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Marketing factors that contribute to the brand positioning of private universities in Puebla

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Abstract:

Choosing a university degree in Mexico is a decision that a large number of people make in their lives in search of professional development. Private universities, compared to public ones, assume greater challenges by having limited resources, in a context of economic difficulty. That is why interest arises in carrying out this research carried out in the city of Puebla, Mexico, a city with a significant number of universities. Universities, when communicating their academic quality, apply communication and educational marketing strategies, disseminating their institutional missions and achieving a position in the target markets, strengthening their presence at a digital level. The market of applicants for a bachelor's program uses digital positioning as a factor in decision-making when choosing the university to enroll. The contribution to knowledge of this research is to determine the elements of communication and marketing that favor brand positioning and the perception of private universities in the city of Puebla. Among the findings found, it was determined that Higher Education Institutions in Puebla perform brand positioning strategies that allow them to disseminate the academic offer to their target market, through traditional and digital media, these tools being the basis positioning strategies and business development.

Keywords:

Positioning, brand, universities, Puebla.

JEL Codes: I23; I2; I20.



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1. Introducción

In recent years, Mexico has seen an increase in the establishment of higher education institutions, the majority of which are private. According to federal government data, in the state of Puebla there are 230 universities, ranking third nationally after Mexico City with 341 universities and the State of Mexico with 240 universities. Most of these universities are located in the state capital (Secretaría de Cultura, 2023). There is a growing trend of institutions gaining official recognition, making Puebla a cluster of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering various educational options, positioning it as one of the locations with the highest demand for the establishment of universities. Due to the range of options available, each private university seeks to maintain its market position among the choices offered in this region. Although there are various higher education institutions, some have been established for a long time and aim to be included in the target market's selection with their academic offerings by designing promotional strategies and activities. This results in increased competition, necessitating promotional efforts for HEIs to achieve institutional objectives, including effective brand positioning and meeting enrollment goals to ensure sustainable operation (Ibarra, De la Vega & Malcón, 2023).

According to Larios-Gómez (2014), Higher Education Institutions in Mexico are undergoing a redefinition of their responsibilities. They are not only tasked with building information societies and managing knowledge but are now continuously seeking to ensure their survival in the educational market. To achieve this, they incorporate marketing actions as a strategic tool in their organizational management. Marketing has become an essential element for universities to establish and consolidate their presence in the educational market, especially at the private level.

In this scenario, and as a strategic tool for Higher Education Institutions, marketing has the potential to adapt educational services to the economic, political, and social context in which universities contribute to preserving knowledge and promoting the common good (Malcón et al., 2021; Moreno & De la Vega, 2020; De la Vega, 2012). Education as a service must be updated, and it is essential to stay informed about society's needs, therefore, the academic offerings, quality, and academic support services are key to attracting and increasing enrollment (Cárdenas, 2015; De la Vega, 2013).

Gómez (2017) analyzes several points regarding the context of private education in Puebla. The author considers that universities with a minimum acceptable quality are those offering programs with high labor demand in technical and practical aspects, which are not highly specialized. These academic programs are necessary for the existence of the higher education institution, as lacking them would jeopardize the institution's sustainable development. Meanwhile, Gordillo et al. (2020) present research to determine the best actions for institutional communication within a university that enhance brand image and market positioning among prospective students. They conclude that a fundamental action is to define a coherent and attractive visual and verbal identity that reflects the institution's values and personality and is applied across all communication channels. The value of the mentioned research lies in analyzing the aspects that distinguish higher education institutions and identifying digital marketing factors that support brand positioning concerning the market interested in educational options. In the study, the authors explain that a search was conducted across various academic databases such as Scopus, Ebsco, ProQuest, Web of Science, Redalyc, Dialnet, and Google Scholar to identify research projects on the use of digital marketing in the academic and administrative activities of higher education institutions in Mexico and Latin America.

2. General Objective

To identify elements that enhance brand positioning in private universities in Puebla through educational marketing, contributing to the design of effective strategies for student recruitment to increase enrollment.

