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A Transformed Model of Brand-building for B-schools: An Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

MBA education in India is facing the same challenges as business. Upheaval of technology, changing customer expectations, global competition, online courses and societal responsibility are the major concerns. Failure to adapt to these challenges will question the academic contribution to business practice. Business school (B-school) branding is crucial to distinguish the services provided by one B-school from another. Considering the importance and relevance of adapting to the changing market forces, the purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual model of brand-building for Indian B-schools. A range of published literature related to the topic is thoroughly searched. The paper examines the viewpoints of various scholars with regard to the role of a student in a B-school. The services marketing perspective is analyzed and the gaps are identified through a robust literature survey. Based on the literature survey, an original conceptual model for brand-building for B-schools is proposed. Some B-schools have adopted certain branding activities, but extant literature review reveals that B-schools in India do not practice an organized holistic approach to branding activities. The proposed conceptual model is stage one in the process of understanding what goes into building a B-school brand. Stage two would empirically test the proposed conceptual model of brand-building. The proposed model is holistic, considering the role of important stakeholders such as students, faculty and corporate. This conceptual model will help B-school management to understand the role and importance of branding B-schools. It will provide an insight into the various parameters on which a B-school brand has to be built.

Keywords: Services marketing, India, Business schools, Stakeholder analysis, Brands, Marketing strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The education sector in India is today worth of trillion dollars (approximately 20,000 crores) business school (B-school) education has seen immense growth in the last two decades [1]. The first business program was started in 1954 by the Indian Institute of Social Welfare and Business Management in Calcutta. There were 118 B-school programs in 1989 and 744 in September 2000. Recently, industry estimates suggest that there are more than 1,300 B-schools in India. B-schools are subject to vagaries of market forces such as tough competition, demanding students, and the corporate world. World Trade Organization and General Agreement on Trade in Services are also influencing factors. If a B-school wants to grow a long-term future, consistent improvement of quality is essential. Quality has to be practicalized in various parameters like quality in inputs (faculty and infrastructure), quality in processes, (active learning time), quality in outputs, (tests and gradation scores) and quality in outcomes (gainful employment) [2- 11]. Innovative colleges, universities and private enterprises are positioning themselves to take market shares from those B-schools that fail to respond to customer needs (Hatfield and Taylor, 1998) [12]. Boundaries of management education are expanding and blurring. New technology is a catalyst for changing delivery constraints and educational mergers are creating large, versatile competitors (Hatfield and Taylor, 1998) [12]. There is a need to understand and interpret the effect of the emerging technologies through research and apply emerging technologies in the classroom to develop student skills and boost academic credibility.

Students are important aspect of education industry, students are consumers and products of education (Conway and Yorke, 1991 [13] a survey conducted by Delucchi and Korgen (2002) [14] for sociology

undergraduates, with a 41-item questionnaire, confirmed that students believe that "higher education operates as a consumer-driven marketplace." Should we treat students as customers? If students are treated as customers, are we compromising on the broad, overall benefits (good citizenship, professionalism, ethical values, life skills, etc.) of B-school education, with immediate, short-term student goals of lucrative employment? Carlson and Fleisher (2002) [15] opine, "This treating of the student body as customers has lessened the rigor of the curricula and teaching methods." In a student-customer orientation, it is difficult to define the "product," it could be education, but this is a slippery construct even for educators, let alone for students [16-20].

According to one survey, on any given day, a student might be a customer wanting routine information (from a department or faculty office); client in need of expert guidance (choosing a course, or reviewing an assignment); citizen with certain rights (borrowing a book or appealing against an act of discrimination); and subject with certain obligations (being fined, for an overdue book, or working to make a grade). The student-customer model has some drawbacks; students may shift the responsibility of learning and placement success from themselves to the faculty and B-school [21]. Accountability no longer rests with the student, and if the faculty or B-school (service providers) do not meet up to the student's (customer's) expectations, then the student fills a service form (teaching evaluation and feedback) which indicates service failure, resulting in, a "bad word of mouth" for the service providers (faculty and B-school). The findings of a survey conducted by Pitman (2000) [22] on "Perceptions of administrative staff towards students and faculty" indicate that in dealing with students, administrative staff move beyond the processes of mere service-providers and incorporate a mentor role into their processes. Administrative staff tends to relate closely to students, perceiving them as internal customers. The student can be considered as a collaborative educational partner (Fieldman (1971) [23] suggested the "societal marketing orientation," which emphasizes that an organization exists to not only meet its own needs and the needs of the customer, but also to maintain and advance individuals' and society's long-term interests. Under this model, the function of a university or college would be to advance the interests and goals of students, faculty, staff, parents, government, and the society as a whole. While student needs are central in this orientation, a balanced constituency far exceeds the students' immediate wants and desires.

