BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences

Doctoral School of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising

PHD THESIS
SUMMARY

BRANDING IN UNIVERSITIES

Study case: Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca and Technical
University of Cluj-Napoca

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Introduction:

Brand, branding, rebranding are recently newly-acquired words in the Romanian vocabulary, that are either taken or borrowed as such from English. This linguistic loan is not by coincidence as long as English holds the supremacy in the commercial field, at least. Thus far, in our society, the term *brand* has been accepted and received with some difficulty and hesitation, often leading to confusion, especially for those too little familiarized with the fields of economy or communication. The term is still understood in various ways, some comprehensions being erroneous or, at least, incomplete. For this reason, we feel that an extra effort is necessary to qualify such concepts in order to have, as much as possible, a joint code of receiving and deciphering their meaning.

Thanks to the material, cultural and spiritual progress of society as a whole, branding is also found in universities, even if the practice is not always called as such. In fact, this is the topic of our research. As an education institution with a certain form of non-mandatory training and education, the university has always been concerned with the idea of attracting students and studying what interests them. This is practiced in the oldest institutions, but the terms of brand and branding are not fully accepted, as they still generate confusion and difference of opinions among the institution's members, leaders, teachers. Universities have always been concerned with studying students' needs, with improving their academic paths, as a first condition to guaranteeing the success of academic activity and, finally, to generating the quality of material progress and that of education in society.

The main word from which all others derive is *brand*. In a first meaning, it represents the totality of a product's perceivable or non-perceivable attributes, its obvious or not so obvious features. A brand is known and recognized by clients due to a number of visual features, but not only; features that, as mentioned above, trigger a reaction in the client's mind and engage their emotions, thus creating a relationship between product and its designer. Visuals are a channel to

most of the unprocessed information that has not undergone analysis through thinking process, and so, the more obvious and different visuals are, the more likely they are to stick to memory and be subject to comparison.

Branding is a subfield of communication representing the creating act and supporting a brand. Everyone agrees that it is difficult cu create a personality; however, it is the more difficult to support it in a way that, through communication techniques and efficient marketing, the product is known and recognized by clients, and is thus separated mentally and emotionally from other products on the market. In other words, through communication of the product's personality, branding is the transmission of the product's value and significance, attributes that are included in the brand.

Finally, the derivative *rebranding* is the recreation or invigoration of a brand. When there is an unwanted change in the sale of a product or even a threat on the market, some manufacturers decide to "reinvent" themselves. So what do they do most of the times? They decide to change certain promotional elements of the product by using visual aids. Often, they modify the logos, the names, the brochures and the presentation materials with the clear purpose of altering the consumer's perception of that precise brand. The main idea is "same product, different presentation", but with a different personality.

The more powerful a manufacturer is on the market, the more visible the branding and possible rebranding are. Said manufacturers are well aware that a small competition means higher prices, and so they pay a considerable amount of attention and money to these segments promoting their product.

As a relatively new field taken from the advertising areal, branding is a very challenging and productive ground for research. This is all the more interesting as we explore branding in institutions and organizations that don't have an economic activity. Is there branding in lack of a product? Is it possible to have clients interested in more than just good material, that is palpable and brings immediate advantages? Certainly, it is our belief that these questions will find answers in the research paper as the latter will clarify this field of communication and branding in higher education institutions.

What is the brand of an institution? What is a powerful university brand? What confusions are being made? What is the difference between a product brand and a service brand? How do we create and maintain an institution's brand? How is branding achieved in a higher education institution? These are some of the questions to which this paper will find possible answers.

If we refer to our country, the social, economic, cultural and education contexts in today's Romania are very complex and very dynamic. Thus, universities, as higher education providers, need a strategy for permanent modernization and adaptation to answer current needs. We are referring here to both the needs and expectations of students, as prime beneficiaries of academic training, and to the demands of the labor market. It is almost unanimously acknowledged that education - the education and training system - is at the basis of other strata of society, that it is a national interest in continuous flow. This is a normal thing since the labor market keeps changing in its turn. An efficient higher education system is one that succeeds in training experts in the fields needed by society, also in ever-growing change, and even in fields that do not yet exist, but might come up in the near future.

