Does School Branding Matter in Secondary Education?

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The 12-year compulsory education was enacted in 1998 and took effect in school year 2001. It will be fully achieved in 2014 (Government Information Office, ROC, 2012). The idea of extending nine years of compulsory education was put forward in 1983 and finally reached the consensus on the basis of several key reasons even though ten ministers of education have come and gone during the period. First, national economic development requires individuals whose ability should be competitive. Nevertheless, when compared with advanced nations, Taiwan has still fallen behind. In addition, nearly half of high schools are private with tuition four times more than that of public schools. The situation is even worse for vocational high schools because most of the students enrolled in vocational high schools are from families with both middle and low social class. Likewise, the educational gap between city and country generates unsolved problems, including uneven educational qualities, uneven distribution of resources, and excessive pressure from seeking higher education. Therefore, to solve the educational problems such as the quality of manpower and unjust hierarchy of social status, it is necessary to extend the compulsory education period. As such, the role of school not only enhances competitiveness, but also promotes social just and personal development.

While the implementation of the 12-year compulsory education plan is around the corner, many key issues need to be concerned. For example, as the government wishes, do students really choose schools in their neighborhood? Or do students still follow school branding and prefer senior high to vocational high school? What factors influence students’ choice of high school, especially the vocational ones? How does school do to satisfy students’ needs? Is there any discord between teachers’ attitude and students’ needs? The present study aims to investigate the attributes to students’ choice of vocational high school and further build up a model of school branding in the education market. Hopefully, school teachers and administers can better understand what their students’ needs are and then highlight or adjust their services. After all, students nowadays are no longer just students of their teachers, they are also consumers.

Does school branding matter? To figure out the question, we have to concern several domains, including a current situation of high school market in
Taiwan and school branding and service (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). Brand and its related factors especially play an important role in decision-making like choosing a school. Understanding a list of criteria of selecting an ideal school becomes a must (Mourad, 2011). While vocational high school in Taiwan has been perceived as inferior to general high school, this paper hopes to offer some insights and practical implications for marketing vocational high school. Meanwhile, this paper also hopes to raise vocational high school teachers’ awareness of students’ needs and adjust their attitudes. After all, the 12-year compulsory education may bring about a great impact on vocational high schools although the government, in some aspects, hopes senior high and vocational schools can be incorporated into communities.

**Education System in Taiwan**

Education in Taiwan can be divided into different phases: preschool education; nine years of compulsory education, consisting of six years of elementary and three years of junior high school; senior secondary education, which can be senior high school, vocational high school, or five-year junior college; and post-secondary education, that is, higher education (Figure 1).

As mentioned, in addition to a scant number of five-year junior colleges, two major types of institution above junior high school level exist. They are senior high school and senior vocational school, both of which take three years to complete and both of which are attributed to senior secondary education, according to the Ministry of Education in Taiwan. Senior vocational schools offer courses in areas such as agriculture, industry, commerce, marine products, home economics, opera and arts, whereas senior high school functions as a bridge into higher education system. In 1997, the attendance of a senior vocational high school was not presumed to enter college or university; instead, it was likely to be the final educational experience and workforce preparation (Chang, 1999). However, with the rise in economic growth, more and more families have the ability to support their children in further study. Since 2000, vocational high school graduates have started to dedicate themselves to higher education by taking the national examination offered by Testing Center for Technology and Vocational Education (TCTE) or even participate in the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE). The number is sharply increasing. Take Shilin High School of Commerce as an example, students here almost all want to go to higher education.
Apparently, for most of the families, the belief of going to higher education for vocational high school graduates will be firm and even stronger in the year of the implementation of 12-year compulsory education. It is the social and economic development in Taiwan that has changed the value of senior secondary education. The attendance of a senior vocational high school is no longer preparation for workforce. Now its function is much more similar to that of senior high—a bridge to higher education. Yet, the problem left is which school is more attractive for junior high students, senior high or vocational high school? Without breaking the myth of superiority of high school, how do vocational high schools find their way in the near future? And how do they survive in the secondary education market?
New Era in Education: Service Industry

In the ancient times, the education system was verbal and carried out generally by the prestigious elders, whose purpose was to instill social and cultural values. The modern education industry, in contrast, is not. Ex-Minister of Education, Yung Chaur-shin, in 1999 had a speech in Taipei, claiming that education is a service industry. Though most of the teachers were shocked and some even sniffed at the claim, government policies, social changes, business trends, advances in information technology, and globalization have reshaped today’s education market and made it true (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). In other words, apart from transmission of values and morals, education, as well, comprises training by professionals and organized instructions regarding systematic curricula and pedagogy.