It is argued that a "holistic approach" or ldquo systems thinking" is required to define a student. Rather than viewing a student as a partner-associate or collaborator, a student must be viewed as a "stakeholder," as a person with a direct interest, involvement, or a direct investor in the process of acquiring higher education. As a stakeholder, the student becomes a co-creator of the service by being a significant contributor to the process of service delivery, i.e. acquiring a degree. The student as a stakeholder co-creates the service. This viewpoint of considering student as stakeholder, proposes to view faculty and administrative staff as stakeholders/co-creators of the service provided in the B-school [24-28].

2. DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL :

Based on the extant literature, a conceptual model of brand building for B-schools is developed. The conceptual model depicts four external variables such as technological upheaval, demographic shifts, global competition, and Indian context.

External environment –The changing market dynamics, in which B-schools operate, is changing at a fast pace. The most important factors shaping the external environment are technological upheaval, global competition, demographic shifts, and Indian context. There are other influencing factors like the diversity of workforce, ethical dilemmas, need for true innovation, gap between student and faculty needs, etc [29].

Technological upheaval- The internet has significantly affected business practices. The internet- and computer-based technology is more likely to cause changes given advancements made in general connectivity through the internet, increased transaction speed, and enhanced interactivity. An amazing range of products and auxiliaries are offered on the net, pricing decisions are favouring the consumer (online auctions), supply chain management practices are being turned upside down (virtual storefronts), and promotion alternatives are more complex (Noon, 1999) [30]. As interactive

communication software and other applications continue to develop, basic assumptions regarding education's value chain, specifically the distribution of knowledge, will require reassessment. (Friga et al., 2003) [23]. This impact is clearly seen in the number of online MBA programs offered by B-schools today. There are also many B-schools offering distance education. Marketing educators need to lead this technological revolution, to understand and interpret the effects of emerging technologies through research, and use emerging technologies in the classroom to increase student skills and enhance academic credibility (Noon, 1999) [30].

Global competition- International competition in management education is very much a reality today. Harvard Business School, Stanford, and Yale University have set-up research centers in India. Even India's elite institutions, the IITs and IIMs, will find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain excellent faculty members in the face of attractive offers from foreign universities, research institutes, and multi-national corporations. So, there is a substantial risk that Indian universities and their students could end up as serious losers in the global higher education "game" (David Arnold Institute of International Education, 2000) [31]. The other side of the coin is the increasing number of students from India. About two-and-half lakh Indian graduates write MBA tests every year, but almost two-thirds of them do not get any seats because of the paucity of seats. The number of Indian students studying in the USA grew by more than 46 percent from 1990 to 1999 (David Arnold Institute of International Education, 2000) [31]. Indian B-schools have to face global competition to both retain good faculty and match the standards of international B-schools [32-34].

Demographics- The two factors which have a bearing in demographics are population growth and changing workplace expectations. India's huge population is predicted to be an asset for growth. By 2020, 47 percent of Indians will be between 15 and 50, compared with 35 percent now. India is destined to have the world's largest population of workers and consumers. The typical student of tomorrow will be quite different from today's student. Considering the yearly growth of about 8-10 percent, India would need every year over a lakh of managerial\personnel. Outside of the USA, India now trains the largest number of MBAs with about 75,000 degrees conferred annually (Gupta and Gollakota, 2004) [35].

