BRANDING HIGHER EDUCATION AND PERCEIVED RISK: QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE FROM THE GULF COUNTRIES (GCS)

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Abstract :-

Purpose

The mental intangibility of the higher education service is the most important feature that results in high-perceived risk associated with its choice. Hence, enhancing and communicating the brand value is the best strategy to decrease the mentally perceived risk for the higher education institution. This indicates that branding is a source of reassurance to students about the quality of what they will receive. Based on the literature review of marketing in higher education it was clear that a strong brand plays a major role in influencing the higher education institution choice. However, there is a limited literature review that investigates branding in higher education in emerging markets from a conceptual and empirical perspective. The purpose of this research is to identify the branding aspects that apply to higher education branding and its role in minimizing the perceived risk associated with the choice of the education service. The empirical setting is the Gulf Countries, which has a mixture of public and private universities.

Research Methodology

The methodology used to guide the research is based on exploratory qualitative research approach composed of 50 in-depth interviews with students from five Gulf countries. The sample is selected from five countries in the Middle East namely, Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Bahrain. The adopted qualitative approach is based on inductive logic to help reveal the main criteria influencing the perception of Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) brands.

Findings and Empirical Recommendations

The in-depth interviews respondents' believe that the main determinant of the higher education institution's brand is the demand and perception of the labour market to its graduates. Findings indicate that internationalisation, accreditation and quality in terms of experiential learning are the key elements that influences the perception of the brand in the Gulf Higher Education competitive market.

Based on the literature review and the conducted exploratory study, adopting comprehensive branding strategy is one of the new trends in the higher education market in the Gulf Countries. It was clear from the exploratory study that IHEIs should focus on using the "International Exposure" image to uniquely identify their institutions and positioning in the higher education market. In addition, educators should focus on delivering a high quality education based on experiential learning that provides learning experience relevant to current and future needs of the labour market. Recommendations are provided to decision makers in HEIs in order to develop their educational services and enhance their institutions' brand image.

Keywords - Services Branding, Higher Education Service, Islamic Higher Education, Emerging Islamic market, Stakeholders' Brand Perception

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