

Impact of Internal Branding on Student Engagement: Insights from a South African University

O'bidie Rudo Maunze^a, Russell Abratt^{b,c} and Michela Mingione^d

^a University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa;

^b School of Business, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA;

^c GIBS Business School, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa;

^d Department of Management and Law, University of Rome, Rome, Italy

*Correspondence to: T Russell Abratt. School of Business, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030, USA; GIBS Business School, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa. Email: rabratt@gmu.edu

Abstract

This study explores how internal branding affects the levels of engagement with the brand by HEI students. The research setting for this study was the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, (Wits) a leading Commonwealth University in South Africa. Most studies on internal brand focus on employees and have been conducted in the developed world. This study focuses on students as the stakeholder and takes place in an emerging market. Assembling internal branding and student engagement from a theoretical perspective, the findings run counter to the known theory by showing that students can be engaged and loyal to the institution without the University having a formal internal branding program. The lack of internal branding had no impact on academic commitment but has a negative impact on brand engagement. Some reasons for this are suggested.

Keywords

Internal Branding; Brand Engagement; Student engagement; Higher Education; South Africa

Introduction

Literature on internal branding suggests the internal market as being the interface between an organization and its stakeholders (Dean et al., 2016). Piehler et al. (2018) suggest the importance and relevance of brand management focused on internal stakeholders; the inside-out perspective. Studies of internal branding within higher education institutions (HEIs) have,

predominantly, been conducted with respect to employees (Judson et al., 2008; King & Grace, 2008; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Yu et al., 2018). Our study has significance in that its focus is on students, giving a wider view of the impact on internal branding. There is scant research on the influence of internal branding on student engagement within HEIs. As McAlexander et al. (2006) assert, a university is an institution that offers a wide array of products and services to an equally wide range of consumers through many outlets and service providers under the auspices of its brand. One study by Dholakia (2017) did incorporate academic, administrative staff and students. Studies on internal branding within HEIs have predominantly been carried out with respect to institutions in more developed parts of the world. This research contributes to the literature on internal branding within a developing country, South Africa, and helps fill a gap by focusing on students.

According to Drapińska (2012), students are, no doubt, the most important university stakeholders. Students are the most obvious and direct stakeholders in a HEI (Marshall, 2018), and form a unique relationship with their educational institution as they perform multiple roles; they are consumers of the educational service, are customers through their monetary transactions with the institution and may go on to support the institution financially or non-financially after they graduate (Yang et al., 2008). Education is an experiential service, requiring the active involvement of both the unique service provider (higher education brand/university) and the consumer (student), with continuous contact between them and the awarding of a degree to the student as the successful outcome of the service encounter (Iskhakova et al., 2017; Khanna et al., 2014). As such, students can be viewed as both consumers and products of education. It is important to recognize students as customers as that determines the service the university gives them and has a bearing on success in the competitive higher education marketplace (Bowden, 2011; Guilbault, 2018, 2016).

Branding, a practice no longer exclusive to corporate, for-profit sectors, becomes one of the strategies used by HEIs to differentiate themselves, to obtain the resources and capital needed to exist and survive in the increasingly competitive environment, to enhance reputation and to positively influence the university's rankings (Dixit & Sharma, 2018; Frandsen et al., 2018; Langa & Zavale, 2018). It is important to note that corporate branding is not only about differentiation, but also about belonging. In the university context, the awarding of a degree offers a life-long membership to the institution, and provides a student with a sense of brand identification even after the graduation (Dixit & Sharma, 2018).

In order to remain as relevant social institutions, HEIs need to communicate their values to the public (Papadimitriou & Ramírez, 2018). Furthermore, decreasing state funding, increasing competition for students and steep competition for research grants require that HEIs relook the way they portray themselves to various stakeholders (Huisman & Mampaey, 2018). Through branding, HEIs are able to enhance their perceived value and competitive standing by providing a tool that helps them differentiate their offering and tell a compelling story to invested stakeholders. The objective of this study is to explore how internal branding affects the levels of engagement with the brand by HEI students. The study took place at University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits), in South Africa.

This article continues by placing this research in the context of the literature on social identity and organizational identification theories, internal branding and student engagement. It then proceeds with the methodology employed, the findings and discussion, and concludes with recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Literature review

The social identity and organisational identification theories

This research draws on social identity, and organizational identification theories. The concept of social identity consists of those aspects of an individual's self-image that emanate from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging, with people tending to classify themselves into various social categories e.g. organizational membership (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). A specific form of social identity is that of organizational identity, where individuals define themselves in terms of their membership in a particular organization and have a feeling of belonging and oneness with it – there is a perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization's successes and failures as one's own (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Myers et al. (2016) state the overall implications of an individual's social identity for the organization with which they develop identification i.e. a development of organizational identification due to an alignment with the values and mission of the organization as well as their feelings of similarity and belongingness. Ashforth and Mael (1989) posit how likely it is that identification with an organization enhances support for, and commitment to it, with reasonable expectations that identification would be associated with loyalty to, and pride in, the group and its activities.