During the 1990s, a large number of multinational companies entered India and sought to hire business graduates for their management training positions. Domestic companies also followed suit, trying to compete. Companies found that the skills of business graduates fell considerably short of the demands of the executive positions in a competitive world. In particular, teamwork skills, critical thinking and critical reading skills, marketing, and operations skills were found lacking. Consequently, since the 1990s, there has been a high demand for management graduates (Gupta and Gollakota, 2004) [35]. Many private entrepreneurs have set up management institutes in various parts of India. Many of these private B-schools have shown considerable dynamism in understanding the changing needs of the local industry and customizing their diploma programs to those needs, there by establishing their own niches. Illustrative specialized niches for management education include agri-business, banking, computer and information technology, construction, cooperatives, defence, education, entrepreneurship, finance, human resource development, industrial relations, international business, marketing, office, pharmaceutical, police, production, project, public enterprise, public relations, quality, rural, sports, telecom, tourism and travel, and transport. Over the last few years, the central government and various state governments have recognized the entrepreneurial efforts of the private B-schools and have begun granting private university status to several private B-schools that have excellent brand names and resource infrastructure. These forces have created a very positive climate for the growth of B-schools, albeit heightening the challenges of ensuring a consistent quality of education at the national level (Gupta and Gollakota, 2004) [35]. In 1991, the number of approved management education institutions in India was only about 130, with an annual MBA intake of about 12,000, comprising of 8,000 full-time, 3,000 part-time, and 1,000 distance education students. The number of approved institutions has now grown to approximately 1,200, with an annual MBA intake of about 75,000 (Gupta and Gollakota, 2004) [35].

Indian context : The Indian business environment is different from the rest of the business world's for the following reasons – the developmental stage of the economy, rapid growth in certain sectors,

diverse cultures and sub-cultures, income- and caste-based classifications of the society, ethical values, existence of powerful unorganized markets for most products, career orientation among youth, etc. As the business environment is unique, there is a need to develop management education programs which consider the differences and develop MBA programs to suit the requirements of the Indian context. Indian B-schools rely on textbooks and case studies used in the USA and based on research done in an American context. The reason for this is the paucity of research in Indian B-schools (Gupta and Gollakota, 2004) [35]. Most B-schools have affiliations with the state universities. The syllabus and other norms imposed by most universities tend to be restrictive and degenerative. The norms do not allow flexibility to respond to the local conditions and do not build competencies for quality teaching, service, and scholarship (Gupta and Gollakota, 2005) [35]. The evaluation techniques adopted in a majority of B-schools still employ traditional grading methods by relying on term end examinations for awarding the degree. The teaching techniques, in most B-schools, are lecture-based approaches, though there is increasing the popularity of more experiential learning exercises like unstructured business situations, case study analysis, projects, internships, team learning, computer-based instructions, etc. [36].

The conceptual model has two major dimensions – brand creation and perceived brand.

2.1 Dimension 1 – Brand Creation :
Brand creation is defined by two constructs – top management philosophy and brand management (includes strategic and tactical brand-building). The variables under each construct are as follows:
Top management philosophy : Existing literature on services branding (Davies, 2000 [31] indicates that the process of building a services brand starts at the top, i.e. top management philosophy. The top management identifies external opportunities and internal capabilities to define the brand and develop the brand concept. In 2003, some mid-tier B-schools in the USA faced the problem of falling applications for their general management programs. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Business experienced a 30 percent drop in full-time applications in three years. The B-school scrapped the general management MBA in 2004 and replaced it with 13 distinct degrees in everything from arts administration to applied corporate finance (Gerdes, 2005) [37]. Rutgers Business School in Newark, has offered a pharmaceutical management MBA since 2000 in partnership with seven area drug companies (Gerdes, 2005) [37]. From time to time top management has to redefine the B-schools' visions and missions to stay competitive in changing market dynamics. Therefore, the role of the top management philosophy is crucial, as the response of the top management towards market challenges will determine the future of the B-school brand. The first category in the Balridge education criteria for performance excellence, calls on senior leaders to take an active role in reinforcing a focus on students and stakeholders (Hammond et al., 2006) [38]. The top management philosophy is crucial in shaping all further brand-building activities. The B-school top management must be aware of expectations and preferences of the three major stakeholders – students, faculty, and industry – before evolving the top management philosophy. Organizational culture and organizational policies articulate the top management philosophy [39].