In other words, we can assert that higher education must permanently be in touch with society and see in which direction it evolves; then, through applied, anticipatory and visionary efficient management, higher education can train experts to answer the demands of this society. For this reason, we are justified in asking: to what extent do universities in Romania manage to answer these challenges, to anticipate all of the changes that mark current society and to successfully adapt to these changes? In some way or another, all of these aspects are found in the said idea of university brand and branding. Should universities prepare experts for the labor market or must they educate good citizens? Or is it both? Should professors be their students' teachers or managers who use and coordinate the existing resources?

Another aspect worth inquiring, in the context of the need for a brand and branding of an educational service, is the aspect generated by the fact that higher education in Romania is not mandatory. Furthermore, there is a very high rate of school dropout among high school students, and so the number of possible clients that universities have keeps dropping. Adding to this is also the decrease in the birth rate and the high number of youth choosing to study abroad. All of this causes a rather difficult situation for Romanian higher education institutions. As such, universities must have a proactive attitude that leads to adequate measures taken in order to guarantee success.

What does being successful mean? How do we get there? Here are some aspects of university branding.

Universities are complex entities with great obligations in education and training the members of the society to which they belong, and which have multiple objectives and target audiences. Their purpose is to provide high quality educational services by attracting new students each year, all the while keeping the current ones interested in and motivated to continue their training path. The better trained students are in a university, the more chances they have in finding better paid jobs, and the more sought out that university will be by future students beginning their senior high school years. Students and future students are the main target audience of a higher education institution, but we cannot ignore that they are not the sole beneficiaries. The respective institution also addresses pupils' and students' parents who more often than not are the ones supporting the tuition and maintenance fees, but also it addresses collaborators, NGOs, school boards, the business environment, the mass media and, in fact, the entire society. The business environment is not addressed solely from the perspective of financial advantages that could benefit a university at one point, but also because that final aim of the students' university education is to prepare them for the labor market. Therefore, universities must be in close connection with the business environment, they must be in tune with the demands on the labor market and they must provide this market with the experts whose solid training and education will benefit the entire society. This mutual determination between academic training and society, mediated by the labor market, shows how a society as a whole works, through the dynamics of one change or another. We can ask ourselves what a well-developed society is if not a high level of response to the material, cultural and spiritual needs of its members, of its citizens.

Universities have the mission of educating good citizens, not just training good experts; this is a huge responsibility which they took on, a mission which often is expressed in the University Charter or in the Strategic Plan. As a promotor of progress and the material and spiritual wellbeing of a society, by promoting its education offer, the university commits itself to training experts in the university's fields of study. Experts are considered to be those who graduate a full Bologna cycle - three years of study at Bachelor's level and two years of Master's studies. The three years spent in Bachelor's level are just the starting point of the academic education; true specialization is achieved during the Master's studies and then during doctoral and post-doctoral

studies. Universities impart knowledge and provide the initial training through teaching and education, but, at the same time, they generate and produce knowledge, adding value to the theoretical and practical acquisition system taken from their antecedents, and which they complete through studies and research to be shared with those following. As this system of building an academic tradition by adding each generation's contribution becomes livelier and more dynamic, the respective institution gains an undeniable prestige - a gained, renowned and acknowledged asset. For this reason, universities must have the best of experts, and, to attract them, some institutions have a very well projected, planned and implemented human resource headhunting policy.

As such, the university branding strategy and its efficiency are important in recruiting new students and in keeping those who already study at the university. These are necessary, almost mandatory elements in the development of the academic environment in Romania, and, for those wishing to align themselves with the foreign institutions ranking top positions that we aspire to and appreciate in our country - for them, these are also forms of promoting themselves.