Internal branding

Developing the brand from the inside out is particularly important for service organizations (such as HEIs) which normally face the challenge of developing the brand for an intangible and complex offering (Judson et al., 2006). It is said that the single most powerful asset of an organization is its brand equity, with several internal company processes synchronized in order to create an external manifestation in the form of a brand – the stronger the synergy between the internal processes, the higher the chance of the brand getting stronger (Khan, 2009). Internal branding is entrenched in the need for meaningful engagement of all stakeholders, a requirement in creating sustainable futures, which requires a closer than arm's length relationship that enables conversations and interactions that can influence company decisions (Matiatou, 2018). Internal branding also requires in-depth analysis to understand how organizations build their image internally before selling it externally – the brand must be meaningful to both the internal and external audience of an organization (Langa & Zavale, 2018).

Internal activities seek to promote the brands inside an organization for the purpose of ensuring that its internal audiences accept the value that the organization's brand represents and transform it into a reality when serving customers (Liu et al., 2015). Therefore, internal branding or internal brand management, also referred to by some authors as a sub-set of internal marketing, is a multi-disciplinary, holistic and barrier-breaking practice which harmonizes bits into a whole and bridges business strategy and its implementation. It is seen as a key factor to developing, strengthening and maintaining an organization's brand and ensuring the business and brand success (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Du Preez et al., 2017; Mahnert & Torres, 2007; Porricelli et al., 2014; Raj & Jyothi, 2011).

In the university context, internal branding has been defined as a formal program of engaging internal constituents in a dialogue about the brand-development process resulting in their willingness to apply the practice of identity-building (Guzmán et al., 2009). Saleem and Iglesias (2016, p. 50), after an extensive review of the literature and noting various

definitions that are fragmented, and in some cases, divergent, offered their definition as: “the process through which organizations make a company-wide effort within a supportive culture to integrate brand ideologies, leadership, human resource management, internal brand communications and internal brand communities as a strategy to enable employees to *consistently co-create brand value with multiple stakeholders*”

Student engagement

HEIs are facing urgent calls for increasing student success and a high-quality educational experience (Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). Student engagement takes many forms and operates on multiple levels (cognitive, affective and behavioral), both in and out of the classroom (Groccia, 2018). It is a multidimensional concept that is typically used to refer to students’ degree of involvement, connectedness and commitment to school as well as their motivation to learn (Rangvid, 2018). It is also used to refer to so many different things that it is difficult to know what people actually mean by the term – it comes out as being ambiguous (Groccia, 2018). One definition of student engagement is that of a complex multi-dimensional construct incorporating three aspects, behavioral engagement, affective or emotional engagement and cognitive engagement (Di Battista et al., 2014; Groccia, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018; Rangvid, 2018).

It is also defined as the time and effort students devote to activities linked to desired outcomes of undergraduate education with increases in student engagement believed to contribute to greater student success (Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017); as the attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students exhibit during learning or being taught, as well as the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (Groccia, 2018); is that of a relationship in which all parties are actively involved in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together (Pittaway, 2016); and as the time and effort students spend on academic activities and other educationally purposeful activities (Strydom & Loots, 2018).

Student engagement may be looked at from an academic perspective. Academic student engagement refers to students’ active participation and taking responsibility for their own learning, and includes the effort they invest in their studies, the time they spend studying, the degree of interest in their courses and the adoption of good study habits (Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017). Dean and Jolly (2012) explicate that student engagement occurs when students accept a level of identity-based risk and are willing to experience the positive or negative emotional outcomes associated with learning. Wilkins et al. (2016) also consider student engagement from an academic perspective, explaining a few key points, for example, how learning is intertwined with social identification with students arriving at university with an academic self-concept (perception of their own academic competence); and how student commitment, achievement and satisfaction are generally interlinked. These three aspects are akin to student engagement.

Evidence suggests that engagement increases students’ retention, encourages successful transition, enhances performance, refines curricula, enriches the student and the staff experience, meets equality objectives, establishes civic engagement, and improves the way that universities operate (Carey, 2018; Di Battista et al., 2014; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Furthermore, engaged students demonstrate more effort, feel more positive emotions, and show more interest in their classrooms compared with their less engaged peers (Di Battista et al., 2014).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used to obtain a first-hand description of student experiences, and glean insights and understanding from them in a single case study. A case study approach was felt to be the most appropriate methodological approach. Gummesson (1991) argued that case studies are able to offer a holistic view of a management issue, and are most appropriate when examining eclectic areas such as internal branding and student engagement. He also suggests that it is a useful strategy for studying processes in organizations and for explanatory/exploratory investigations. A qualitative approach was assumed for this study since our objectives were to portray, interpret, decipher, and otherwise determine the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world (Van Maanen, 1988). The effectiveness of case study research where it has been explanatory in nature has been made by a number of leading scholars (Eisenhardt, 1989; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Easton, 2003; Gummesson, 1991, 2003, 2005).

The case site for this research was the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa (<https://www.wits.ac.za/>). This university was selected, based on convenience (de Heer & Tandoh-Offin, 2015); One of the researchers works at Wits University and has access to students and also has insights into the university culture which could be useful during data interpretation (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018).

Wits is a public university in South Africa, having been established in 1922. It is ranked 230 globally, and second in South Africa, by the Center for World University Rankings. In 2018 Wits had 38 353 students, 64% of whom are undergraduates, 35% postgraduates and 1% occasional students; over 4500 staff (25% academic, 75% administrative/non-academic); and over 160,000 alumni since 1922 (Wits 2018).

The sample population was selected using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2009). After defining the sample criteria purposefully for students by taking factors such as race, gender, degree of study, year of study, and whether they live on campus or not, the final respondents were selected. The sample size consisted of 12 undergraduate and postgraduate students, a size deemed acceptable in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006). The Demographic profile of respondents is shown in Table 1.

