City Branding in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract: Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have been gaining political power and proximity in cities all around the world since the industrial revolution initiated in the 19th century. Due to high demand in a very competitive globalized knowledge economic sector, HEI sector has transformed into a commodity and is interdependent with the global market. The vast economic outburst has also resulted HEI to be associated with a myriad of business sector including tourism industry through an array of knowledge-based enterprises such as academic conferences, arts and sport festivals and other multitudes of academic mobility events. HEI has also spurted a local economic catalyst contributing to job creations both directly and indirectly. HEI have been represented by education-marketers as a place for the amalgamation of intellectual development and sensorial experiences through various visual consumptions. This trend also signifies the convergence and depolarisation of work and leisure whereby prospective students intends to study at a place that would also provide some recreational values. Hence, this study aims to contribute to a conceptual understanding of the field HEI and City Branding by evaluating previous works on Edu-tourism and branding. Secondary data are gathered from various sources and it is concluded that despite Malaysia being one of the most known and visited countries in South East Asia with a vast number of international students enrolled in the country, there are still many domains and areas that have yet to be tapped to its fullest potential to create a more robust and cohesive city branding efforts in line with HEI growth.

Keywords: City Branding, Place Branding, Tourism Branding, Higher Education

1 Introduction

Globalisation has transformed cities all around the world to become a stage for steep competition for a myriad of resources such as human, infrastructure and financial. The identity, image and reputation of a city influence the attraction of different stakeholders. Due to this phenomenon, local city governments have been adopting marketing strategies in order to garner the desired resources for the betterment on the city. Branding strategies and concepts are usually for businessoperations;however, it is now commonly employed by public administrators to produce a robust and powerful brand of cities.

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are also one of the major industries that have been heavily impacted by globalisation. HEI are constantly competing with each other both locally and internationally to gain prospective students, teaching members, researchers and also most importantly better financial prospects. Universities with strong brands have been able to benefit from good quality internationalization prospects which brings in substantial amount of

monetary advantages and is strongly desired by HEI managers especially in the current highly competitive globalised market.

2 Definition and Concept

A good brand ensures a superior quality as it is a guarantee to deliver quality good or service to consumers. Many scholars have attempted to define the complex nature of branding including [1] that contends *"a brand is a distinctive product or service through its personality and position over competition, a unique combination of functional features and symbolic values"*. The concept of City Branding first appeared in the 1990s as a way of distinguishing one of many marketing approaches [2]. Previous research conducted by [3] discussed the similarity of marketing products and services to the need to market places and then cities. Hence, city marketing has emerged as a sub-field of place marketing.

Branding is deemed as an ideal starting point for place marketing but due to its complex nature, it is more difficult than product or service branding [3]. The key to establish a successful brand is by creating a strong relationship between the consumer and the brand. Hence, city branding is a strategy employed by city governors to achieve three main objectives; i) to prosper and improve the life quality of the people ii) to secure local enterprises and their brands from negative influences and iii) to bolster enterprises and their brands to be globally competitive. Any city with good branding ensures its consumer which entails its inhabitants, investors, tourists and potential residents good employment possibilities, quality education, good real-estate investment and generally comfortable livelihood.

City branding is also a strategy used to strengthen a city's competitive advantage by providing cities with cultural and political importance, socio-economic development and most importantly a strong source of economic value. Among the ways of fostering the socio-economic status of a city is through serving quality education. Education is of paramount importance to one's life as it is a significant determinant for success and quality of life. It is also the fundamental element of a modern and prosperous society.

For centuries, HEIs or universities have played major roles within cities all around the world as the catalyst for a multitude of activities by engaging local communities and also for the local economic development. Universities are where ideas are debated, invented and fostered. They provide insurmountable advantages and positive impact on local economic growth by fostering financial resources into the city yet maintaining the primary goal which is to impart knowledge and contribute to the advancement and betterment of human kind mainly by teaching and researching. Local communities with HEI bond together via translational research activities conducted. However, according to [4], there are occurrences of disparity between HEI and cities as they simultaneously mistrust, misunderstand and admire each other. This complex relationship renders the nature of branding to be more difficult than conventional branding of goods and services. Higher education branding adopted some good practices from the business world, hence imposing the industry to be deemed more like a business-sector and industry-driven rather than just as an ivory tower.

3   Research Trends in Malaysia

Most HEI branding and marketing research in Malaysia has been focusing on push and pull factors of international students decision making to pursue their studies in Malaysia. [5] & [6] examined the the determinants of international students choosing to study in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). However the research was confined by limited sample of students thus resulting generalising the scenario of international students coming to Malaysia rather unfeasible. [7] conducted rather similar study but only focused on private universities in Malaysia.

A study conducted by Mohd [8] utilised the positive qualities of Malaysia as a nation to determine international students' decision making to choose a particular university instead of using the attributes of universities. Ojo [9] proposed a theoretical framework that integrates multiple factor groups that influence the process of decision making among international students coming to study in Malaysia. The model presented factors for choosing Malaysian universities which are; i) reputation ii) living cost and fee iii) degree of international recognition and iv) social and geographical factors.

All in all, most of the existing literature in Malaysian HEI branding/marketing practices merely focuses on the prospective of international students' decision making factors pursuing their tertiary level of education in Malaysia. Previous studies have also shown that the lack of integration on branding-focused paradigm.

4   Conclusion

The combination of Higher education and tourism is a multi-billion dollar business for many countries. However the research on the integration tourism industry pertaining to HEI in Malaysia is still limited due to much focused were only laid on students' perspective on choosing an institution. Furthermore, studies on HEI and city branding in Malaysian context seem to be at an infantile stage. Hence there is a dire need to embark on the field of city branding together with the universities in Malaysia.

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