

Can we measure university brand pride? – Steps towards adapting a brand pride measurement scale for higher education

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In contemporary society, universities are pivotal in fostering community ties, particularly among young people who often join university communities after completing secondary education. The post-pandemic era has altered these communities, prompting a reevaluation of the university brand's significance and its relationship with the community. This study employs focus group discussions to examine university brand pride manifestation within these communities. Findings indicate that expressions of university brand pride encompass behaviors such as boasting about the university, expressing positive sentiments, purchasing university merchandise, and sharing university-related content on social media. While these factors align with many components of existing brand pride scales, the study suggests an adaptation. By comparing the qualitative results with previous brand pride frameworks, the research outlines preliminary steps toward developing a tailored university brand pride scale.

Keywords: higher education, brand pride, higher education marketing

Track: Marketing Communication and Branding

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the role of belonging to communities seems to be becoming more and more valuable. Communities can operate as acquaintance-, interest groups, or even brand communities based on a common cause (Amani, 2022). Universities have a proven role in community building, as the university brand and trust in these brands can strengthen communities (Nevzat et al., 2016). At the same time, in today's post pandemic-stuck era of digitized higher education, university communities seem to be transforming (Cristofoletti & Pinheiro, 2023), and the importance of the university brand is being reevaluated.

The value and significance of the university brand can vary in different societies, as culture has an impact on how we express ourselves (Tsiligiris et al., 2022), our satisfaction and pride, to be more precise (Tracy & Robins, 2008). It might be no different in the case of university brands. In different cultural contexts, universities pertain diverse attitudes towards showing off pride (Wear et al., 2016; Schlesinger et al., 2021). In the United States, high emphasis is put – among others – on merchandize as part of showing support for university athletics and sports (Wear et al., 2016), which highlights a need to understand the connection between university brands and its correspondence with university values (Hutchinson & Bennett, 2012). While in the European higher education area, the concept of university brands is more often associated with satisfaction and word-of-mouth intentions of the university's students (Schlesinger et al., 2021).

The above-mentioned distinct differences led to this current study, which aims to explore the factors that make up university brand pride through qualitative research in a specific national context. The research also seeks to highlight the similarities and differences between the factors identified and those previously used to assess brand pride, in order to provide feedback on the applicability of the brand pride scale and suggestions for modification in the field of higher education and university brand testing.

2. Literature review

2.1. University brand

A brand is “a name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors” (AMA, 1960). Brand research is one of the intriguing fields of research today, as the literature examines it from many aspects, whether it is country branding (Tijani et al., 2024), brand attachment (Shimul, 2022), or brand communities (Bhattacharjee et al., 2022). As the literature reveals a wide range of examination and comparison of brands in different

areas of application and field, this research attempts to conduct brand research specifically in the case of universities (Retamosa et al., 2020).

The concept of branding is not alien to higher education and higher education marketing. Previous research has revealed that in addition to the fact that universities are important building blocks of the brand of their inclusive city, the expertise, network of contacts and availability of quality information created by universities fill a gap (Bisani et al., 2022). The literature identifies several dimensions of brand value when talking about higher education brands. These include faculty, academics, employee loyalty, community, study programs, brand personality, institutional infrastructure, shared value creation, and brand trust (Retamosa et al., 2020).

The examination of the branding of higher education also appears in Hungarian research, yet it remains an understudied concept in this national context. Berács (2003) specifically sheds light on the branding of "economics" trainings and forecasts the spread of economics as a brand name and the associated meanings in Hungary. Berács also emphasizes the significance of the university name in its perception by wider society (Berács, 2003). Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that the university brand, especially the name of the university, has a significant impact on the perception of consumers. However, can it be stated that the university brand can also be associated with emotions? Is the brand and especially the university brand able to fill its consumers with pride?

2.2. Brand pride in higher education

Pride is an extremely strong emotion rooted in self-esteem and social acceptance (Sredl, 2010). In a consumer society, pride might stem from consumers' urge to consume products or services with which they can identify and through which their personality can be expressed (Belk, 1988). This research focuses on the brand specifically and examines the pride that derives from consuming it.