The aim and objectives of the current thesis are to synthetize the relevant information found in the literature studying the field of branding and communication management in universities, the *literature review*, but also to propose a Guidelines of University Branding, with emphasis on the main relevant defining elements; this can be achieved by studying the two renowned universities of Cluj-Napoca. The general framework is that of branding and communication. Taking from what is being implemented, we will highlight the practices that can be successfully borrowed and applied in universities. Branding already exists, it has proven its worth, and it is being practiced successfully within the corporate and business environments so that big companies reach to their consumers, keep them and increase their number, therefore avoiding risky business. But how did branding start? How did companies begin practicing it and mainly why is it so important? What can we borrow from what others have successfully implemented in corporations? We certainly cannot generalize the results or proposals, because the study was conducted on just two universities; we can, however, consider that with this research we are bringing an important contribution in the field of university branding. The two universities considered for this research, Babeș-Bolyai University (BBU) and the Technical University (TUCN), were chosen because they are two powerful universities in Cluj-Napoca - a town with a

rich history of higher education, renowned and acknowledged as the most important academic center in Romania. Due to the relevance of the results gathered, and their possible use by other higher education institutions, the two chosen universities have very different profiles. Babeș-Bolyai University covers a vast educational offer, the majority of study fields, training experts in diverse fields, while the Technical University has a technical, engineering, niche profile with a different target audience than that of Babeș-Bolyai University. Such differences prevent the two universities from entering a competition regarding the future students they need to attract in order to train them into becoming experts in a particular field; as such, the universities seem to complete each other from this viewpoint. Their different profiles make it so that the students' typologies are different, too, and therefore so are the training and education services offered, the expertise of academic staff, of vice-rectors and of the rectors themselves. If the members of the BBU top management have a training based mainly on social humanistic sciences, the training of those at the Technical University resides in exact sciences, for the latter institution has a scientific profile covering most engineering study fields.

The questions to which I have answered in the present research are:

Q1: What are the characteristic elements of a university brand?

Q2: What are the main criteria of future students when choosing the higher education institution? What leads them to decide upon having an entrance exam into one university?

Q3: What do the representatives of the two universities think about the key elements in creating and maintaining a powerful institutional brand?

Q4: What are the visual recognition elements of a university brand? Is it important to have unity in a university's visual identity? If yes, why is this unity important?

Q5: What are the most efficient elements and strategies in guaranteeing a university's visibility in the social media? What works and what doesn't work in this construct?

Research methodology:

The paper is based on a complex research strategy combining the qualitative and the quantitative methods. We tried to include and analyze as many perspectives as possible to university branding and therefore our empirical research is structured into four parts.

The first part refers to the students' perspective, as they are the main target audience, and to the role of orienting educational services towards them (the *student-client* perspective of universities). In the case of BBU, we will analyze the data from the questionnaire *Why choose BBU?*, during 2016-2018. This questionnaire was applied only to first-year students. The data were received from the Center for University Development and Quality Management. This questionnaire was made available through the BBU internal platform - Academic Info, and it addressed only first-year students. The data resulted from the analysis of the answers given by students will be compared to those applied in a similar questionnaire and addressed to students from the Technical University, although in lower numbers. The data will be processed by using the JASP and SPSS programs.

The second part of the research seeks to find the perspective of professors in the management teams of the two universities. To be exact, we will look to establish how institutional branding is seen and managed both within the university and in relation to society and partners. This time, we will analyze simultaneously the data from similar interviews taken to top-management members in the two universities. We think it's important to ask for such opinions because, as the literature shows it, the construction of a powerful brand starts within the institution, in the way communication at this level is achieved, but also through techniques and means that generate and maintain the inner motivation of the institution's members and the cohesion of the entire group.

In the third part, we will study the elements contributing to the university's visual identity, and we will emphasize the need for a Guidelines of Visual Identity in these institutions. As such, we will apply a content analysis based on the existing publications used by the two universities in their current promotion, in their participation in educational fairs and/or other types of events.

In the last part, the fourth one, we will study the online communication strategy or strategies seeing as, currently, this is the main (and sometimes the only) source of information for students and future students. Therefore, we will analyze the content of online articles and posts of the two universities. At the same time, we think it useful to also simultaneously analyze the statistics which Facebook offers to the administrator's account.

