

Cognitive Pattern Recognition for Enhancing the Brand of Higher Education Institutions with a Mixed Approach

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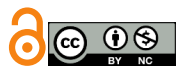
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ABSTRACT

Objective: In recent years, the existing problems in higher education institutions on one hand, and the increase in competition among these institutions for attracting students on the other hand, have seriously challenged their capacity fulfillment. Considering the popularity and development of social networks and their marketing capabilities, this research aims to identify a model that can enhance the brand of higher education centers.

Methodology: This study was conducted in four stages (the first two stages qualitatively and the next two quantitatively) using a mixed approach. Initially, through scientometrics, relevant and authoritative documents and articles related to brand enhancement in educational centers were identified, and the most important actions were recognized through qualitative content analysis and inferential methods. Then, using a quantitative approach, the related model was identified through fuzzy screening validation and fuzzy cognitive mapping method. The methodology of this research is applied in nature, mixed in the qualitative part, and descriptive-survey in the quantitative part. The qualitative section's population was documents and records, and in the quantitative section, experts were targeted, with samples collected purposively in both sections.

Findings: As a result, the qualitative part identified nine essential factors, with "recognition" determined as the initial action and "strategy and management style" as the final action based on the derived model.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is necessary for stakeholders (researchers, research centers, and related organizations) to pay more attention to these two areas. One of the main reasons for advancements in international educational centers has been the focus on social media marketing and, of course, branding and brand management.

Keywords: Brand Enhancement, Higher Education, Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping, Fuzzy Screening, Content Analysis

1 Introduction

The transformation of the higher education system in Iran in recent years has posed specific challenges not only for those involved in the management process but also for the internal and external members of higher education institutions. This process is complex and involves not just a transition to innovative structures emerging from science and technology advancements but also the introduction of new third-generation educational standards based on general cultural competencies and professional competency paradigms (Javdani & Pardakhtchi, 2023; PorFalahati et al., 2023; Safamanesh et al., 2023). In line with these developments, higher education centers have faced serious challenges. Among the fundamental issues in the strategic management of higher education centers and educational development programs is the focus on management and brand strengthening (Hosseini Largani, 2023; Javdani & Pardakhtchi, 2023). International research (Casidy, 2013; Hannan, 2021; Saurombe et al., 2017) indicates that brand management is the missing link in improving and developing higher education. On the other hand, decreasing interest in further education, increasing unemployment rates, declining population growth rates, the unrestrained increase in the number of universities and similar educational centers, while reducing student numbers, have intensified competition among these institutions (Broucker et al., 2020; Natarajan et al., 2016; Pinar et al., 2014; Song et al., 2023). Therefore, as past research (Casidy, 2013; Ghorbanzadeh, 2022; Hannan, 2021; Perera et al., 2021; Pinar et al., 2014) has also emphasized, conceptualizing branding in educational centers is considered an appropriate solution for this challenge.

However, with the change in how businesses and customers communicate, a misconception has arisen that branding and marketing are synonymous (Abbas, 2019; Momen et al., 2019), but the reality is that branding, as a methodological discipline, deals with the process of building, creating, and managing a brand, with the primary goal of establishing a connection with the brand's value to customers, through communications that businesses create to explain and promote their brand and value proposition (Natarajan et al., 2016; Saurombe et al., 2017; Wulandari, 2017). In contemporary definitions of branding, by adding aspects of intangible brand relations, interaction and communication between the brand, the organization, and the consumer have changed in such a way that branding is perceived as the process of creating value through presenting

a convincing and consistent proposition and customer experience aimed at achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty (Abbas, 2019). In fact, the primary goal of branding is to present the brand identity to a wider community to attract individuals for purchases. This branding activity is considered part of marketing communication activities (Broucker et al., 2020).