Education nowadays is designed to create tangible and intangible services for their consumers. These services, according to Lovelock & Wirtz (2011), do not involve transfer of ownership; instead, they are process-orientated, including people processing (students’ physical entrance to the school field), possession processing (students’ knowledge and skill possessions), mental stimulus processing (students’ ethical standards establishment and maintenance), and information processing (other related intangible form of service). In addition, like business programs, the services a school provides are also characterized and assessed by their quality after consumption (Chen, 2008). Shahaida et al. (2009) indicates that business success does not simply come from their major products or services; it is a combination of services and image or increased by creating the brand image. For example, the Star Wars brand created more revenue from the sale of associated products than it did from cinema tickets. Thus, branding is fundamental to the success of many organizations (Randall, 1997). This analogy can be applied to school business, which makes “school branding” a potentially important role in the education market.

A strong brand offers consumers signals to make inferences about the attributes of the product or service so that it can initiate consumers’ purchase decision and further generate a competitive advantage for the business (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2011). Perhaps that is why “school branding” has been discussed in higher education for years and, meanwhile, it is viewed as a major factor of how students choose the school. Schools of higher education have strived to build up their brands to attract more consumers. Likewise, the tension seems to spread over secondary education because of the 12-year compulsory education system and the dropping fertility rate. The Ministry of Education emphasizes that quality
and equality of high school education will be a top priority in secondary education. Therefore, it is time for any faculty in secondary education to build up school branding and prudently consider about what the school is and what the school aspires to be.

**School Branding and Its Attributes**

Brands improve the efficiency of marketing programs for higher education, and they are more likely to do so for secondary education. But what is a brand? What is school branding? According to Doyle (2001), a brand is a specific name, symbol or design or some combination of these which is distinctive from another. People have the sense of the “brand,” and they will tag bits of their experience with “it” and generate straight away a certain kind of feeling. Therefore, in a cognitive aspect, a brand is a set of hooks that one’s mind uses to organize his or her experience of a commercial offering. Business and manufacturers recognize the truth that brands help to boost sales. Analogically, school branding is a unique attractor to parents and students.

A school brand is not only about a school’s rankings and test scores but also about its culture, atmosphere, and mindset. Researchers (Jobber, 2001; King, 1991; Doyle, 1989) have claimed that several factors are crucially involved in building a successful brand, generally including quality, positioning, repositioning, communication, a long-term perspective, and internal marketing (Figure 2). Quality, for example, is regarded as a vital element of a good brand. Its consistence and credibility is usually expected in consumers’ minds; that is why higher quality brands achieve a higher market share and higher profitability (Chen, 2008; Shahharudin et al., 2010). Positioning, such as brand name, image, and service standards, is how consumers view a brand in a market. For example, tick-like swoosh reminds consumers of Nike which is almost the king of sports and so does Golden Arches to McDonald in the fast food industry. Repositioning adjusts the movement to the tendency and reflects a change in consumers’ tastes, whereas brand contacts received by consumers are relevant to communication, including how to build awareness, to develop the brand personality and reinforce the perception of the target audience. All these perspectives make enterprises stand longer.

Though branding seems to determine consumers’ choice of the product or service, the notion of branding, in general, can have various definitions and measurements. In this study, we focus on the implicit and explicit attitudes of students, parents, and faculty for the elements are well established in psychology (Greenwald, Banaji, Rudman, Farnham, Nosek, & Mellot, 2002). In social
psychology, explicit attitudes are more propositional or cognitive in orientation, whereas implicit attitudes usually appear from automatic affective reactions (Rudman 2004). Thus, explicit attitudes are apparently shown as the criteria of school evaluations such as administrative management and policies, but methods of quantifying and measuring implicit attitudes such as the Evaluative Movement Assessment (EMA) and Implicit Association Test (IAT) have commonly applied.

School branding is not just the same as enterprises’ because of its non-profit property. Though, to survive in a competitive education market, a school needs to invest in the brand over the long-term effort, the components of branding can be various in different settings. Therefore, all members of the school, including the principal, faculty, students, and parents, should perceive the brand values and ensure that the brand is marketed “internally” as well as externally.

