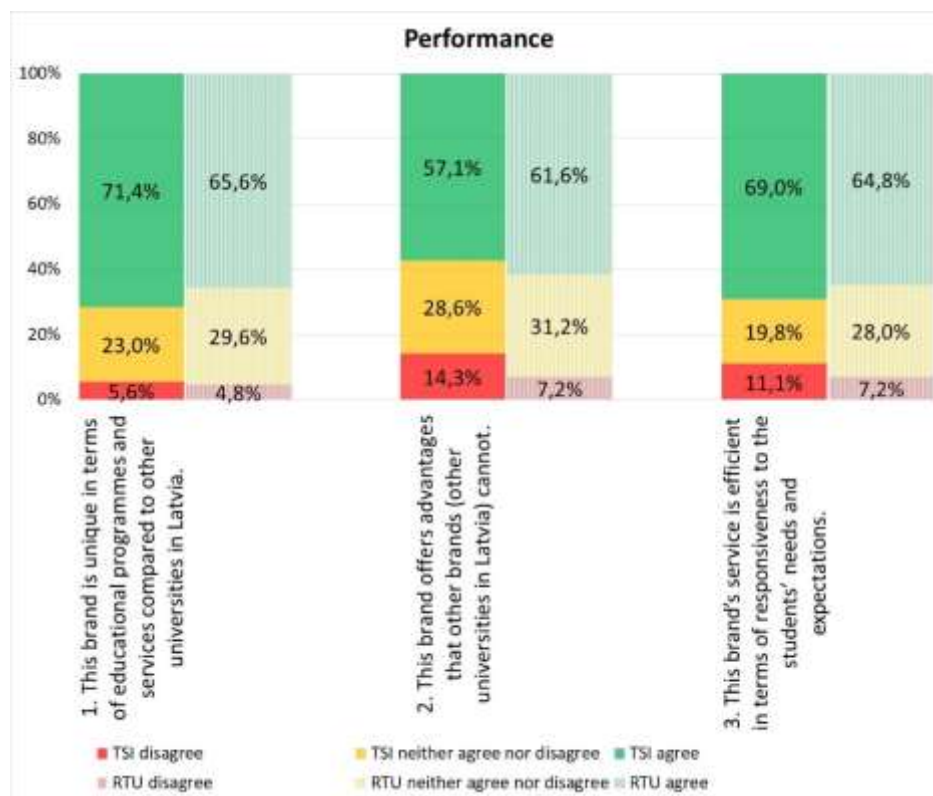


Figure 1. Students' perceptions of their brand's performance.

The second criterion – this brand offers advantages that other brands (other universities in Latvia) cannot. The students' point of view is also similar. Most of RTU (61,6 %) and TSI (57,1 %) students believe that their university brand has such quality. However, 28,6 % of TSI students and 31,2 % of RTU students neither approve nor disapprove this statement. The number of students who disagree with this statement is a little higher among TSI students – 14,3 %. The amount of RTU students expressing a negative opinion is 7,2 %. The cause why RTU students think a little more positively could be explained by the wider range of study programmes RTU can offer for its students compared to other universities.

The third criterion showing the performance of the university was as follows: this brand's service is efficient in terms of responsiveness to the students' needs and expectations. Most of TSI students (69,0 %) and RTU students (64,8 %) agree positively with this statement. However, there are more students belonging to RTU who neither agree nor disagree with this answer – 28,0 %. There are also 19,8 % of TSI students who do not have a strong opinion. The number of students who disagree with this statement is more characteristic for TSI students (11,1 %). Students of RTU having a negative answer make 7,2 %. The recommendation for both institutions could be to be more responsive and pay more attention to students' needs and expectations to prove having a highly efficient service.

Another aspect characterizing the brand of the university was judgements (Figure 2). There were three criteria taken into account to describe these judgements. The first criterion was the following: the providers of this brand's service are knowledgeable and helpful. The students of TSI assess the providers of their institute brand's service a little more positively in comparison with the students of RTU – 81,0 % and 69,6 %. However, it is important to admit that a larger number of RTU students do not have a strong opinion about this statement. If there are only 11,9 % of TSI students who neither agree nor disagree with

this statement, then the number of RTU students is higher - 25,6 %. Moreover, 7,1 % of TSI students and 4,8 % of RTU students disagree that the providers of their institution brand's service are knowledgeable and helpful. The results of the research prove that it is of a high importance of every institution brand's service to have a professional and positive communication process with its students. The number of students who are in doubt or evaluate the knowledge and help of their institution service negatively is still high therefore the universities have to take actions to improve the situation.