Brand pride can be captured as an expression of positive feelings about a particular brand (Ahn–Davis, 2020). Brand pride can have numerous advantageous benefits, such as the emergence of repurchase intent, commitment to the brand, brand loyalty, brand advocacy, co-creation, or even joining brand communities (Nandy et al., 2024). At the same time, brand pride can be influenced by a number of factors. These include, for example, the appearance of periodic consumers of the brand on the market, or the intention of temporary consumers to belong to a brand community (Bellezza – Keinan, 2014). Brand pride is examined in the literature from two main directions: on the one hand, from the perspective of the employer brand, and on the other hand, from the perspective of the brand consumed by consumers

(Nandy et al., 2024). The present research is based on the latter when examining university brand pride, since in this sense, brand pride equals the social benefit resulting from consumption, the associations that benefit our consumer, and the pride in consumption (Nandy et al., 2024).

Based on Ahn and Davis' (2020) definition, university brand pride can be defined as an expression of positive feelings about the university brand, focusing specifically on the university's primary target group, the students. There are many factors that can be assumed to express university brand pride. Belonging to brand communities can be presumed as an element of brand pride (Muniz – O'Guinn, 2001), which can take place either online or offline (Hook et al., 2017). Furthermore, the question remains to what extent the wearing of university souvenirs, positive word of mouth and voluntary promotion passed on from the university can be interpreted as a projection of brand pride. To this end, it is necessary to examine the methodological aspirations of brand pride measurement methods.

There are ongoing attempts to research brand pride, but most of its research methodology measures employer brands along one-dimensional scales (Nandy et al., 2024). The literature reveals a scale in which pride related to consumer brands is examined (Taute et al., 2017), and this scale also examines brand pride along a one-dimensional and four-factor logic. The scale of Taute et al. (2017) is criticized by Nandy et al. (2024) for examining brand pride as a one-dimensional emotion, even though it might be considered a multidimensional phenomenon. Their qualitative research revealed 60 factors that can express brand pride in consumer brands. Then, taking into account the steps of scale creation, a multidimensional scale was created with a multi-step procedure, which is able to assess consumer brand pride through the examination of 12 factors. The latter research can be considered a significant step in the evolution of brand pride surveys.

The measurement of brand pride by scales has not yet become widespread in higher education research due to the novelty of the above-mentioned methodologies. However, we can find a few studies in the literature specifically related to university branding. In a study by Amani (2022), alumni students revealed that the behavior of graduates promoting the university brand greatly contributes to university branding and students' sense of belonging to the community. While Fazli-Salehi et al. (2019) defined the prestige of the university and the competition between universities among the underlying factors of identification with the university brand. The representation of the university brand by students on social media can also not be considered a novel field of research (Le et al., 2023).

As can be seen from the above, there have already been efforts to understand university brands and the related theoretical concepts, but the applicability of brand pride scales in higher education has not yet been extensively studied. The aim of the present research is therefore to explore the factors that make up the brand pride of university students and to examine the applicability of the brand pride scale of Nandy et al. (2024) in the higher education setting.

Based on the above, the following research questions can be formulated:

- What factors constitute the brand pride of university students?
- Can the examined brand pride scale be applied to the higher education environment?

3. Primary research

3.1. Methodology

The research examines the opinions of the International Economy and Business (INEB) full-time master's students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the University of Szeged (hereinafter USZ) with the help of qualitative focus group discussions, and their relationship to the USZ brand, with special regard to their pride.

The research took place in April 2024 with the participation of 29 students in 8 mini focus group discussions. The study employed an arbitrary sampling method and involved both Hungarian and international students among the participants, thus ensuring a diverse group of students according to their country of origin. Naturally, an arbitrary sampling method raises several research limitations, which will be discussed further in the conclusions. Although the 8 mini focus group discussions and their results cannot be considered representative in nature, the results still provide a deep insight into the university brand pride of the students studied. Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous. The results of the focus groups were processed manually after the transcription.