A discussion document was used to steer the interviews in order to avoid imposing preconceptions upon respondents. Although this was used to direct the discussion, respondents were also requested to expand upon ideas and concepts as they deemed fit (Chapleo, 2010). Questions at the beginning of the interview were broad and general and as the interview progressed, questions began telescoping to become more focused. First, in order to establish the existence of internal branding practices, the following attributes were explored: Knowledge of the Wits values; knowledge and/or participation in Wits traditions; the receiving of brand-related training; receiving brand-related information on Wits history, traditions, vision, mission; the communication content received by students; communication and feedback by students to Wits; the content and effectiveness of the orientation or First Year Experience Program; the existence of a postgraduate orientation program; relationship building with students; and students' feelings of being valued or appreciated by Wits. Second, to investigate employee engagement, the following indicators were investigated: Academic commitment; the Wits experience; satisfaction with the Wits experience; institutional commitment; volunteerism behaviors toward Wits versus other organizations; loyalty through maintaining Wits ties; and loyalty through Wits-branded merchandise.

Table 1. Respondent Profile.

CODE NAME	DEGREE PROGRAM	FACULTY	YEAR/S OF STUDY	TOTAL YEARS @WITS	AGE RANGE	GENDER	RES OR NON-RES STUDENT
UG1	BSc Aeronautical Engineering	Engineering	1	1	18-20	M	Residence
UG2	BA General	Humanities	2	3	20-25	M	Non-residence
UG3	MBBCh	Health Sciences	5	5	20-25	M	Non-residence
UG4	BSc Actuarial Science	Science	2	2	20-25	F	Residence
UG5	Law (LLB) Honors	Commerce, Law & Management	2	5	20-25	F	Non-residence
UG6	BA PPE	Humanities	2	2	20-25	F	Residence
PG1	PhD in Condensed Matter Physics	Science	2	9	25-30	M	Non-residence
PG2	Masters in Chemical Eng.	Engineering	2	9	25-30	M	Non-residence
PG3	MSc in Clinical Microbiology	Health Sciences	4	10	25-30	M	Non-residence
PG4	Masters in Commerce	Commerce, Law & Management	1	5	20-25	F	Non-residence
PG5	Masters in International Relations	Humanities	2	6	25-30	F	Non-residence
PG6	Masters in Geosciences	Science	2	6	20-25	F	Residence

Initial contact to make the participation request, introduce the topic and provide the background and purpose of the intended research was through email, telephone or in person. All respondents were informed of the average time expected for each interview, that is, between 30 – 60 minutes. Lastly, permissions for an audio recording were requested. Notes were also taken during each interview. The qualitative data was then quantified through a thematic analysis, continually reviewing and merging categories assuring their mutual exclusivity (Wastyn, 2009). The researchers also consulted internal documents, and the university's website in order for triangulation to take place.

Findings

Existence of internal branding practices

Knowledge of the values and knowledge/participation in traditions

All 12 respondents were oblivious of the Wits values, with five offering guesses as to what the Wits values could be. Suppositions of the Wits values included nondiscriminatory, welcoming, strive for excellence, integrity equality, conscientious learning, community, transformation, success and academic leadership. While most of the respondents simply said “no” to the knowledge of the Wits values, one responded to say ‘I can tell you the values of the constitution... The only thing I know about Wits (in this context) is that Wits gives you the edge’, and another said ‘I had no idea Wits had values’. Eight of the 12 students (four are undergraduates and four postgraduates) knew or participated in Wits traditions, with four of the respondents having no knowledge of them. Of those who knew the traditions, four of them credited residence life to knowing or participating in these traditions.

Receiving Brand-related training and Brand-related information

All of the respondents reported receiving no brand-related training during their time at Wits, with a standard response of “No”. Only three of the respondents, two undergraduates, and one postgraduate expanded on their responses as follows:

“Maybe in 1st year but nothing impactful that I can recall”.

“No, not even in res and that would be the one place where they would probably tell you”.

“No. I know that Wits gives you the edge”.

Eleven of the respondents, all six undergraduates and five postgraduates, reported that they had not received any brand-related information from Wits, with one respondent, a postgraduate student, reporting that they had received some info though from non-official sources. One of the responses included the following:

“Its first year and then also over the years like it will come from different people also from either your seniors (senior students) or just lecturers or even some of these...not inaugural lectures... it will come through the Wits space even through that at least that much comes *in*”.

The communication content to students and communication and feedback by students

The communication received by all 12 respondents, predominantly through email, did not contain brand-related information. Furthermore, six of the respondents, three undergraduates and three postgraduates, reported how they did not always read their emails. A sample response was:

“Through emails it will be they have some inaugural lectures; guest lectures or just research stuff. And then the part where you owe them they will remind you to pay your fees and then if someone at Wits did well in something like they won something/achieved something then they also send. It’s mostly emails and those are the kind of things they send. Or if there are incidents or bad things or security issues and stuff and the rest...”

Five of the respondents, two undergraduates and three postgraduates, indicated feeding back and communication with Wits through surveys. The other seven respondents, four undergraduates and three postgraduates, indicated not communicating with Wits, with two of these undergraduate respondents indicating the perceived futility of such an exercise. Two responses were:

“I once did a survey. 1st or 2nd year I think. About my experience and how I was finding Wits. But I and Wits aren’t as close”.