3. Specific Objectives

The first consists of randomly selecting a sample of five higher education institutions for analysis. The second consists of collecting information through observations and analysis of documents and information issued by the institutions under study, emphasizing educational promotion.

The third consists of identifying elements that enhance brand positioning in private universities in Puebla through educational marketing.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Brand Perception

Brand perception refers to the mental image a consumer has of a particular brand, which is influenced by past experiences, advertising and marketing, and the perceived quality of the product or service offered by the brand (Keller, 2016; De la Vega, Chávez & Chávez, 2024). The following discusses theories that accompany the study of different disciplines and provide a better understanding of the issues addressed by this study. It is necessary to start with the topic of communication, which, in its various approaches, refers to commercial communication. Among the different authors discussing the beginnings of media, Hidalgo Toledo (2014) highlights that, within the transformation of social structures, communication has become an extension of human memory, preserved in various media along with its interpretation and context. In a classic marketing text titled "Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind," Ries & Trout (1991) emphasize the importance of using differentiating elements to form a positioning strategy that consistently benefits the organization in various aspects through the effective use of different communication media. Ahmed et al. (2015) note that digital tools enable the strengthening of university positioning, in which one of the advantages offered by marketing through these tools is the implementation of strategies over a reasonable period and the possibility of replication.

Organizations are complex systems; they have a history and develop behaviors that constantly evolve and change. Likewise, the markets, businesses, and sectors where they operate are also dynamic and changing in an unpredictable environment (De la Vega & Rivero, 2014). In this situation, organizations cannot explain or convey all their complexity to the public. Capriotti (2021) highlights the challenge of managing the large amount of information generated within organizations and making it known to the general public who might be interested, preventing target markets from quickly identifying with the organization's brand.

Therefore, strategic communication management is essential for any organization to establish an action plan that ensures communicative messages align with organizational objectives and are communicated effectively to relevant audiences.

Delving into the concept of communication, Contreras (2019) states that corporate communication is essential for creating and maintaining the institution's reputation and establishing a positive

relationship with its relevant publics, including students, faculty, employees, parents, and the community at large. A good corporate communication strategy helps build a positive image of the institution and maintain a trustful relationship with its relevant publics. Papic (2019) asserts that organizational communication is a process aimed at establishing and maintaining effective communication between the educational institution and its relevant publics, with the goal of achieving its strategic objectives. Additionally, the author notes that brand perception is the image that publics have of the educational institution, based on their experiences and the information they receive about it. Consequently, organizational communication is a key factor in influencing an institution's brand perception by conveying a consistent and coherent message and building a positive image of the institution.

Corporate identity is the set of values, principles, and characteristics that define an educational institution, while brand perception is the image that publics have of the institution based on their experiences and the information they receive about it. Therefore, the relationship between corporate identity and brand perception is close. In this sense, according to Kapferer (2012), brand identity is built through the combination of tangible and intangible elements, ranging from the name, logo, and design to the personality and values of the institution. Hence, corporate identity is essential for building a strong and coherent brand perception that aligns with the image the institution wishes to project.

Alonso (2018) mentions that information and communication technologies have been evolving at an accelerated pace over the past 20 years, making them a reference point in the face of globalization and the impact that technological structures have on our lives. Each historical period has its new technologies and elements that distinguish it, making the term "new" somewhat relative.

Consequently, information and communication technologies have a close relationship with the brand perception of an educational institution, given that proper management of these technologies can contribute to generating a positive and strong brand perception, while inadequate management can have the opposite effect.

Parra et al. (2022) assert that today, private higher education institutions operate in a challenging environment, so it is advisable to use marketing strategies that allow them to maintain student enrollment at their institutions and strengthen their brand perception.

Higher education in Mexico faces a perspective of continuous change, not only due to market behavior but also due to the diversification of its natural functions, its restructuring and organizational development, its service and academic program positioning, and its internationalization, among other aspects (Cárdenas, 2018).