3.2. Primary research results

The results of the mini focus group discussions will be presented along the following logic: (1) factors of university brand pride, (2) applicability of the existing brand pride measurement scale to the higher education environment.

Factors of university brand pride

Pride in the university brand, i.e. the joy of identification with the university brand, was expressed in many ways among the respondents. The pride of the subjects was most often manifested in boasting about the brand, positive word-of-mouth, and joyful stories about the university.

"I show that I am proud of the university when I brag to my friends at other institutions that we are the best and we have the best facilities and weather conditions for international students."

"We have a lot of events to celebrate and come together."

"To show that we also belong to the community and when we talk about the university is always good and positive."

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the prestige of the examined university as a brand and the detailed online documentation of this prestigious learning process, which can be associated with the increase in the status of students, also appear.

"The University of Szeged is considered one of the most important universities in Hungary and has a high prestige. Thanks to this prestige, I like to present and document my entire university time on social media."

"Oh yes (I'm proud). Because sometimes I jokingly tell my friends that for me it's like being at the best Hungarian university."

Another factor of pride involved the purchase of souvenirs with the university's logo, on water bottles, T-shirts, or sweatshirts, which are proudly used or worn by their owners.

"I bought a college water bottle, pens and T-shirts."

"You could say that you can show (your pride) with merchandise with the university logo, such as wearing T-shirts and hoodies, badges or other university items."

"We can buy university T-shirts that are produced by the university and have the university's slogan on them. Yes, it can show (our pride)."

"By (I show my pride) buying university things, such as a sweater, in the university store..."

Among the previous results related to prestige, the online documentation of experiences has already appeared, which is closely related to stories and boasting about the university brand on social media. This latter can also be associated with the university's brand pride, similarly to the indication of the university in the students' personal profiles.

„... A lot of people are out on social media in the description, so it shows that we're here and we're part of the community."

"Well, I don't really wear college stuff on a daily basis, but I do write about it on social media sometimes."

Participation in the university community, and individual or group successes also fill some students with pride. Group success plays a major role in this expression of pride, as it can also be interpreted as the success of the group or community formed by the university brand.

"Achievements and participation in university life, as well as positive representation of the university to a larger audience, allow us to show our pride."

"I participate in university activities and events, mingle with fellow students, and take part in university life."

"Personal and group achievements within the university community, such as academic success, contributions to research or creative projects...."

In addition to the positive pride examples, there were also students who did not feel particularly proud of being identified with the university. For them, the main goal is learning, which is not coupled with a particular sense of pride, even though it is published on their social media profile.

"I don't necessarily promote the university. I love sharing that I come here on social media platforms, but that's about it."

"Well, I wouldn't say I'm particularly proud, and I don't really show it. I also post my university on social media in my bio, but I think that's it for me. I'm here to learn."

All in all, we can conclude that pride in the university's brand is manifested in several factors within the studied student group. These include boasting about the brand, positive word-of-mouth advertisement, positive and joyful expressions about the university, identification with the prestige of the university, documenting the learning process online, buying, using and wearing branded souvenirs, sharing information about the university on social media, as well as participating in the brand community and experiencing group successes and recognitions. Based on these, a colorful palette of university brand pride was revealed, which is worth comparing with the brand pride scale explored earlier in this paper (Nandy, 2024). This comparison might help judge the applicability of the scale to higher education and university brands.

Applicability of the brand pride scale for the higher education context

After presenting the results of the focus group discussions, we examine how much the results overlap with certain elements of Nandy et al. (2024) brand pride scale, i.e. what are the theoretical concepts that appeared in the focus group discussions and are also reflected in the scale. Table 1 shows that most factors revealed during the focus group discussions correspond to the scale of Nandy et al. (2024). These factors involve status, differentiation from peers, pride towards other consumers, pride in the values represented by the university brand, sharing experiences related to the university brand, and pride in the university. The comparison revealed only 4 items of the scale of Nandy et al. (2024), which might be difficult to interpret in a higher education setting in relation to university brands (e.g.: statements 1, 6

7, and 12). These are topics that did not specifically arise during the discussions with the examined student cohort.