Managing value creation opportunities through branding is considered an integral part of any organization's development program; because the values that are transmitted externally, if not directed by the organization, will lose their credibility (Momen et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2021). A university is a service-oriented organization that exists in an increasingly complex and competitive environment. This organization not only seeks to align its activities with a domestic and international educational market (Ghorbanzadeh, 2022) but also must implement new governmental policies on "how to manage and organize higher education institutions" (Pinar et al., 2020). New financing models, entrepreneurial methods, and performance evaluation requirements have transformed universities, which now seem more like "economic enterprises" than "bases of scholars" (Pinar et al., 2014; Song et al., 2023). If previously all promotional efforts were focused on developing control strategies, due to changing conditions, service organizations have realized that branding and the transmission of brand messages to organizational audiences are as important as internal administrative and executive development programs (Saurombe et al., 2017; Wulandari, 2017). In terms of higher education, a brand can be defined as "a name, an image, a compelling description of an organization that embodies the value your university offers" (Abbas, 2019; Broucker et al., 2020; Hannan, 2021). Since a distinctive brand simplifies consumer choice, universities have made significant efforts to create a brand identity, which, according to Song et al. (2023), can be defined as: "your institution is an entity that you would like graduates, prospective students, legislators, and the general public to understand." (Song et al., 2023).

Consumers not only estimate the visual image of the brand but also the people who share this image; however, "reputation" and "scholarship" are the most important factors in choosing a university. Once a university has clearly defined its brand nature (who and what it is, what values and characteristics it has), it must act very precisely and systematically in communication to ensure not only that senior management is aware of the brand's nature, but employees become brand managers and preferably live with

the brand (Abbas, 2019; Hannan, 2021; Perera et al., 2021). Branding a university, or in other words, corporate branding, is more complex than product branding, as a corporate brand is intangible and involves attitudes, beliefs, and values that may constantly differ (Casidy, 2013; Perera et al., 2021; Pinar et al., 2014). Hence, the dependency between organizational culture and corporate branding is evident. The latter requires loyalty from academics and personnel at all levels, as well as a cohesive and integrated communication model in a university. The implementation of internal branding efforts facilitates the process of understanding the brand, taking ownership of it by the staff, and presenting evidence of the brand in their organizational responsibilities (Hannan, 2021).

In summary, the existing problems in higher education centers in recent years on one hand, and the increase in competition among higher education centers for attracting students on the other hand, have seriously challenged their capacity fulfillment. Considering the popularity and development of social networks and their marketing capabilities, this research aims to identify a model that can enhance the brand of higher education centers.

2 Methods and Materials

This research, philosophically, is grounded in the interpretive paradigm and a mentalist approach throughout all its stages. The initial research population comprises documents and records (past studies) indexed in the Web of Science database, covering a time span of the last 50 years (1972 to 2022), focusing on the primary keywords "branding" and "brand management" (1095 articles as the statistical population) and the secondary keywords "higher education," "university," and "college," identifying 203 articles as the research sample through purposive sampling. These articles were utilized as the research sample in the second stage. In the third and fourth stages (fuzzy screening and fuzzy cognitive mapping), the population includes selected academic and practical experts, with the operational segment chosen from among public relations managers, university presidents, and high education center heads, and research vice-presidents, due to their comprehensive mastery over goals, programs, and strategies for brand

enhancement and university development, selecting a necessary sample size of 19 individuals through snowball and purposive sampling based on the principle of sample sufficiency. Similarly, in the academic section, professors in the fields of business management, communications, and media management, who have published at least 10 articles in the realm of branding and brand management over the past five years, were selected in a similar manner, amounting to 7 individuals. Therefore, the total available expert pool in this research equals 26 individuals.

The data collection method for the first and second stages of the research is library-based, as it involves extracting information from documents, records, and past studies. The tool for data collection in this part is note-taking, performed electronically using the MAXQDA software. In the third and fourth stages, due to the need for information from the natural and real-world conditions of the population, the data collection method is categorized as field-based and, due to the use of questionnaires, as survey-based. The validity and reliability of the tool in the first and second stages are confirmed through the extensiveness of the web database and the precision of the search engine, as well as the concurrence of the chosen words. The capability for validity, reliability, transferability, and confirmability at these stages, respectively, is further confirmed through precise searching, consistency of results based on the credibility of the examined database, applicability of findings, and the practical objectivity of indicators.