The thesis is structured into two main parts, like any other research paper (Chelcea 2007). The first part, the theoretical part, aims at clarifying and debating the theoretical terms mentioned in the title - *brand* and *branding* - and, on the other hand, it aims at offering a concentrated view of the respective literature. The second part of the thesis is the empirical research/the case study that sheds light on the results of the very research undertaken in both mentioned universities - Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and the Technical University in Cluj-Napoca. We decided to perform a comparative analysis between the two Romanian universities, because we considered a comparison to universities in the United States or other European countries to be unproductive, at this point. The reason for this is that, as we are well aware of, in Western Europe and the United States, universities are very different in structure and operation; the economic and financial context is different and it would be unrealistic to compare the two institutions whose resources are incomparable to the former. Certainly, there are elements that the Romanian universities can borrow mostly from universities in the United States - ranking top positions in research, too; in fact, Romanian universities do borrow such elements, mainly in branding, but not only.

As mentioned before, the universities chosen as basis for our research, due to their different profiles, allow us to cover an ampler range of target audiences and hopefully we may, thus, generalize the results. Such generalizations will be at the core of a proposal for a *Branding Guideline*, which is so necessary in universities; a guideline that includes the general directions for establishing priority objectives for the universities' top management. The information in the guideline will be considered most relevant for universities, while the specific differences will, of course, be stablished by a precise reference to each institution's profile.

We chose this research topic because we thought it necessary for practitioners in the field, but also because, while reviewing the literature, we could not find any complete research on what branding in universities involves. We believe that the current research will considerably add to the

field of university branding and perhaps raise new questions and bring around new horizons for future research.

In the first chapter of the thesis, tackling the theoretical aspects, we presented a few definitions and introductory notions on branding, taking from a few communication practices used in the past up to those of current day. We presented some features of brands and their elements, and then we proceeded to classifying brands by analyzing the similarities, differences and differentiating elements.

In the second chapter, we analyzed the concepts of image, identity and communication management. We differentiated between the image of an institution and its visual identity. Often in branding, practitioners are focused on just the organization's visual identity, thus ignoring the other features that, together with the visual identity, create the institution's whole image. Visual identity in a university is extremely important for sure, but it cannot fulfil the other attributes on its own; rather, through visual, it completes an independent image that is already formed and renowned by the collective mind.

In the third chapter, we analyzed and elaborated on the context in which higher education institutions activate, we highlighted their characteristics and functioning norms. We mentioned here the National Education Law No. 1 of 2011, which is currently regulating higher education in Romania, and we also mentioned the Bologna Declaration, which adds information about this segment of education and its context.

In the fourth chapter, we tackled the particular framework, going into detail on the elements of communication included in the university branding. We analyzed the respective theory in order to identify the representative studies that refer to the construction of a visual identity in universities; we did research on the students' perspective about university branding; we defined and elaborated on the notion of *internal branding*, what it is and what studies on other universities from abroad show us; lastly, we showcased the communication strategies for the social media, strategies that are practiced and studied by experts in communication.

The empirical research starts with *Chapter five*, dedicated to the practical comparative study between the two universities: Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and the Technical University in Cluj-Napoca. In this chapter, we analyzed the study by considering the perspective

of the students enrolled in the two universities. As mentioned before, we analyzed the data from the questionnaire entitled *Why choose BBU*, applied by BBU only to first-year students; the questionnaire was put together by the Center for University Development and Quality Management together with the results of a similar online questionnaire applied to students at TUCN.

In the sixth chapter, we analyzed the results from similar interviews conducted on the top management of the two institutions - vice-rectors, rectors and members of the Administration Councils. We presented their viewpoint, the definitions they gave to branding; we think that these were the main decision makers regarding the directions taken by the universities they run.

In the seventh chapter, we tackled the concept of visual identity in universities, its component elements and the guidelines in the field. We applied a content analysis grid on a series of advertising materials that the two universities use, on brochures and promotion flyers. We mainly focused on the way they form a distinct visual identity, the manner in which they stick to it and the messages they want to send to the general audience via the used symbology.