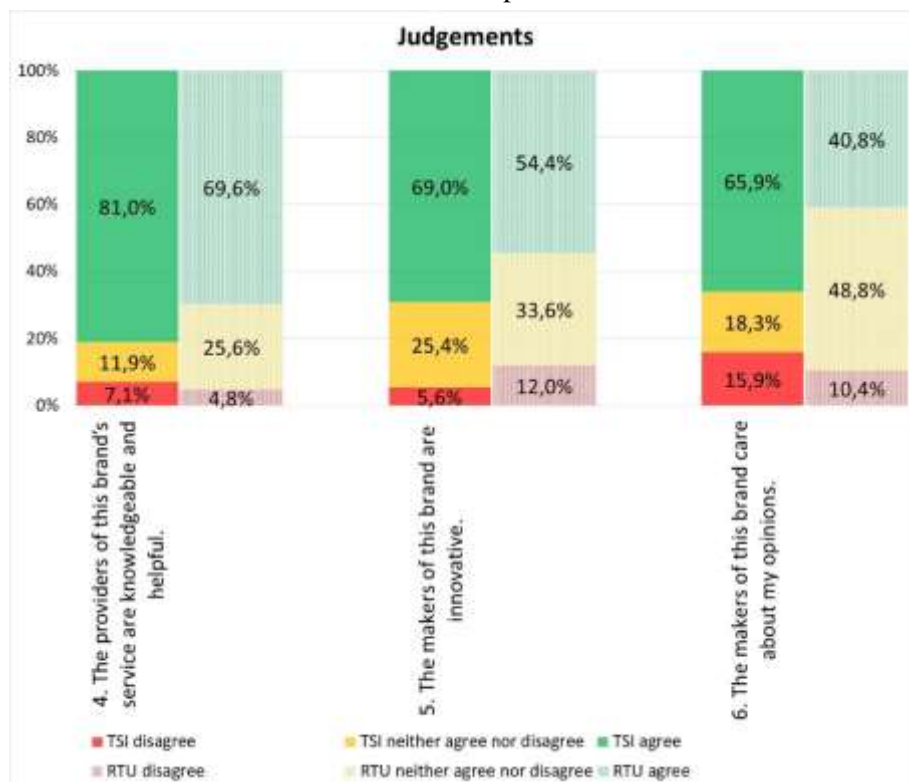


Figure 2. Brand judgements - customers' personal opinions.

The second criterion characterizing the judgements is dealing with a statement if the makers of this brand are innovative. The students of TSI evaluate their institute brand makers in a more positive way. 69,0 % of them agree with this statement. Accordingly, the students of RTU are a little less positive – 54,4 %. Moreover, many RTU students cannot decide if their neither agree nor disagree with this statement – 33,6 %. TSI students having such opinion are less – 25,4 %. There are also more students of RTU who disagree with this statement in comparison with TSI students – 12,0 % and 5,6 %. Innovations include different spheres – not only technologies but also creativity of the institution and its teaching staff, learning, social and psychological environment of the institution and many others. All these spheres have to be considered to be important and equal in their contribution. The data of the research prove that this criterion is one of the most significant to pay attention to. An assessment of students is more negative and uncertain as positive.

One more criterion which expresses the attitude of the brand makers of the institution to their students is as follows – “the makers of this brand care of my opinions.” The students of RTU are more critical about their university brand makers. Only 40,8 % agree with this statement. TSI students are more positive – 65,9 %. The number of RTU students who neither agree nor disagree with this statement is also very high – 48,8 %. Whereas, there are only 18,3 % students of TSI who belong to this group and do not have a strong opinion. However, the number of students who disagree with this statement is higher for TSI students – 15,9 %. Accordingly, the number of students of RTU expressing disagreement is a little smaller – 10,4 %. The data of the research prove that many students, especially students of RTU, are of opinion that their point of view are not taken into account by the makers of the brand of their institution. Students are a big and important part of the university. University and students have common goals. They can achieve them only in the united cooperation and communication process. Therefore, students' opinion is of a high importance.