Strategic brand management : Berthon et al. (1999) [40] state that a B-school's brand fulfils the classic functions that brands do for all offerings to which they are attached. A powerful brand vision indicates the long-term, stretching intent for the brand, which must excite staff, encourage their commitment, and enable them to interpret how they can contribute to success. Strategic planning for a B-school at this stage must evaluate the "market orientation" status of the B-school (Hammond et al., 2006) [38] describe the processes required to engender amarket orientation as a "distinct form of sustainable competitive advantage." The brand sustainable competitive advantage is essential in building a B-school's positioning in an increasingly competitive and cluttered market in India. The dominant value proposition should possess sustainable competitive advantage for building positive relationships to attract, satisfy, and retain major stakeholders [41]. This process begins with assessing brand value, formulating brand objectives – both short-term and long-term.

Tactical brand building : Tactical brand building involves implementation of brand marketing programs, measurement, and interpretation of brand performance. Customers can be co-creators in personalization of products and services, in developing market acceptance of products and services, and shaping customer expectations (Prahlad and Ramaswamy, 2000) [42]. Student, faculty and administrative staff appear on the brand creation side and on perceived brand side as these three stakeholders perform the role of "co-creators" of the service. The role of "co-creators" is important in the tactical brand-building stage as the "points-of-marketing," described by Gummesson (1987) [43] is "in marketing of services – relationships and interactions created by direct contact between the customer and the service provider."
The "points-of-marketing" are direct interactions between the student as a customer and the faculty and administrative staff as service providers, interactions between industry representatives with placement co-coordinators and faculty of the B-school, etc. Ensuring positive "points-of-marketing" experiences for all the stakeholders constitutes the essence of tactical brand-building activity of the B-school. Periodic evaluation of brand performance is an essential aspect of tactical brand-building. The innovative placement support provided by the B-School plays an important role [44-51].

2.2 Dimension 2 – Perceived Brand
The perceived brand aims to build stakeholder satisfaction, defined by two constructs –major and minor stakeholders. B-school management strives to maximize stakeholder satisfaction. The major stakeholders are student; faculty and corporate while minor stakeholders are society and government, administrative staff, and media. The variables under each construct are as follows :

Major Stakeholders :
(1) Student : The student's role and relationship with a university are complex. Students are both consumers and products of education (Conway and Yorke,1991) [13]. For a student of a B-school, the following factors are relevant-admissions process, course fee, teaching-learning approach-and pedagogy, infrastructure, placement record, brand communications and industry interface. The role of student feedback is important to the student.
(2) Faculty: Faculty's role in a B-school is becoming increasingly important today. As the quality of teaching, research potential, scope for consultancy and overall success of the B-school depends largely on the faculty. According to a joint survey conducted by COSMODE Management Research Center and Business World – India, in 2002, Indian B-schools have 3,600 PhDs, the requirement is 11,000 . For a faculty of a B-school, the following parameters are relevant-recruitment and selection process, salary, performance appraisal and reward system, personal vs organizational goals, focus on research, consultancy, and impetus for management development programs, faculty development programs, seminars, conferences, etc. [52-53].
(3) Corporate : Corporate recruiters complain that MBAs lack creativity, people skills, global thinking, an aptitude for teamwork, and the ability to speak and write clearly and cogently (Hasan Jameel, 1993) [54]. Factors considered as important by the corporate: skill sets of students-managerial perspective, self-awareness and self-direction, respect for the individual, and value for diversity.

Minor Stakeholders : The minor stakeholders considered are society and government, administrative staff, and media. The conceptual model proposes that the B-school brand is created by top management philosophy and brand management activities, the major and minor stakeholders perceive the B-school brand, the feedback, and inputs given by stakeholders influence and are influenced by the final B-school brand [55]. The model proposes to look at stakeholders – mainly students, faculty, and corporate as co-creators of the service.
The Following model (Figure 1) explains the Brand Building process in B-schools :