3 Findings and Results

In this section, the results of the codings conducted and the categories identified in the qualitative research process are presented. As a result of this investigation, 218 initial codes were identified, which after review and re-examination, were defined as 82 final codes. The definition of these codes was achieved through the integration and reengineering of the initial codes, categorized into 9 categories (brand strengthening actions). To facilitate the process of identifying codes, the automatic coding feature in MAXQDA software was also utilized. Table 1 summarizes the qualitative results.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics of Branding Actions and Brand Strengthening in Educational Centers*

Category	Main Code	Number of Related Documents	Number of Codings	
Recognition	Awareness	57	104	
	Brand Recognition	36	37	
	Brand Conditions	63	138	
	Brand Awareness	23	73	
	Web Orientation and Navigation	55	152	
	Brand Identity	66	24	
	Brand Heritage	24	217	
	Brand Knowledge	19	145	
Strategy and Management Style	External Environment	29	46	
	Targeting	60	97	
	Strategies and Programs	17	28	
	Advertising Program and Mix of Advertising Methods	41	93	
	Development of Brand Elements	54	77	
	Formulation and Development of Brand Identity Document	7	13	
	Creating Brand Culture	26	22	
	Training	8	31	
	Monitoring and Evaluation	Feedback and Brand Satisfaction	30	131
		Campaign Management	18	28
Brand Evaluation and Analysis		64	218	
Long-Term Perspective		49	57	
Brand Evangelism (Word of Mouth)		68	198	
Brand Vision, Mission, and Purpose		21	54	
Enhancing Brand Experience		30	239	
Actions and Development of Implementation Programs		11	18	
Brand Positioning	Brand Performance Evaluation	78	193	
	Strategic Views and Decisions	19	25	
Dynamism and Agility	Creating Brand Reputation	76	201	
	Adaptability	20	34	
	Brand Credibility	65	82	
	Adaptability with Flexibility	18	26	
	Quality and Standardization	23	56	
	Responsiveness to Changes	34	51	
	Social Responsibility	77	92	
	Timely Circulation of Information and Knowledge	19	33	
	Brand Promotion	25	60	
	Internal and External Interaction	21	36	
Communication Skills	Customer Relationship Management	76	112	
	Brand Positioning Statement	28	35	
	Integrated Marketing Communications	21	58	
	Brand Image	46	66	
Psychology and Sensory Communication	Presence in Social Networks and Web Space	48	70	
	Love and Attachment to Brand	16	33	
	Channel Management Communication	41	63	
	Brand Loyalty	73	95	
	Brand Relationship Management with Customers	53	76	
	Brand Commitment	36	47	
	Value Conflict	22	55	
	Brand Spirituality	9	14	
	Attention to Customers' Spiritual Rights	11	22	
	Brand Responsiveness	25	42	
	Marketing Channel and Network Relationships	50	75	
	Communications	34	57	
	Support for Brand	24	37	

	Trustworthiness	35	55
	Customer Voice Reception	26	78
	Brand Personality	39	80
Market Sensing and Innovation	Market Monitoring	12	31
	Brand Mental Image	38	79
	Customization	15	39
	Personal Branding	18	27
	Review of Time, Cost, and Efficiency of Processes	14	26
Competitive Advantage and Prestige	Brand Equity	38	47
	Brand Investment	37	46
	Valuation and Competitive Advantage	42	71
	Organizational Culture and Climate	10	23
	Brand Differentiation	47	79
	Internal Marketing	17	33
	Added Value	38	87
	Organizational Structure, Nature, and Framework	8	14
	Green Marketing	13	37
	Size, Local, and Global Scales	10	16
	Advertising Slogan	15	24
	Technological Infrastructure Update	18	24
	Perceived Quality	18	31
	Utilization of Virtual Space	35	57
	Brand Trust	40	69
	Marketing Mix	74	108
	Brand Attitude	48	89
	Transaction Process Security	7	11
	Making the Brand Meaningful	12	18
	Entrepreneurship, Creativity, and Innovation	32	65

After identifying the brand strengthening actions, to assess the importance and verify the functionality of these actions in Iranian higher education centers, the degree of importance of the categories and actions was evaluated based on experts' opinions. For this purpose, the brand strengthening actions were assessed. Based on a five-point Likert scale (1 to 5), each expert provided a set of n values (according to the number of criteria: 8 criteria: advertising effectiveness, consumer behavior management, branding, customer relationship management, financial profitability, competitiveness, knowledge management, and entrepreneurship) for each option (9 brand strengthening actions). These values indicate the degree of conviction of the chosen option in relation to criterion j . Additionally, the importance of each sub-action was separately obtained from experts. In the second phase of the fuzzy screening process, the evaluations made by the experts were combined to obtain an overall evaluation of each option. The first step in this phase is to establish a consensus function (Q) for the decision-making body. This function indicates how many experts' agreements are necessary for an option to be accepted and pass the screening process. The consensus function is defined as follows:

$$QA(k) = Sb(k)$$

$$B(k) = \text{Int}\left[1 + \left(k \frac{q-1}{r}\right)\right]$$

$$k = 1, 2, \dots, r$$

Given that the survey was based on a five-point scale, q is replaced with 5. Since 26 people responded to the questionnaire, r is replaced with 26. The consensus function was obtained as follows:

$$k = 1 \rightarrow b(1) = \text{Int}[1.154] = 1 \rightarrow QA(1) = S_1 \sim VL$$

$$k = 2 \rightarrow b(2) = \text{Int}[1.308] = 2 \rightarrow QA(2) = S_2 \sim VL$$

...

$$k = 25 \rightarrow b(25) = \text{Int}[4.85] = 5 \rightarrow QA(5) = S_5 \sim VH$$

$$k = 26 \rightarrow b(26) = \text{Int}[5] = 5 \rightarrow QA(5) = S_5 \sim VH$$

After selecting the appropriate consensus function, we can use the OWA operator for experts' consensus. Here, for each of the m options, a single score is provided by expert k ($k = 1, 2, \dots, r$). Now, for each of the options, the single evaluations of the experts must be arranged in descending order. B_{ij} represents the j th highest score of option i based on which an overall evaluation of option i can be calculated as follows:

$$u_i = \max_j \{Q(j) \cap B_{ij}\}$$

$$i = 1, 2, \dots, m$$

$$U_1 = \max \{VL \cap VH, L \cap VH, \dots, M \cap VH, H \cap H, VH \cap H\} = H$$

$$U_2 = \max \{VL \cap VH, L \cap VH, \dots, M \cap VH, M \cap VH, H \cap VH, VH \cap VH\} = VH$$

...

$$U_8 = \max \{VL \cap VH, L \cap VH, \dots, M \cap VH, M \cap VH, H \cap H, VH \cap H\} = H$$

Based on the information obtained from the questionnaire, the importance of each component was determined. Table 2 specifies the importance of each component according to the opinions of experts and specialists participating in the fuzzy screening.

Table 2

Importance of 83 Brand Strengthening Actions

Action	Importance	Action	Importance	Action	Importance	Action	Importance	Action	Importance	Action	Importance
1	H	16	H	31	VH	46	H	61	H	76	VH
2	H	17	H	32	VH	47	VH	62	VH	77	H
3	H	18	VH	33	VH	48	VH	63	VH	78	VH
4	VH	19	H	34	VH	49	VH	64	VH	79	VH
5	VH	20	VH	35	H	50	H	65	H	80	VH
6	H	21	VH	36	H	51	VH	66	H	81	H
7	H	22	H	37	VH	52	H	67	H	82	H
8	VH	23	VH	38	VH	53	H	68	VH		
9	H	24	H	39	Fair (F)	54	H	69	VH		
10	VH	25	VH	40	H	55	H	70	VH		
11	H	26	H	41	VH	56	VH	71	VH		
12	H	27	VH	42	H	57	VH	72	H		
13	VH	28	VH	43	H	58	VH	73	H		
14	H	29	VH	44	VH	59	VH	74	VH		
15	H	30	VH	45	VH	60	H	75	H		

VH: Very High; H: High.

Given the information obtained from the questionnaire and the calculations performed, we find that all identified actions in the area of brand strengthening for higher education centers are of at least significant importance, and all 82 actions were approved. Also, to confirm the grouping

and the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, according to Table 3, the composite reliability test with a value above 0.7 has been approved. Moreover, the AVE value above 0.5 confirms the tool's validity.

Table 3

Test of Reliability and Validity

Actions	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Recognition	0.797	0.666
Monitoring and Evaluation	0.848	0.732
Brand Positioning	0.883	0.800
Psychology and Sensory Communication	0.725	0.711
Competitive Advantage and Prestige	0.868	0.707
Strategy and Management Style	0.791	0.800
Dynamism and Agility	0.843	0.724
Communication Skills	0.819	0.748
Market Sensing and Innovation	0.825	0.744

Based on the information obtained from the fuzzy screening phase and to combine the obtained opinions for conducting the Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping (FCM) technique, the weight of each sub-component was calculated based on

experts' opinions, and then, by combining opinions, the initial data table for the FCM method was created. Based on the initial information and as a result of the calculations

performed, the final matrix (Table 4) represents the identified relationships and their intensity.