The other aspect dealing with the brand of the university is an imagery of it (Figure 3). This aspect includes four most important criteria. The first one describes the design of the brand – if the design aspects of this brand are attractive and memorable. Most of TSI students evaluate positively the design of their institution – 77 %. RTU students are more critical – a favourable assessment of their university design is given by 64,8 % of students. Moreover, there are also more students of RTU who neither agree nor disagree about this statement – 27,2 %. Students of TSI could be characterized to be stronger in their opinion – only 17,5 % of them have chosen the answer – “I neither agree nor disagree with this statement.” The number of students who disagree with this statement is also higher for RTU students – 8,0 %. There are only 5,6 % of TSI students who have a negative opinion about the design of their institute brand. The design of the brand includes the message and motto of the institution. It may make people be interested, indifferent or taken dislike to it. The design has a symbolic meaning. The institutions have to be aware of the importance what kind of message is being transferred by the design of their brand.

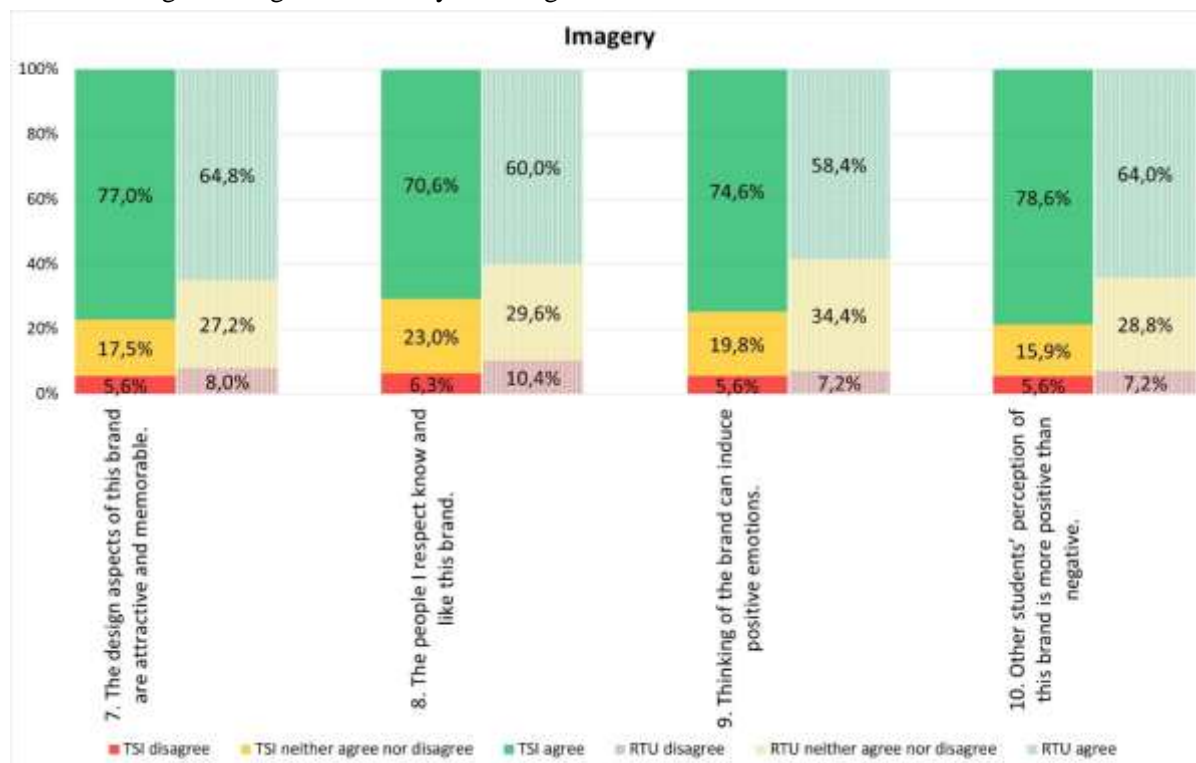


Figure 3. Brand imagery from the students' point of view.

Another criterion which shows the imagery of the brand is the following – “if the people I respect know and like this brand.” TSI students in comparison with RTU students express a little stronger agreement with this statement – 70,6 % and 60,0 %. Moreover, RTU students still keep a little more critical approach to this statement – 29,6 % of them neither agree nor disagree if the people they respect know and like this brand. A little less TSI students - 23,0 % express the same opinion. Students who show a disagreement with this statement also tend to belong to RTU – 10,4 %. The number of TSI students disagreeing with this statement is relatively small – 6,3 %. The data of the research prove that a rather high number of students belonging to both institutions - TSI and RTU do not have a strong opinion if the people students respect know and like the brand of their institution. It may be that these people could not be well informed about the brand of these institutions. The recommendation is to improve the marketing strategies of RTU and TSI.