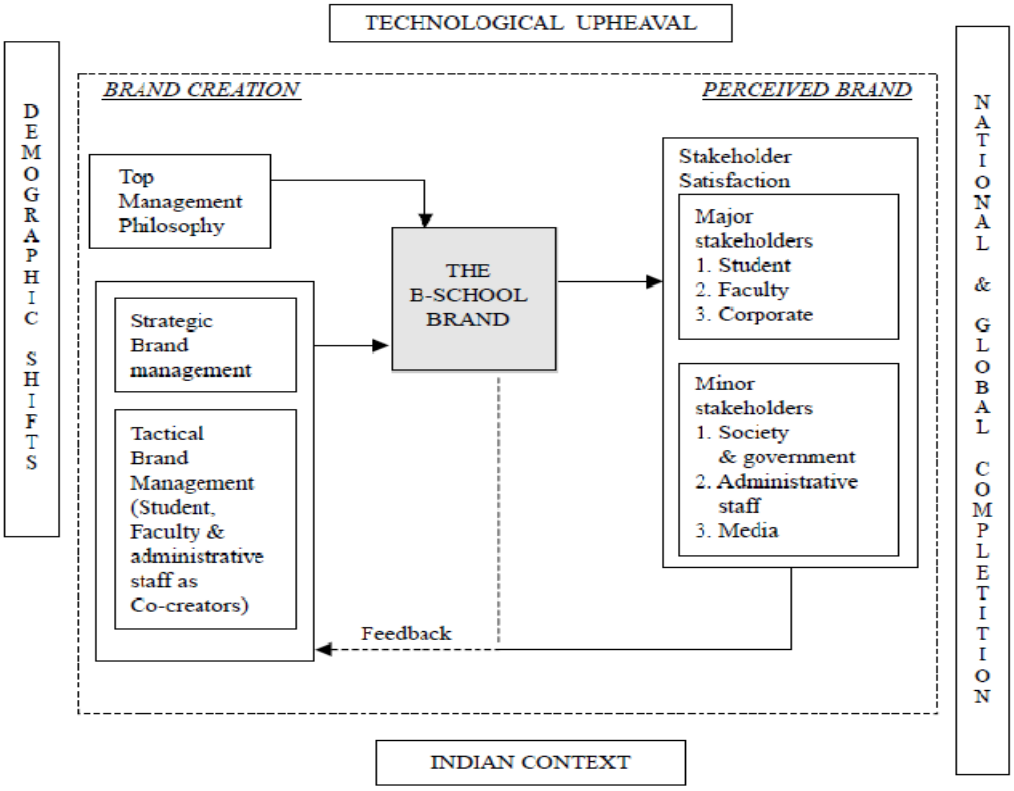

Figure 1: Brand creation model for B schools in India

Propositions:

P1. The three major stakeholders of a B-school – student, faculty and corporate –have to be satisfied to build the B-school brand.

P2. For a student, placement record is the most important attribute of the B-school.

P3. For faculty, alignment of personal and organizational goals is the most important attribute of the B-school.

P4. For the corporate, skill sets of students are the most important attribute of a B-school.

P5. Top management philosophy determines the value of a B-school brand.

P6. Strategic brand management and tactical brand-building are essential to build a B-school brand.

P7. The external variables – technological upheaval, national and global competition, demographic shifts, and Indian context shape and affect the environment in which B-schools operate.

3. MAINTAINING A STRONG B-SCHOOL BRAND :

The conceptual brand-building model provides a holistic perspective of viewing and building B-school brands [22]. Effective management of tactical brand management strategy, which includes implementation, measurement, and interpretation of brand performance, will lead to maintenance of strong brand equity over time.

Pitt L.F (2006) [56] conducted an empirical study titled, “How well are business schools managing their brands? A research note.” They sampled 61 MBA directors and senior B-school administrators. The MBA directors represented B-schools from Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and South Africa. Pitt et al. used the brand report card (BRC) suggested by Keller (2000) [57] that provides a systematic way for managers to assess their brand’s performance. The ten attributes in BRC and relevance of each attribute to our proposed conceptual model is as follows:

(1) The brand excels at delivering the benefits customers truly desire. B-schools should consider the needs of all major stakeholders: students, faculty and corporate, as suggested in our conceptual model.

(2) The brand stays relevant. Strategic planning and market orientation status ofthe B-school should be evaluated continuously. Periodic evaluation of the brand in tactical brand-building stage will ensure that the brand stays relevant.