“I do actually. I make a specific point to try to give feedback on appraising courses and how things work just because I suppose it’s the right thing to do. At the time you can arguably be heard. And I believe you can...it’s kind of like voting to sort of bypass the bystander effect”.

The content and effectiveness of an orientation program (first year and post-graduate)

Three of the 12 respondents (two of them undergraduates) were not exposed to an orientation or the First Year Experience program (FYE). The other nine respondents exposed to the programs found little value in them except for helping find your way around campus; or found it overwhelming with too much information shared. As such, the FYE or orientation programs were quite ineffective for all respondents. Sample responses on the FYE or orientation programs were:

“I wouldn’t say it did. Showed me where the computer labs are. I can’t say it did much for me I would be lying. There isn’t a significant thing I can point to you and say okay Wits First year experience did that for me”.

“I wouldn’t say so. I think the programme actually was a bit overwhelming. So I think it is a great thing to do because it does...like I went on tours and stuff through Wits and it does help you a little bit. But that first week is going to be overwhelming no matter what. I don’t think there is anything that Wits could do to better. That was part of orientation week? It did not particularly help integrate me into Wits at all”.

All six postgraduate student respondents reported Wits as not having a postgraduate orientation program. Two of their responses were:

“No, nothing like that. And I feel like...I have seen it now being a postgrad for some time it’s absolutely necessary especially in terms of research. Telling masters students once you are *starting out what is required*”.

“Yes, our department we did. It was different from other years but we still had an induction of what it means to be there and some expectations even things as simple as writing CVs we also had to equip us for when we were looking for work so that was also good”.

Relationship building with students

Only two respondents, both undergraduate students, reported some sort of relationship building efforts, though they credited those to residence life. The remaining 10 respondents reported no relationship building efforts at all by Wits University.

Two of their responses were:

“Outside of res I think it’s mostly with our tutors and our lecturers. Like our maths tutors I think they are postgraduate students they get to us on a personal basis like teaching us in class they actually give us their numbers and communicate with us if we ever have a problem we contact them directly. So it goes beyond academics. And also some of the lecturers they communicate with us via email about exams or stuff on like”.

“No, I don’t think it’s there. I also don’t personally know a lot of people outside let’s say my school then my faculty then it’s everyone is just sort of doing their own thing I think. As far as management, no. There isn’t a lot of reaching out to at that level unless you are in trouble or you are doing well. Yes those are the only times you hear from some of these people”.

Nine of the respondents, five undergraduates and four postgraduates, did not feel valued or appreciated by Wits. Furthermore, three of these respondents, one an undergraduate and two at postgraduate level, indicated that they were not expecting to be valued or appreciated by Wits. Four of the respondents – two undergraduates and two postgraduates, brought up the issue of there being many people at Wits University which would make them feel valued or appreciated improbable. The remaining three students, one undergraduate and two postgraduates, felt some sort of value or appreciation of them by Wits.

Two of the responses were:

“I don’t really think so. Because there’s many students here as well you don’t actually feel important or valued from the rest of them. You don’t feel like you are any more important than or you are valued more than the others”.

“When I was doing well I felt very much valued and then... I think funding was more accessible, like I said first year I was a research assistant and I primarily got that because I was doing well. They were like you know what we can’t let you go so let’s give you some funds.”

The level of student engagement

Academic commitment

With the exception of one undergraduate student who has a low commitment level to their studies, the other 11 respondents showed a very high commitment level. Two responses were:

“Very committed. I spend a minimum of 8 hours a day working”.

“I am very committed - that’s the only thing I have. Mostly I get to school, study and go. I am there to study, learn and go. Most of the time I am in the library”.

Overall, there is a high level of academic commitment by the students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, with one (an undergraduate student) who has low academic commitment based on the wrong program choice.

The Wits experience by students

The Wits experience was analyzed through a summary of the overall Wits experience, which included a variety of experiences. Nine of the respondents, five postgraduates and four undergraduates, reported a good Wits experience overall, with three respondents (two undergraduates and one postgraduate) reporting a fair experience.

Academically, all respondents reported a challenging and/or stressful experience. Regarding the social experience, five respondents reported a good social experience. Four of the respondents were residence students, three of whom are undergraduates and credited the good social experience to residence life, further listing a mix of positives associated with residence life, with the fourth respondent, a postgraduate student, reporting a good social life through friends. The non-residence student, a postgraduate, credited a good social experience to Wits’ proximity to Braamfontein, an area with good entertainment and restaurants. The remaining seven respondents who are nonresident students, three undergraduates and four postgraduates, reported a lack of a social life.

The majority of respondents, five undergraduates and four postgraduates, explained that they were part of a club, sport or society, with one undergraduate and two postgraduates stating that they were not. Five respondents reported high school to varsity transition challenges – two undergraduates and three postgraduates. These transition challenges included a more challenging academic life, the sheer number of people at the university or trying to strike a balance while in first year.

The issue of departmental silos came out as a negative regarding the Wits experience, with two respondents, both of them postgraduates, making note of this. One said “But it doesn’t happen often enough to see what other faculties are doing - you kind of stick to your own faculty and there is no real coalition with anyone else”, while another expressed “There is a lot of high walls of people sticking to their own. For example, we don’t know what is happening in mining engineering, yet we should be working closely together”.