In the eighth chapter, we studied the communication strategies used by the two universities in social media, through Facebook. We identified the practices that work and those that led to the planned results, but we also found the practices that are less successful. In order to do this, we had access to the administrators' accounts of the two pages; the statistics we took from those pages helped us perform an efficient communication analysis.

Finally, based on the elements we studied both theoretically and practically, we presented the main conclusions of our research, new research horizons and, at the same time, the need for and purpose of a University Branding Guidelines, with the elements it should contain.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The main purpose of this kind of research is to generalize the results in order to make them relevant and in order to be truly innovative in the field. This is what we tried to do with the current study.

Based on the analyses of students' replies, we discovered which are the main criteria they consider when choosing the university where they enroll: the existence of programs in an international language, the quality of the study programs, but also the post-graduation employment perspective. These are the main elements on which we need to focus the communication and promotion strategy, by insisting on the benefits offered by the university and which can be found among students' interests, as well. We concluded that students choose their university mainly according to their own ideas and opinions, and that the main target audience for campaigns advertising entrance should be high school students in sophomore and junior years.

Also, we know the other types of target audiences that we need in our communication strategy and the degree in which they influence future students. We are talking about students' and future students' parents, teachers, but also their friends and acquaintances. We also know that university branding is linked to the brand of the city, and this relationship must be exploited when drawing up a university strategy and using slogans during entrance campaigns. It has once again been confirmed that the internet and social media are the main source of information for students, but also for members of their families, for their friends and acquaintances; however, working visits made to the universities are also important. We need to focus more on events like *Ziua Porților deschise* [Days of Open Doors] or *Şcoala Altfel* [University for Pupils], events that allow future students to contact directly the university to which they wish to apply.

As for the viewpoint of members from within the organization, mainly of university management - their perspective is important in creating the university's identity and in keeping it unitary. It's crucial that we understand the values with which we want to associate the university, by insisting on its unique character and on its differentiating elements. It's also important that the management understands the role of maintaining the organization's identity in time and also that of unity. All members of the organization must know, understand, adhere to and identify with these values in order to achieve the consistency and constancy of the *internal branding* we mentioned afore. Based on the answers from the interviews, we concluded that some elements offer unity to both universities; however, there are a few differences of opinions that could affect the idea of unity that is so crucial to a powerful band.

The unity of an institution's image is developed and also completed by visual identity. A large part of the communication strategy is based and should be based on visual elements specific

to the institution. Once an identity is created, by choosing a logo, the defining colors, these elements must be maintained in time. Since universities are institutions with a high number of employees, the majority of whom are not experts in this field, but specialized in other fields, the aforementioned elements must be included in a Visual Identity Guideline. This guideline has to be elaborated by communication experts and it must include the logo, the slogan and the different variants of logos accepted for the different materials used.

The guideline may also include a series of standardized designs for cards, official letters, headers, the colors for different study lines or faculty logos; in fact, this is quite recommended. We noticed that the flyer is a form of promotional material most preferred by the universities we included in our analysis. This is an ideal advertising material because it does not contain too much information and therefore it's easy to read, while still offering enough data. In the case of BBU, we noticed a preference for photographs of students and this is an advantage for two reasons. The main target audience finds itself in the advertising material, and the message reaches that audience more easily; also, the human factor usually attracts and touches people.

Seeing as the internet, especially social media, is the main source of information for students when choosing the university they wish to attend, it is our opinion that the communication strategy and the campaigns advertising the entrance to the university should be focused on this. Also, the target audience of the analyzed Facebook pages is the audience in whom we are interested, with ages between 18 and 24. Messages should be adapted to these age categories, as well as the topic for designing and keeping an *engagement brand*; communication with the other target audiences should be carried through other channels (website, written press, online press etc.). Based on the analyses, we noticed the types of posts that generate most *reach* and *engagement*; also, there is an obvious preference for posts of photographs and videos. If several social media platforms are being used (YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram), they must be interconnected and synchronized, so that communication be made in parallel on all these platforms (and the message be adapted based on the chosen platform); some might also make constant reference to others.