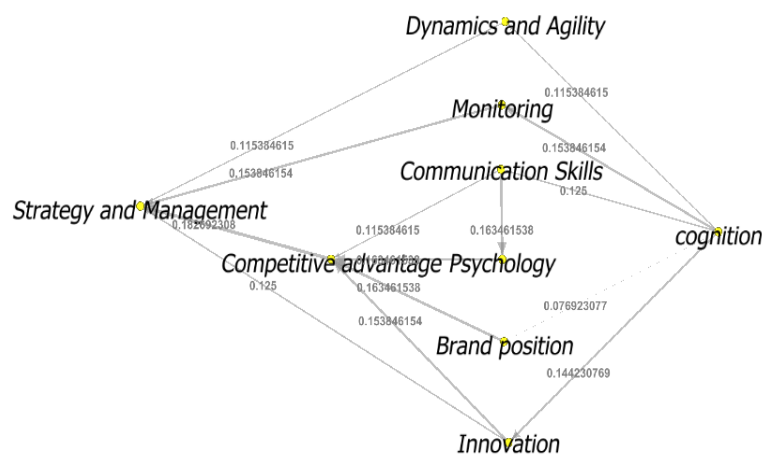
Table 4

Final Matrix (FM)

Actions	Recognition	Monitoring and Evaluation	Brand Positioning	Psychology and Sensory Communication	Competitive Advantage	Strategy and Management Style	Dynamics and Agility	Communication Skills	Market Sensing and Innovation
Recognition	0	0.1538	0.0769	0	0	0	0.1154	0.1250	0.1442
Monitoring and Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0	0.1538	0	0	0
Brand Positioning	0	0	0	0	0.1635	0	0	0	0
Psychology and Sensory Communication	0	0	0	0	0.1635	0	0	0	0
Competitive Advantage and Prestige	0	0	0	0	0	0.1827	0	0	0
Strategy and Management Style	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dynamism and Agility	0	0	0	0	0	0.1154	0	0	0
Communication Skills	0	0	0	0	0.1154	0.1250	0	0	0
Market Sensing and Innovation	0	0	0	0	0.1538	0.1250	0	0	0

Figure 1

Final Model of the Study



To draw the graph model based on the calculations performed, the data was transferred to Gephi software, and the research pattern is obtained as Figure 1.

Given the examination conducted on identifying the necessary actions for brand strengthening, the results have shown that addressing these issues in the field of education has occupied a significant portion of this research. Therefore, it is necessary for stakeholders (researchers, research centers, and related organizations) to pay more

4 Discussion and Conclusion

attention to these two areas. One of the main reasons for advancements in international educational centers has been the focus on social media marketing (Song et al., 2023) and, of course, branding and brand management (Natarajan et al., 2016; Perera et al., 2021; Pinar et al., 2014; Saurombe et al., 2017).

The confirmation of the importance of the identified items in the second step also validates the claim made. According to the proposed conceptual model through Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping, it was determined that recognition and awareness of the current conditions and having sufficient knowledge about the brand, its history, identity, and outlining the brand conditions are the most fundamental actions for branding, which also affects other actions. In other words, universities, before any other action, must properly understand this segment and define the initial assumptions of branding from this perspective. Because the existing results showed that recognition could strengthen 5 actions (dynamism and agility, monitoring and evaluation, communication skills, brand positioning, and marketing and innovation). In essence, knowledge and awareness are considered the primary source of actions for university brand strengthening. Another point in this model is that these 5 actions are not directly related to each other, and their commonality is their influence from recognition. Among these, psychological issues such as creating love and loyalty to the brand, personality, mental image, and brand spirituality could be the result of the interaction of value, integrated and appropriate communications in social media, and the formation and promotion of suitable communication channels to support the brand.

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On the other hand, the direct and indirect effects of these factors, along with psychology and sensory communication, on competitive advantage indicate that the university must pay special attention to these issues as core competencies for creating a distinction from competitors and conduct specialized and targeted planning for them. What plays a special and fundamental role in this regard is marketing and innovation. In other words, for branding through social media, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship based on the correct analysis of needs, desires, and market demand (audiences or potential applicants) are among the newest categories introduced in this research, which has created a specific innovation.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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