

Place branding in the context of UK ‘new’ universities.

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The focus of this research was to explore interpretations of brand success in the context of a selection of comparable newer UK universities. A total of twenty-four interviews were undertaken. The data analysis applied a systematic process of analysis (recursive abstraction).

Location was identified as being a fundamental antecedent of brand success. Without the heritage and history of older institutions, newer universities have needed to find a way to appeal to their audiences, who often expect them to be offering something unique. These universities have focussed on incorporating location into their branding and marketing communications to ensure their uniqueness of message.

The data also demonstrates that where a university doesn’t have a sustained heritage of its own, it draws upon the heritage of the destination in which it resides. Moreover, the extent to which a university engages with its local community was also identified as important. Universities that were embedded into the fabric of their local community were seen in a more favourable light as a result.

Furthermore, this research suggests how brand identity can be combined with location to create a brand personality that will be aligned to the location’s operational features as well as its emotional benefits. Of particular interest also, this research reinforces literature which asserts that consumers choose to connect with locations that best enable them to create and express their own desired identity (Kemp et al., 2012).

Finally, the data shows that students consider their university choice in the context of staying in or near their university location after graduating. Therefore, the type of employment, cultural and social opportunities a town or city offers is an important factor. The cost of living bore a close relationship to the overall image of the location, with different motivations from students influencing whether they were looking for somewhere they could keep their costs down or pay a premium for a more culturally rounded experience in a large city, for example.

This research has important managerial implications in developing and executing branding strategies in the HE context as it suggests that the various attributes of the university location (whether based on the heritage, culture or the surrounding natural environment), can be used to create distinctive brand images which enable an opportunity for differentiation from competitors, which is fundamental in such a competitive marketplace as HE.

Keywords: Place branding, Identity, Higher education, Non-profit branding, Local culture values.

References

Kemp, E., Childers, C.Y., and Williams, K.H. 2012. Place branding: Creating self brand connections and brand advocacy. *Journal of Product and Brand management*, 21(7), 50-515.