Table 1.: Focus group results and scale adaptability to measure university brand pride

	Scale elements of Nandy et al. (2024)	Occurrence of scale elements in the focus groups	Adaptability to measure university brand pride
1	I feel that I belong to a higher class when I use Brand X.	X	I feel that I belong to a higher class since I attend University of X.
2	Using Brand X increases my status in public.	✓	Attending University X increases my status in public.
3	Using Brand X makes me unique.	✓	Attending University X makes me unique.
4	Brand X helps me stand out of the crowd.	✓	Attending University X helps me stand out of the crowd.
5	I feel superior as compared to others when I use Brand X.	✓	I feel superior as compared to others when I attend University X.
6	Of all the branded items I own, Brand X is my most prized possession.	X	Of all the universities I know, it was my biggest dream to study at University X.
7	I usually purchase an item from Brand X to celebrate my special moments (e.g., birthday, anniversary, promotion, etc.).	X	I usually purchase University X branded merchandise to celebrate special occasions (e.g.: successful admission, successful exam, university event, etc.)
8	I feel proud when other Brand X owners notice that I use Brand X.	✓	I feel proud when other from other universities get to know that I attend University X.
9	I am proud of everything that Brand X stands for.	✓	I am proud of everything that University X stands for.
10	When I share my experiences about Brand X with others, I do it with a sense of pride.	✓	When I share my experiences about University X with others, I do it with a sense of pride.
11	I am proud of my favorite brand, Brand X.	✓	I am proud of my University X.
12	Items from Brand X are among my favorite possessions.	X	Items with logos from University X (e.g.: hoodie) are among my favorite possessions.

Source: Own editing based on the scale of Nandy et al. (2024) and the primary research

Conversely, most scale elements appeared in the focus groups of the primary research (a total of 8 statements). It is important to emphasize that although 4 factors did not correspond with the results of the qualitative research, they were also reformulated when adapting the elements of the scale for the higher educational context. This was a necessary step to take, as their examination may yield interesting results in later quantitative research. Furthermore, it is worth considering applying a novel scale element for the examination of wearing, using or purchasing objects bearing the university logo, as these factors were emphasized during the primary research and were not part of Nandy and colleagues' (2024) brand pride scale.

4. Conclusions

The aim of the present research was to explore the factors that make up brand pride in universities and to propose and adaptation of a brand pride scale in the higher education context. It seems certain that the concept of brand pride, based on Ahn and Davis' (2020) definition, can also be applied to higher education and university brands. The studied student

sample revealed a colorful range of university brand pride elements, which includes, for example, joyful information sharing, wearing and using university souvenirs, spreading rumors on social media, and group success. These factors correspond with most elements of the brand pride scale of Nandy et al. (2024). However, there were elements that do not seem to be adaptable to the study of university brand pride (statements 1, 6, 7, 12). The study further attempted to propose a modified scale specifically to measure university brand pride.

Among the limitations of his research are the problems arising from arbitrary sampling and the questionability of the theoretical saturation resulting from qualitative exploration. As a further limitation of the research, we can also mention that the research only included students of a single program of a university, so the study worked on a relatively narrow target group with a small sample. Despite the limitations, however, the research proved to be suitable for a deeper exploration of brand pride. The fact that participants were studying for master's degree helped abstract thinking, so in-depth answers might have been obtained. The research contributed to the literature on brand pride in the higher education context by exploring the diverse measures of brand pride, and the appearance and applicability of certain elements of the examined brand pride scale. Further research directions include the quantitative adaptation of the brand pride scale to universities in the higher education environment, as well as the comparison of the brand pride of international and Hungarian students in order to map social and cultural differences in university brand pride perception.

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