Rodríguez-Abitia et al. (2020) state that the university community has the task of seeking new forms of teaching and learning, training, and understanding how people interact and live with technology as part of their routine. In this sense, it is necessary for both faculty and students to develop technological and social skills in order to become agents of change who adapt to new times in line with sustainable development. Digital marketing is the key variable that allows for the application of technology and actions aimed at strengthening brand perception. According to Sainz de Vicuña (2018), digital marketing adapts to changes in contexts without losing sight of the goals of a company or organization. In this sense, the application of digital educational marketing offers a wide range of

possibilities for universities, allowing them to expand their commercial opportunities and increase their student enrollment, while also retaining their current students.

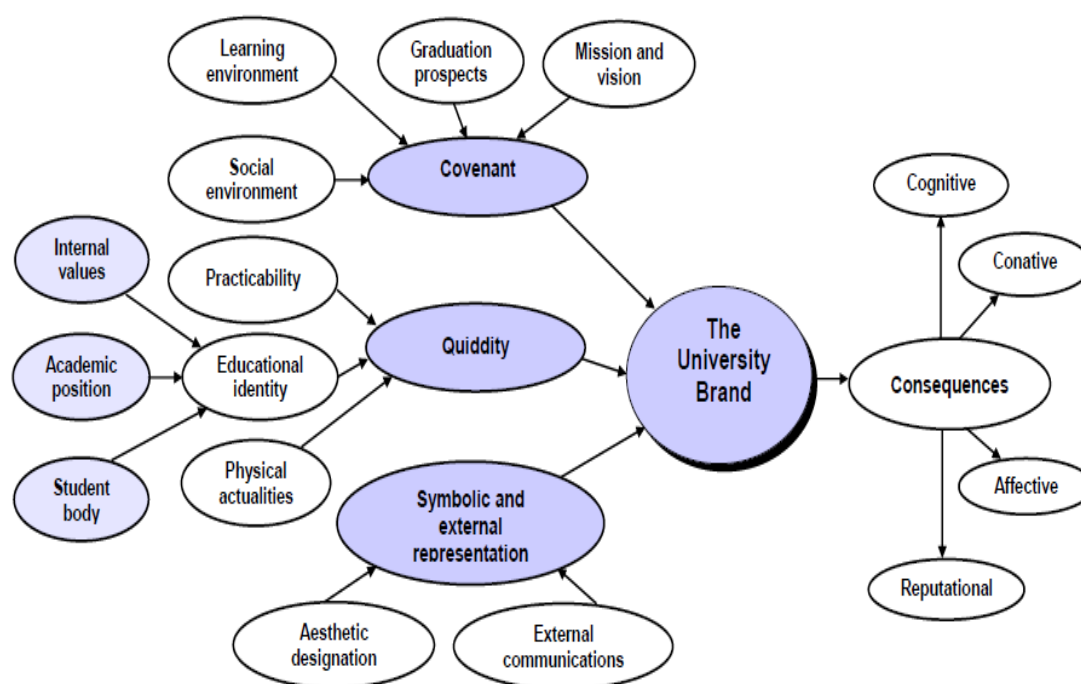
Within the theory of effectiveness and digital flow, Fleming & Alberdi's (2000) theory of the 4 F's of digital flow stands out. This theory describes a positive psychological state in which a user is deeply engaged in a digital activity and has an optimal experience. The 4 F's in this theory refer to:

- Focalization: Refers to the concentration that the user has on the task they are performing. In this state, the user is fully focused on the activity and is able to ignore external distractions.
- Feedback: Refers to the feedback that the user receives from the activity they are performing. Feedback can be immediate or long-term, but it must always be relevant to the activity.
- Fascination: Refers to the feeling of being completely immersed in the activity, losing track of time and space. In this state, the user is captivated by the activity and fully engaged with it.
- Finality: Refers to the sense that the activity being performed has a clear purpose and that the user is progressing towards a goal. In this state, the user feels motivated and committed to the activity.