Another key finding was of how the Wits experience at first year showed respondents a different picture of who they thought they were – akin to being “humbled” by the experience, for example, not feeling special or not feeling as smart as they thought they were. Seven of the respondents, four in undergraduate and three postgraduates, had a view regarding this aspect of “being humbled” by Wits University.

Regarding the overall Wits experience, nine respondents, four undergraduates and five postgraduates reported a good experience, with three respondents, two undergraduates and one postgraduate, reporting a fair/middle ground experience rating. There were no reports of an overall bad experience by any of the student respondents.

One student said:

“Varsity not easy like high school, a lot more to do and more academically challenging. Wits will show you that there is stuff out there more powerful than you. You don’t feel more important or more valued than the others. No free time when studying engineering. No time to be part of any social clubs or societies because of school and socialising with friends. There is a lot of academic work to be done in a short time. Social experience through res life and friends. Academic help, social events, assistance during exams for stress relief and relaxation through res life. Overall experience was good. I have definitely enjoyed it”.

Satisfaction with the experience

The overall satisfaction ratings were generally positive. Nine respondents, five of them undergraduates and four of them postgraduates indicated that they were satisfied or highly satisfied, while the remaining three respondents – one undergraduate and two postgraduates, scoring their satisfaction as fair. One of the prevailing reasons for satisfaction with the Wits experience was that of growth and independence while at the institution, with eight respondents, five of them undergraduates and three postgraduates, noting this.

Two respondents said:

“I’m happy with it. You face a lot more challenges and new challenges and being able to overcome that makes you feel good about yourself”.

“Mixed – yes for academic preparation and excellence; no for admin issues (financial aid office). Wits has made me grow up - it is where I grew from a teenager to a young adult and dealt with life’s issues”.

Institutional commitment

Eight respondents, five undergraduates and three postgraduates, are not committed to the institution, with four respondents, one undergraduate and three postgraduates being committed. Furthermore, those not committed to the institution explained their commitment as being toward their school or res, or to the ultimate goal of getting their degree.

A sample of the responses were:

“To Wits as in to the university? Yes. Or to just getting my degree? To the university. I think quite committed too. I came here for a degree and I am not going to leave without it”.

“6/10. Once again res life that had a huge impact on my commitment to Wits and the programme and the people and just helping other people predominantly first years”.

Volunteerism behaviors toward wits versus other organizations

Regarding volunteerism behaviors, it was a 50/50 split between those who volunteer at Wits and those who do not. It was another 50/50 split in terms of the undergraduate/postgraduate mix of those who volunteer or do not. One of the respondents, a postgraduate student, indicated that they were not aware of any volunteerism opportunities at Wits. When it comes to volunteering outside of Wits, three undergraduates and four postgraduates, indicated that they do, five respondents indicating that they do not.

Loyalty through maintaining ties

Eleven of the 12 respondents indicated their loyalty to Wits through a willingness to maintain ties with the institution in one way or the other, with one respondent, a postgraduate student, indicating that it was time to leave. One respondent – an undergraduate student would like to maintain ties but feels it is time for change of scenery when the time comes to do a Master's degree.

Respondent responses were:

“No, I don't have any. To make me leave would have to be something personal to me like the equity issue because like the political situation is what I came here for I wouldn't study politics anywhere else. I don't think like any family situations or stuff I would drop my studies for; if my parents were leaving the country I would just say bye”.

“I am interested in academia so I think this year I have enjoyed so many aspects well obviously not all aspects but a lot of aspects of academia. So I can see myself returning and becoming a lecturer here but it is obviously dependant because I haven't really experienced corporate. It's dependant on my experience next year”.

Loyalty through branded merchandise

Eight of the respondents, a 50/50 split between undergraduate and postgraduate students, wear Wits branded merchandise. Two of the respondents mentioned the expensive nature of the merchandise in the Wits Shop. The remaining four do not – two of them are not averse to the idea of wearing Wits branded merchandise but the other two would rather not wear it.

Responses include the following:

“I have only got my student card. Only this year for the first time I have bought the law school jacket. I think that it's expensive ...its more for people who are employed so because the prices are not exactly suitable to students if that makes sense”.

“Yes I do wear my Wits jersey only when I go to school because outside people ask you questions which I am not in the mood to answer most of the time. So I know at least when I am close to Wits everybody knows I am going to school or yes I am studying.”

Discussion

The findings show that there is a lack of a formal internal branding program but this does not impact negatively on academic engagement of the students. Eleven out of the 12 student participants exhibited these traits related to academic engagement, with one undergraduate student suggesting that he did not enjoy their program of choice, a factor which added to the academic struggles and challenges and the low rating toward academic commitment. However, overall, the majority of the students exhibited a very high level of academic commitment as per the standard definitions. (Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017).

Overall, the majority of students reported a good experience. There were no overall negative ratings of the Wits experience. Shah and Richardson (2016) make clear the student experience as being an enriched learning one which includes the student's transition from school to university, campus life, engagement with staff, interaction with other students and

extracurricular activities. These aspects were apparent in the descriptions of the student experience by the respondents.

The study results indicated a stark absence of relationship building efforts with the students, attributed to the absence of internal branding practices. The literature suggests the importance of relationships and dialogue with students (Guilbault, 2016; Guzmán et al., 2009). Although some aspects of brand engagement were negative in light of the absence of internal branding practices, the results for some of the aspects were still positive. For example, all students, bar one, indicated their loyalty to Wits through a willingness to maintain ties with the institution in one way or the other. The results of this study are contrary to those by Bowden (2011) who found that student loyalty was most strongly determined by psychological attachment and a sense of belonging to the brand. In particular, the study results show that loyalty was not affected by a sense of belonging because seven of the eight students who showed no sense of belonging to Wits still showed loyalty toward it. Wearing branded merchandise, or displaying is a sign of loyalty. However, only eight of the 12 respondents showed loyalty through branded wear, giving mixed results in terms of brand engagement.