One more criterion characterizing the imagery of the brand is as follows – “if other students' perception of this brand is more positive than negative.” Most of TSI students agree with this statement – 78,6 %. The students of RTU are less positive – 64,0 %. There are also more RTU students who neither agree nor disagree with this statement – 28,8 % in comparison with TSI students who make 15,9 %. The number of students who disagree with the statement is relatively small for both institutions – RTU – 7,2 % and TSI – 5,6 %. The data shows that most of students of TSI and RTU think that other students' perception of this brand tends to

be more positive, however, a quite large group of RTU students do not have a strong opinion or they are not certain about other students' perception. There are many students at RTU and there are many opinions.

The imagery of the university is also closely connected with the next criterion – if thinking of the brand can induce positive emotions. Most of TSI students express a positive agreement – 74,6 %, whereas RTU students are more critical – 58,4 %. There are also more students belonging to RTU who neither agree nor disagree with the statement – 34,4 %. TSI students who do not have a strong opinion are much less – 19,8 %. Only 7,2 % of RTU students and 5,6 % of TSI students disagree with the statement. The data of research prove that students of RTU are more critical about the imagery of their university brand.

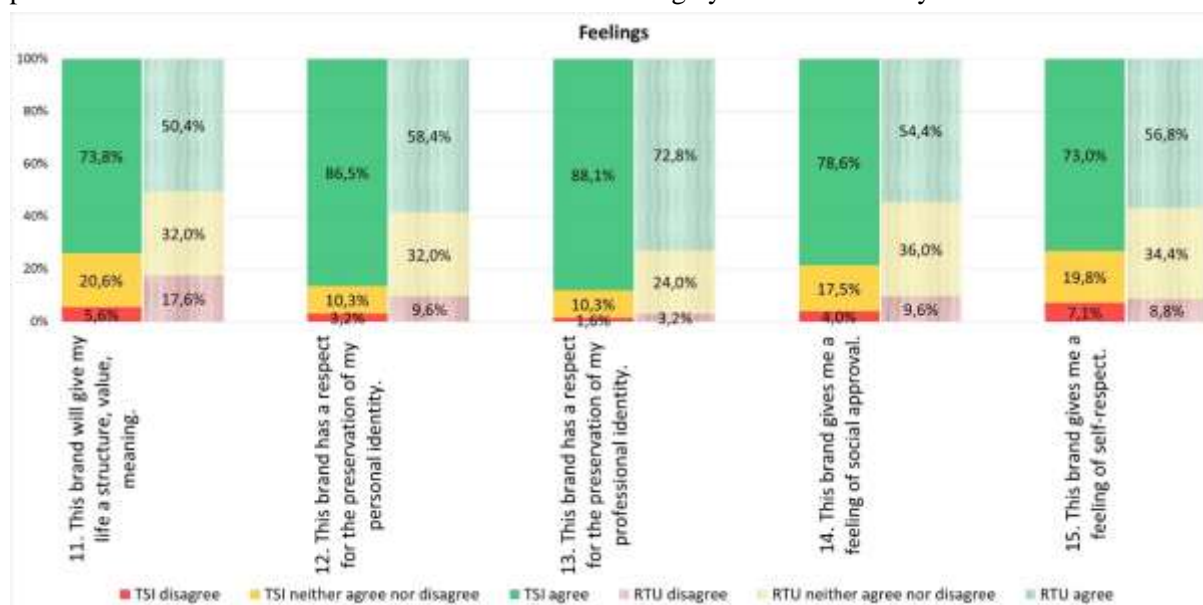


Figure 4. Feelings that the students have about the brand.

An important aspect connected with the brand of the university is feelings the students have towards their institution (Figure 4). There were four criteria developed to research students' feelings. The first one was the following – “if this brand gives my life a structure, value, meaning.” TSI students are more certain about this feeling – 73,8 % of them agree with this statement. Students of RTU still keep their critical approach – only 50,4 % gave a positive answer. The students who neither agree nor disagree with this statement are also more at RTU – 32 %. The students of TSI who do not have a strong opinion are less – 20,6 %. There are also more students belonging to RTU who disagree with the statement – 17,6 %, whereas only 5,6 % students of TSI have a negative answer. The data prove that students of RTU are less certain if their university gives their life a structure, value, meaning. The qualities mentioned in this criterion – to have a structure of life, value, meaning is more connected with students' personal life and their personality. The data show that the personal life of RTU students may be less connected with their studies at university. The university should develop strategies how to connect the students' personal aims with their professional aims. Both personal and professional sphere are very important spheres in every person's life. They should be connected.