When structuring a post on Facebook, we need to reduce the information to a maximum of two-three rows, and insist on the visual, then make reference to the full article on the website, for instance. We, thus, manage to also increase the traffic on the website, an objective that interests us

directly for marketing purposes. Direct address and simple language, adapted to the age group, are recommended. Moreover, we also recommend the *calls to action* to increase posts *engagement*.

These social media platforms are in continuous flow as are their algorithms; surely, years from now, today's networks will no longer have the same impact, other platforms will appear, but we consider that the main component elements will stay the same. Moreover, each platform has its own statistics that are available to an administrator's account, and the continuous study of those statistics will provide us with the solutions - we will be able to see what works and what does not work. The content of the message will have to constantly be adapted to the platform, to the target audience, while the direction will always follow what experience today shows works.

We consider having synthetized enough relevant information and so, as a result of this research, we think that proposing a *Branding Guideline* for each university, as an adaptable diagram.

First of all, any university must set clear *values* it wants to adopt, thus defining itself and differentiating itself from the others; most importantly, perhaps, it must establish its *mission*, both general (specific to higher education), and specific (insisting on the differentiating elements). The university mission must be phrased as clear and simple as possible, so that all of the university's members understand it. We think that a *Branding Guideline* has to be as visible and accessible as possible, published on the university website and offered to all employees upon their first contact with the institution where they perform their jobs.

Internal communication within the institution, the HR department, through its human resources policies, and the existing procedures are greatly responsible for the assimilation of the representative values of an organization by the latter's members. We chose this as a first step because it is our opinion that this is the T0 point in the strategy of university branding. Theory shows us that branding is established from the inside, and the university's values must be set very clearly from the beginning and included also and mainly in the logo and the slogan, by choosing a symbology and the messages of the symbols chosen.

For practitioners - experts from the Communication Department in universities, but also for those responsible with communication and image in each faculty within each university - it's necessary to have a Visual Identity Guideline, as part of the Branding Guideline, in order to keep

with the visual unity within the organization. We refer here to the work of establishing and including rules for using logos, establishing the colors designers use in their work (including the color codes), the rules for using headers, standardizing certain types of design in elaborating cards, official letters, diploma drafts, standardizing the entrance brochures or establishing the logo size when printing the various promotional materials.

All these aspects must be discussed, debated and decided upon by the university management; after that, they need to be implemented within the entire organization and made available to practitioners within the university. Also, all faculty logos and all their specific and representative color ranges must be included here.

Regarding students, they need to be taken into consideration; by applying questionnaires at the beginning of their first years of undergraduate studies, as is the case for BBU, we can find out what were the reasons that determined them to choose the university; during the following years of study, universities need to apply satisfaction-measuring questionnaires in order to observe if students have changed their minds, what pleases and displeases them in their academic experience, as great corporation do with their clients and consumers. It's necessary for students to be encouraged to offer positive feedback, as well as negative feedback in order to prevent education dropout.

Regarding practitioners in communication and promotion through social media, universities need to establish a draft for working with the component elements of a post. Templates and drafts of posts can be designed to have a unitary work in promoting through social media. For instance, as the current research shows, an ideal Facebook post should have a maximum of 150 words, one or more photographs that also include people, in order to mark the human factor, or there can be a video of maximum 5 minutes.

We can add here, and it's most recommended that we do, signing these materials, photographs, video, with the university logo or watermark. Based on the knowledge that many posts will be redistributed or shared by collaborators in the press, it's recommended that these posts be "signed". If we're dealing with a more complex or longer material found on the university website, the post should make reference to it. Therefore, two criteria are fulfilled that have proved to be working in the case of posts that generate more *reach* and *engagement* - including photos or videos and including a link.

This is just a work routine, a red thread, if you will, which we consider academic should follow; it should, however, be adapted to the needs of each university, based on its profile, mission and especially on its vision for the future.

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