The study findings indicated differences for undergraduate and postgraduate students. The findings show that a lack of internal branding may have a negative impact on brand engagement by mostly undergraduate students, with five out of six showing no institutional commitment or a sense of belonging to Wits. However, results for postgraduate students showed that the majority – four out of six - showed both a high sense of institutional commitment and sense of belonging to Wits. Brand engagement by students, particularly undergraduate students, may be low because of a reported low sense of belonging to the institution. Tinto (2017) elucidates how development of a sense of academic and social belonging early on in first year has positive spin-offs on other forms of engagement. Therefore, a low sense of belonging could explain the lack of engagement by the students (particularly undergraduates). The differing results between postgraduate and undergraduate students could be that postgraduates, by virtue of having selected to study at the institution would be less likely to have a lowered sense of belonging as undergraduates would and thereby likely to have a more positive attitude regarding the institution.

The students seem to be engaged in some aspects, for example, in academics and loyalty, while engaging negatively in other parts, for example in institutional commitment – a student engagement complexity mentioned by Groccia (2018). According to Groccia (2018), it is quite possible for one to be positively engaged along one or more dimensions, but negatively engaged along others.

Draپیńska (2012) posits that a university should endeavor to reduce the sense of alienation and disorientation of new students as well as facilitating student interactions in order to generate positive emotions and raise satisfaction levels. Draپیńska (2012) goes on to assert that the level of student integration into the university and involvement in its life affects the quality of the student-university relationship. Further, Bowden (2011) states strong and engaging relationships in the higher-education industry seem to be driven more by the quality of psychological and emotional bonds. These assertions apply to the majority of the undergraduate student respondents – the lack of a sense of belonging to the institution could be attributed to weak emotional bonds and to a failure by the University to reduce undergraduate students' sense of alienation and disorientation. Our study results showed that there was either no FYE program or it was ineffective at best, which could have also

contributed to the lack of a sense of belonging, especially by undergraduate students for which the FYE program is intended to benefit.

The study by Wilkins et al. (2016) supported the hypothesis that organizational identification influences the attitudes and behavior of higher education students. Their study results align with our study results since the low organizational identification especially by undergraduate students seemed to influence their attitude toward the university, with some negative or mixed attitudes being exhibited.

Conclusions

The study concluded that there were no formal internal branding practices in existence. This had no influence on academic engagement of the students, and hardly any impact on their willingness to maintain ties with the institution. However, there is a negative impact on brand engagement, predominantly for undergraduate students, possibly due to the lack of a sense of belonging or organizational identification, again exhibited more in undergraduate rather than postgraduate students. In addition, social identification is related mostly to friends, or their residence, by undergraduate students, or the school and faculty by postgraduate students, and not to the institution. Lastly, social exchange based on reciprocity also had an impact on brand engagement, as observed in some negative or mixed attitudes exhibited toward the institution and how they correspond with low institutional commitment. Postgraduate students show a more positive attitude toward the university than undergraduate students who gravitated toward being negative, though the reciprocal nature of the relationship prevented attitudes from being overly negative.

Although student engagement is unaffected by the absence of an internal branding program, the depressed brand engagement levels by Wits students, particularly undergraduate students, should be worrying to university management. The relationship between students and their university ought to be developed from the time they enroll in first year and nurtured until they graduate. A positive student experience is highlighted in the literature as a significant antecedent to engagement, to the development and strengthening of organizational identity, and to the development of loyalty and positive attitudes toward the HEIs. Student engagement, through the student experience, which ultimately leads to brand engagement, would therefore be possible through the implementation of well-structured internal branding strategies and activities that lead to strong relationships between the university and students. Done correctly, further down the line as alumni, engaged students would likely be willing to be involved with their alma mater.

Recommendations for university management

For students, especially, undergraduates, the recommendation is that they be exposed to an excellent student experience. High school to university transition challenges, including the reduction of their sense of alienation is to have a sustained program to ease students into university life. In order to enhance the experience for non-residence students, a program similar to that experienced in residences is recommended. Furthermore there should be a more structured First Year Experience program that is part of the curriculum, based on the fact that the majority of the students found the current program ineffective. A positive student experience would be possible through the implementation of robust internal branding strategies and activities.

For postgraduates, an orientation program which is all-encompassing for all postgraduates and not just at school or faculty level is recommended. Generally, the assumption seems to be that postgraduates originate from that particular institution but the reality is that some postgraduates also originate from a different institution. As such, a program akin to the First Year Experience for undergraduates would be highly recommended for postgraduate students. This would be an opportune time to induct postgraduates into a different level of university life, to orientate those that are from other institutions and to start brand-related communications and activities important in building identification and eventually, brand engagement.

Limitations and future research

A study of this nature has some limitations. Although case study research may be generalizable, our findings should be used to formulate propositions or hypotheses for further research. Our case site, the University of the Witwatersrand, is a typical Commonwealth university, and studies could be conducted in other Commonwealth universities in both developing and developed countries. Our study was explanatory, so further research using quantitative techniques may reveal further insights into internal branding and student engagement.