Another criterion characterizing students' feeling about their university is as follows – “if this brand has a respect for the preservation of my personal identity.” The opinion of both groups researched considerably differs – 86,5 % of TSI students and only 58,4 % of RTU students agree with this statement. Moreover, only 10,3 % of TSI students and 32 % of RTU students neither agree nor disagree with this statement. The ones who disagree with this statement also more belong to RTU group – 9,6 % and 3,2 % to TSI group. The data confirm the above-mentioned fact – for a large group of RTU students' their personal life and personality stay apart from their university. Students do not feel a respect of their university towards their personal identity. It could be explained with the intense and hard efforts students have to make to succeed in their studies. The criterion showing students' feelings about their professional life at the university is the following – “this brand has a respect for the preservation of my professional identity.” Most of students of both institutions have given a positive answer – 88,1 % of TSI students and 72,8 % of RTU students agree with the statement. However, there were more students of RTU who

neither agree nor disagree with the statement – 24 %. Students of TSI not having a strong opinion were less – 10,3 %. The number of students who disagree with the statement was small in both groups – 1,6 % of TSI students and 3,2 % of RTU students. The data prove that most of students of both groups are satisfied with the preservation of their professional identity. The aim of the universities and the aim of the students is the same – to develop professionally.

The last criterion characterizing the feelings of students is as follows – “this brand gives me a feeling of social approval.” The data show the difference in students’ opinion. Most of TSI students feel socially approved – 78,6 %, whereas only 54,4 % of RTU have the same feeling. Moreover, 36 % of RTU students express neither agreement nor disagreement with this statement. Besides, 9,6 % of RTU students and 4 % of TSI students show disagreement with this statement. The data prove that RTU students feel less socially approved than TSI students. It could be explained by the more competitive atmosphere at the state university, whereas the environment at the private university is more supportive and encouraging.

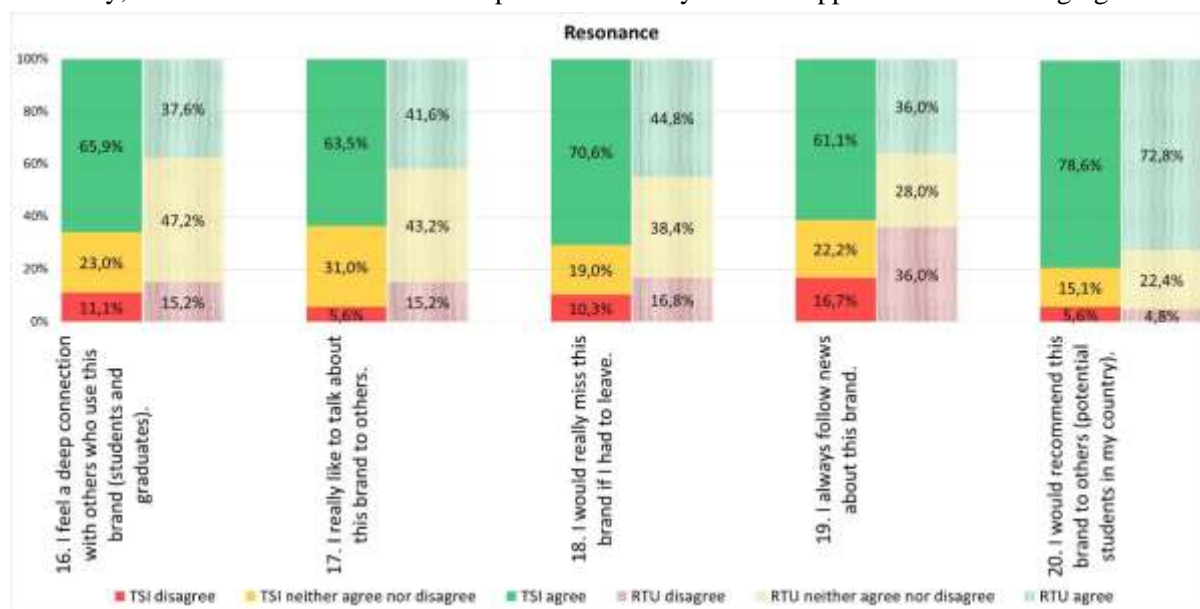


Figure 5. Relationship between the students and the brand.