For years, the result of the junior high school students’ basic competence test has been used as the basis for deciding students’ enrollment modes in secondary education. However, it will be different after the implementation of the 12-year compulsory education—junior high school students can choose their ideal schools to meet their needs and characteristics. In this respect, school branding has become more important than ever before because the primary purpose of a 12-year compulsory education system is to pursue quality and equality of education. Therefore, criteria of selecting an ideal school will become a new issue right after the educational policy.
The theory of brand building provides common guidance; however, it varies on account of social backgrounds and other factors. For example, previous studies on the selection of higher education institutions have shown that attributes of selecting schools contain location, tuition, courses and external sources, internationalization (Chen, 2008; Mourad, 2011), reputation and ranking (Temple, 2006), quality of the education service, word of mouth, infrastructure, school’s mentoring programs, politics, etc. Mourad (2011) further categorizes these attributes into different domains, including consumer-based (e.g. students and parents’ experience), provider-based (e.g. location, relationship between the students/parents and the faculties/staff, and size of the institution), information-based (e.g. advertising, and marketing activities, personal recommendations, and word of mouth), service provided-based (e.g. quality of the educational service, tuition, usage-benefits from the service, after sales service), and symbolic-based attributes (e.g. brand adding value and co-branding, positioning in the market, and overall image and reputation).

Mourad (2011) in fact provides a set of clear, content criteria; however, he focused on higher education institutions in Egypt. As mentioned, we believe that different levels of school and different cultures and social environments will have different factors affecting consumers’ preferences in selection of a school. Therefore, on the basis of Mourad’s criteria, it is a must to sort out the items of criteria and categorize them into organized groups, such as students-based, school-based, and informational-based aspects. For sure, some other factors may be overlooked when considered their contributing to the selection.

Cultural Bounds

For Asian students (e.g. Taiwanese), selecting a school has not been like shopping a common product. Traditionally, parents believe that to have a happy and secure life, children must earn a good salary at a stable job, so that parents tend to push their children to get into a good kindergarten, primary school and secondary school and finally a prestigious university (Napompech, 2011). This concept somehow dominates students in choosing their schools.

Research on cultures for years has asserted that Asian people care more about their group and family, different from Western people who are more individual oriented (Gregory & Munch, 1996; Shulruf, Hattie, & Dixon, 2011, Wagner III, 1995). Thus, Taiwanese students are considered collectivists that have a great emphasis on the importance of groups and family and think more in terms of “we,” unlike American people coming from individualistic cultures who tend to think only of themselves as individuals. Consequently, choosing a school
for Taiwanese people has not been a student’s mission but his or her family’s or even teachers’. However, advanced technology get people all over the world closer with one another, which makes Taiwanese people are greatly influenced by western cultures. Thus, in addition to figuring out the attributes in selection of vocational high schools (school branding), it is worth exploring whether, for Taiwanese students, harmony and loyalty within a group and family nowadays is still important and how the forces of students, parents, and teachers meet the balance.

The implementation of the 12-year compulsory education system will bring about a great impact on the secondary education market. As well, it will influence vocational high school which is generally assumed as inferior to senior high school. As members of the vocational high school faculty, we hope to find out our way in the competitive education market and hope to reach the requirement that the Ministry of Education emphasizes—pursuing quality and equality of education. Therefore, it becomes a must to investigate the attributes of students’ choice of an ideal school as well as the viewpoints of both parents and teachers. In respect of the factors of school selection, we can better understand the needs of our students, parents, and even faculty and ensure whether they are satisfied with the school’s current administration and programs. Moreover, we hope to arouse the faculty members’ awareness of the change and further together build up school branding in the education market.

Branding is an investment in the future. It is also an investment in a school’s ability to compete effectively for students, parents, and faculty. The reality has shown that the most recognizable school branding will gain the greatest accolades and consistently attract more students and faculty. Therefore, in the competitive world of education, school must continually compete to remain viable, reliable, and consistent over time. Those who have insight all market aggressively and many have already begun their own branding campaigns. Let’s not operate in a vacuum. After all, students nowadays are no longer just students of their teachers, they are consumers. They have the right to strive for what they want.

Education is not just about the knowledge in textbooks; it develops in us a perspective of looking at life and the world around us. However, education is a long journey which needs all participants’ involvement in terms of time and efforts. Creating and managing a strong brand is one of the main strategies to reach the purpose of education. Thus, every school should build up its brand and check that the brand composed of both characteristics which can meet their
consumers’ need and expectations which further create a more efficient educational environment for generations in the coming century.

References