References

- Ahmed, P. K., & Rafiq, M. (2003). Internal marketing issues and challenges. *European Journal of Marketing*, 37(9), 1177–1186. doi:10.1108/03090560310498813
- Almarghani, E. M., & Mijatovic, I. (2017). Factors affecting student engagement in HEIs – it is all about good teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(8), 940–956. doi:10.1080/13562517.2017.
- Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20–39. doi:10.2307/258189
- Bowden, J. L.-H. (2011). Engaging the student as a customer: A relationship marketing approach. *Marketing Education Review*, 21(3), 211–228. doi:10.2753/MER1052-8008210302
- Carey, P. (2018). The impact of institutional culture, policy and process on student engagement in university decision-making. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 22(1), 11–18. doi:10.1080/13603108.2016.1168754
- Chapleo, C. (2010). What defines “successful” university brands? *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 23(2), 169–183. doi:10.1108/09513551011022519
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.
- Dean, D., Arroyo-Gamez, R. E., Punjaisri, K., & Pich, C. (2016). Internal brand co-creation: The experiential brand meaning cycle in higher education. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8), 3041–3048. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.019
- Dean, K., & Jolly, J. P. (2012). Student identity, disengagement, and learning. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 11(2), 228–243. doi:10.5465/amle.2009.0081

- Dholakia, R. R. (2017). Internal stakeholders' claims on branding a state university. *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 38(4), 226–238. doi:10.1080/15332969.2017.1363580
- de Heer, F., & Tandoh-Offin, P. (2015). Exploring the benefits of branding universities: A developing country perspective. *IUP Journal of Brand Management*, 12(4), 58–71.
- Di Battista, S., Pivetti, M., & Berti, C. (2014). Engagement in the university context: Exploring the role of a sense of justice and social identification. *Social Psychology of Education*, 17(3), 471–490. doi:10.1007/s11218-014-9255-9
- Dixit, A., & Sharma, K. (2018). A study identifying factors affecting branding of management institutes in Madhya Pradesh. *International Journal of Advances in Management and Economics*, 6(3), 1–10.
- Drafińska, A. (2012). A concept of student relationship management in higher education. *Transactions of the Institute of Aviation*, 6(227), 35–49. doi:10.5604/05096669.1076706
- Du Preez, R., Bendixen, M., & Abratt, R. (2017). The behavioral consequences of internal brand management among frontline employees. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 26(3), 251–261. doi:10.1108/JPBM-09-2016-1325
- Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., & Lowe, A. (2002). *Management research*. Sage.
- Easton, G. (2003). One case study is enough. *Academy of marketing annual conference*. Aston University.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532–550. doi:10.2307/258557
- Frandsen, S., Gotsi, M., Johnston, A., Whittle, A., Frenkel, S., & Spicer, A. (2018). Faculty responses to business school branding: a discursive approach. *European Journal of Marketing*, 52(5/6), 1128–1153. doi:10.1108/EJM-11-2016-0628
- Groccia, J. E. (2018). What is student engagement? *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2018(154), 11–20. doi:10.1002/tl.20287
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. doi:10.1177/1525822X05279903
- Guilbault, M. (2016). Students as customers in higher education: Reframing the debate. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 26(2), 132–142. doi:10.1080/08841241.2016.1245234
- Guilbault, M. (2018). Students as customers in higher education: The (controversial) debate needs to end. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 40, 295–298. doi:10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.03.006
- Gummesson, E. (1991). *Qualitative Methods in Management Research*. Sage Publications. Newbury Park, California.
- Gummesson, E. (2005). Qualitative research in marketing. Road-map for a wilderness of complexity and unpredictability. *European Journal of Marketing*, 39(3/4), 309–327. doi:10.1108/03090560510581791

- Gummesson, E. (2003). All research is interpretive! *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 18(6/7), 482–492. doi:10.1108/08858620310492365
- Guzmán, F., Abimbola, T., & Whisman, R. (2009). Internal branding: A university's most valuable intangible asset. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 18(5), 367–370. doi:10.1108/10610420910981846
- Huisman, J., & Mampaey, J. (2018). Use your imagination: What UK universities want you to think of them. *Oxford Review of Education*, 44(4), 425–440. doi:10.1080/03054985.2017.1421154
- Iskhakova, L., Hoffmann, S., & Hilbert, A. (2017). Alumni loyalty: Systematic literature review. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, 29(3), 274–316. doi:10.1080/10495142.2017.1326352
- Judson, K. M., Aurand, T. W., Gorchels, L., & Gordon, G. L. (2008). Building a university brand from within: University administrators' perspectives of internal branding. *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 30(1), 54–68. doi:10.1080/15332960802467722
- Judson, K. M., Gorchels, L., & Aurand, T. W. (2006). Building a university brand from within: A comparison of coaches' perspectives of internal branding. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 16(1), 97–114. doi:10.1300/J050v16n01_05
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71. doi:10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197
- Khan, B. M. (2009). Internal branding: Aligning human capital strategy with brand strategy. *ICFAI Journal of Brand Management*, 6(2), 22–36.
- Khanna, M., Jacob, I., & Yadav, N. (2014). Identifying and analyzing touchpoints for building a higher education brand. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 24(1), 122–143. doi:10.1080/08841241.2014.920460
- King, C., & Grace, D. (2008). Internal branding: Exploring the employee's perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 15(5), 358–372. doi:10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550136
- Kinzie, J., & Hurtado, S. S. (2017). Taking advantage of student engagement results in student affairs. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2017(159), 35–46. doi:10.1002/ss.20225
- Langa, P. V., & Zavale, N. C. (2018). Branding and the search for competitive advantage in the field of mozambican higher education through the use of websites. In *Competition in higher education branding and marketing* (pp. 107–142). Springer.
- Liu, G., Chapleo, C., Ko, W. W., & Ngugi, I. K. (2015). The role of internal branding in nonprofit brand management: An empirical investigation. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 44(2), 319–339. doi:10.1177/0899764013511303
- Löhndorf, B., & Diamantopoulos, A. (2014). Internal branding: Social identity and social exchange perspectives on turning employees into brand champions. *Journal of Service Research*, 17(3), 310–325. doi:10.1177/1094670514522098
- Mahnert, K. F., & Torres, A. M. (2007). The brand inside: The factors of failure and success in internal branding. *Irish Marketing Review*, 19(1/2), 54–63.