Resonance (relationship between the students and the brand) was the last aspect the students had to express characterizing the brand of their university (Figure 5). The first criterion students had to follow was to think if they feel a deep connection with others who use this brand (students and graduates). 65,9 % of TSI students and only 37,6 % of RTU students answered positively. There were also a high percentage of RTU students who neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement – 47,2 %. The number of TSI students who did not have a strong opinion was smaller – 23 %. The students who disagreed with the statement were more among RTU students – 15,2 %, whereas, those students of TSI who gave a negative answer were less – 11,1 %. The data show that RTU students are less united with other members of their university in comparison with TSI students. It could be explained by the status of the university. RTU is one of the largest universities in Latvia. The number of students is high. The aims, motivation and background of students are different. The demands of the university are high. Therefore, the competition keeps developing. In such circumstances students tend to be more concentrated on their individual needs and aims. As a result, their connection with other members of the university is getting weaker. The recommendation for the university is to develop the strategies to make a stronger bond among students, the teaching staff and graduates.

The other criterion students had to take into consideration was as follows: “I really like to talk about this brand to others”. 63,5 % of TSI students and only 41,6 % of RTU students have answered positively. The number of students who neither agree nor disagree with the statement is also rather high – 43,2 % of RTU students and 31,0 % of TSI students. The ones who disagree with the statement are 15,2 % among RTU students and 5,6 % among TSI students. When people speak about something, they may have a positive attitude or also a negative one. However, there is one more kind of attitude – neutral. A neutral attitude is quite often expressed without words. The data prove that students, especially RTU students have a tendency to be neutral or indifferent and do not like to talk about their university.

One of the last criteria showing students' attitude towards the brand of their university was the following – "I would miss this brand if I had to leave". Most of TSI students – 70,6 % and much less of RTU students – 44,8 % agreed with this statement. There were also more RTU students who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement – 38,4 %. Students of TSI not having a strong opinion were less – 19 %, whereas, those ones who disagreed with the statement were 10,3 % among TSI students and 16,8 % among RTU students. The data prove that RTU students are less united with their university in comparison with TSI students. It could be explained that many of RTU students start working already at early years of their studies. They devote more time and make strong efforts to succeed in their professional career. Therefore, their unity with the university gets weaker. The last criterion characterizing the resonance of the university is connected with news: "I always follow the news about this brand". 61,1 % of TSI students and only 36% of RTU students agree with this statement. The number of students who neither agree nor disagree with the statement are quite similar among both groups of students – 28,0 % of RTU students and 22,2 % of TSI students had such opinion. However, there are many more students of RTU who disagree with this statement – 36 %. The number of TSI students expressing disagreement is smaller – 16,7 %. The data prove that students are quite honest in their answers, especially RTU students. Studies and work take a lot of time from students' life. But the news change and develop very fast. It is almost impossible always follow them.

Conclusions

The theoretical literature analysis and the empirical research performed by the authors have allowed to drawing the following conclusions.

- A brand is made of a set of perceptions associated with the main brand-building blocks; these perceptions create the relationships between consumers and the brand.
- Marketing directly influence consumers' perceptions; for improving brand perceptions, marketers can use various tools and models including the CBBE model that may be customized to serve different purposes.
- In the higher education sector, the CBBE model can be applied by senior education managers for measuring their brand-building efforts in the agenda of enhancing their marketing communications and improving their marketing strategy.
- The results of the empirical study demonstrate that in general, the students of both state and private higher education institution perceive their university's brand similarly
- Most of students consider the brand of their university to be unique both in terms of its programmes and services.
- It is of a high importance of every institution brand's service to be more responsive and pay more attention to their students' needs and expectations in order to prove having a highly efficient communication process with the students.
- Students' opinion is of a high importance to reach the goals, which are common for both – students and universities.
- Innovation is insufficient and could be developed for the brand of the institutions.
- The institutions have to be aware of the importance of the message, which is being transferred by the design of their brand.
- The universities should develop strategies how to connect students' personal aims with their professional aims showing a respect towards students' personal identity.
- Universities and students have the same aim – to develop professionally.
- Universities should develop the strategies to make a stronger bond among students, the teaching staff and graduates.
- However, there are some differences between how students of the state and private universities assess their brands; there is one very important fact that merits mention – the data proves that students of the state university (RTU) are more critical about the brand of their university in all aspects having researched – performance, judgements, imagery, feelings and resonance. It conveys the suggestion that the private university puts more emphasis on enhancing their marketing communications in the agenda of creating a strong institutional brand.

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