(3) The pricing strategy is based on consumer's perception of value. The dominant value proposition of the B-school should satisfy students' expectations on all attributes of the brand including course fee. Student is the first stakeholder, as depicted in our conceptual model.
(4) The brand is properly positioned. The positioning strategy is a part of the strategic brand management process in our conceptual model.
(5) The brand is consistent. The feedback loop shown in our conceptual model ensures that gaps are identified easily and bridged from time to time to ensure consistency.
(6) The brand portfolio and hierarchy make sense. Analyzing the target group's (students) needs and providing a suitable portfolio of products such as executive MBA, online MBA, an MBA in specialized industries like financial services, retail management, etc. form the crux of strategic brand management.
(7) The brand makes use of and coordinates a full repertoire of marketing activities to build brand equity. In our conceptual model, top management philosophy, strategic brand management and tactical brand management are on the brand creation side. The major and minor stakeholders' satisfaction are on the perceived brand side. Student, faculty, and administrative staff playing a dual role as "co-creators" emphasize the use of a full repertoire of resources, which will help build the brand equity.
(8) The brand's managers understand what the brand means to consumers. This aspect of brand management is addressed in the construct, top management philosophy, where the expectations of major stakeholders from the B-school are considered while deciding on the dominant value proposition.
(9) The brand is given proper support that is sustained over the long run. In our conceptual model, the constructs on the brand creation side and perceived brand side are mutually reinforcing, highlighting the interdependency among the constructs and the importance of continuous effort to build the B-school brand.
(10) The company monitors sources of brand equity. The external variables such as technological upheaval, national and global competition and demographic shifts present various opportunities for monitoring and identifying sources of brand equity from external environment. Emphasis on understanding the major stakeholders' expectations and preferences ensures that sources of brand equity from internal environment are recognized.
The major finding in the Pitt L.F (2006) [56] study is "senior B-school administrators do not perceive their organizations to be doing a good job on managing a brand." The most successful B-school brands in India are the older Indian Institute of Managements –IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Bangalore and IIM Calcutta. The data available are limited as only commercial publications such as rankings and ratings by business magazines are available. There is a lack of significant academic research in this area. By integrating the BRC attributes (Keller, 2000) [57] and studying the whole process of branding a B-school through the proposed conceptual model, a B-school can build and maintain a strong brand.

4. CONCLUSION

Literature suggests that there is an increasing tendency among B-schools to view students as customers of the B-school and B-schools are adopting marketing practices similar to any other service. B-schools should address the needs of all stakeholders such as students, faculty, corporate, society, and media. Brand management in B-schools has not been researched exhaustively in Indian B-schools. The proposed conceptual model draws constructs from the literature review and qualitative discussions with academics. The model is specific to the Indian context, but care has been taken to incorporate input from current research in branding concepts and practices of international B-schools, specifically from the USA and Europe.
It is proposed to validate the conceptual model of brand building with a sample of Indian B-schools through an empirical study. The seven propositions suggested in this paper will be tested. Managerial implications and further research potential B-schools in India face tough competition from Indian to international B-schools [58-59]. With more-and-more B-schools brands offering similar courses, there

is a need for B-schools to break away from the clutter and offer innovative, market-oriented courses. B-school top management has to understand what a B-school brand is. How does a B-school build its brand? Who are the important stakeholders involved in building the B-school brand? What is the dominant value proposition of the B-school brand? How should a B-school brand position itself in the minds of prospective students, faculty, corporate and society? The proposed conceptual model is stage one of the process of understanding what goes into building a B-school brand. Stage two would empirically test the proposed conceptual model of brand-building. Branding of services, though very evident in industries like airlines, hotels, banking, etc. is still young in educational services like B-schools. B-school branding can be researched from various perspectives and the elements of B-school branding are likely to be quite different from other services branding because of the number of stakeholders involved, the role of top management, and changing market dynamics. The model can be revised further by adding other variables or constructs based on the empirical study. Determining the extent to which the stakeholders play the role of co-creators poses a research challenge. Measuring the impact of stakeholders' feedback in creating the B-school brand is also a research challenge.

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