- Marshall, S. J. (2018). Internal and external stakeholders in higher education. In S. J. Marshall (ed.) *Shaping the university of the future* (pp. 77–102). Springer.
- Matiatou, M. (2018). Internal branding as innovation tenet: A transformational paradigm shift. In M. Khosrow-Pour (Ed.) *Enhancing knowledge discovery and innovation in the digital era* (pp. 287–312). IGI Global.
- McAlexander, J. H., Koenig, H. F., & Schouten, J. W. (2006). Building relationships of brand community in higher education: A strategic framework for university advancement. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 6(2), 107–118. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150015
- Myers, K. K., Davis, C. W., Schreuder, E. R., & Seibold, D. R. (2016). Organizational identification: A mixed methods study exploring students' relationship with their university. *Communication Quarterly*, 64(2), 210–231. doi:10.1080/01463373.2015.1103285
- Nguyen, T. D., Cannata, M., & Miller, J. (2018). Understanding student behavioral engagement: Importance of student interaction with peers and teachers. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 111(2), 163–174. doi:10.1080/00220671.2016.1220359
- Papadimitriou, A., & Blanco Ramírez, G. B. (2018). Conclusions and reflections on branding and marketing in higher education. In Papadimitriou A. (ed) *Competition in higher education branding and marketing* (pp. 239–247). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: Springer.
- Piehler, R., Grace, D., & Burmann, C. (2018). Internal brand management: Introduction to the special issue and directions for future research. *Journal of Brand Management*, 25(3), 197–201. doi:10.1057/s41262-018-0096-2
- Pittaway, S. (2016). Engaging students, shaping services: The changing face of student engagement at the hive. *Insights the UKSG Journal*, 29(3), 249–257. doi:10.1629/uksg.315
- Porricelli, M. S., Yurova, Y., Abratt, R., & Bendixen, M. (2014). Antecedents of brand citizenship behavior in retailing. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 21(5), 745–752. doi:10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.06.002
- Raj, A. B., & Jyothi, P. (2011). Internal branding: Exploring the employee perspective. *Journal of Economic Development, Management, IT, Finance, and Marketing*, 3(2), 1–27.
- Rangvid, B. S. (2018). Student engagement in inclusive classrooms. *Education Economics*, 26(3), 266–219. doi:10.1080/09645292.2018.1426733
- Saleem, F. Z., & Iglesias, O. (2016). Mapping the domain of the fragmented field of internal branding. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 25(1), 43–57. doi:10.1108/JPBM-11-2014-0751
- Schmidt, H. J., & Baumgarth, C. (2018). Strengthening internal brand equity with brand ambassador programs: Development and testing of a success factor model. *Journal of Brand Management*, 25(3), 250–265. doi:10.1057/s41262-018-0101-9
- Shah, M., & Richardson, J. T. (2016). Is the enhancement of student experience a strategic priority in Australian universities? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35(2), 352–364. doi:10.1080/07294360.2015.1087385
- Strydom, F., Loots, S. (2018). *Understanding students: A key to systemic success*. Retrieved May 2, 2018, from http://www.usaf.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Understanding-students_WEB.pdf

- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. in *Political Psychology: Key Readings* eds J. Sidanius and J. T. Jost (New York, NY: Psychology Press), 276–293.
- Tinto, V. (2017). Reflections on student persistence. *Student Success*, 8(2), 1–8.
doi:10.5204/ssj.v8i2.376
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wastyn, M. L. (2009). Why alumni don't give: A qualitative study of what motivates non-donors to higher education. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 9(2), 96–108.
doi:10.1057/ijea.2009.31
- Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Kratochvil, D., & Balakrishnan, M. S. (2016). The effects of social identification and organizational identification on student commitment, achievement and satisfaction in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(12), 2232–2252.
doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1034258
- Wits. (2018). Wits facts and figures. Retrieved March 28, 2019, from <https://www.wits.ac.za/about-wits/facts-and-figures/on>
- Yang, S.-U., Alessandri, S. W., & Kinsey, D. F. (2008). An integrative analysis of reputation and relational quality: A study of university-student relationships. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 18(2), 145–170. doi:10.1080/08841240802487353
- Yu, Q., Asaad, Y., Yen, D. A., & Gupta, S. (2018). IMO and internal branding outcomes: an employee perspective in UK HE. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 37–56.
doi:10.1080/03075079.2016.1152467