In the topic of perceived educational quality, Alvarado et al. (2016) propose management and elements that will help educational organizations evaluate the effectiveness of their proposed strategies. Some of these elements include: establishing clear objectives; setting success indicators; facilitating data collection; developing data analysis; and implementing continuous information review and adjusting strategies as necessary.

Bennett & Ali-Choudhury (2009) develop a model of brand elements with three basic components in terms of: a collection of promises made to the external world about the brand's benefits (promise); a set of distinctive characteristics that define the brand's inherent nature and reality (brand essence); and a variety of aesthetic designations and external communications that describe the brand (the symbolic and external representation of the brand). The authors state that the consequences of having a positive perception of a strong university brand include the intention to apply (or seriously consider applying) to the institution and engaging in favorable comments. According to the mentioned authors, the emotions of potential students can influence their decision to enroll in an institution and their perception of it. That is, it is important for students to feel that they would like to attend that university and that it is seen as pleasant and attractive. The authors propose a model, illustrated in Figure 1, for designing a university brand that generates positive perceptions among prospective students.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Designing a University Brand



Fuente: Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009

4.2 Educational Marketing

Educational marketing refers to the set of activities aimed at creating, promoting, and delivering value to current and prospective students, with the goal of improving teaching quality and academic outcomes, as well as attracting and retaining students, faculty, and sponsors (Tahir et al., 2017). This practice involves applying marketing strategies in the educational context, including market research, audience segmentation, identifying growth opportunities, developing action plans, and measuring results. The ultimate goal of educational marketing is to improve the quality of education and ensure the financial sustainability of educational institutions.

It is relevant to highlight the importance of educational marketing in both the public and private sectors. This practice is a key strategic tool for achieving objectives such as increasing student enrollment, which is essential for the survival of private sector educational institutions. In this section, several theories are presented that illustrate how educational marketing has been applied in both local and international contexts. Over time, educational marketing has evolved and witnessed the rapid growth of some educational institutions, as well as the disappearance of others.

The marketing strategy involves analyzing consumer needs and the advantages that brands or companies offer to meet those needs. To better understand how higher education institutions can promote their academic offerings, it is important to consider the theories developed by authors over time to analyze the phenomenon of educational marketing. These theories help to understand how to maximize competitive advantages and interpret the positioning of higher education institutions in the market. Doña and Luque (2017) assert that higher education institutions must combine the characteristics of the marketing mix to identify potential customers, but also to continuously improve

their service offerings and expand in a planned and efficient manner in a competitive environment. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop more effective communication strategies and promote direct and individualized communication between the brand and the customer. This strategy represents relational marketing and involves creating long-lasting relationships between all stakeholders, both internal and external (Santana-López et al., 2019; De la Vega, 2016).

Sanz Del Vecchio et al. (2017) examine educational marketing as a crucial tool for the success of private universities, stating that this marketing allows universities to establish their own identity at both national and international levels without relying on third parties. Additionally, educational marketing can also contribute to improving the education of students already enrolled in the institution.

Pastukhov et al. (2017) suggest that visual models can enhance an organization's positioning strategy by providing an objective view of the target audience's location. Additionally, visual models allow for the collection of information about the university and its competitors, helping to take corrective actions to improve positive positioning and effectively present the university's unique and distinctive characteristics.

Educational institutions seek to improve their strategies to achieve commercial objectives, particularly to help students make the best decision for their higher education. In this context, Market Theory is important and can explain productivity challenges and other issues faced by educational institutions. Walberg (2000) describes that this theory focuses on profit maximization, cost reduction, and the constant effort to improve organizational efficiency, but applied to the context of educational institutions.

When conducting a study on educational marketing, it is important to take the context into account, as regions within and outside of Mexico may vary depending on their socioeconomic and cultural situation (Larios Gómez, 2014; De la Vega & Rivero, 2009).

According to Camilleri (2019), Higher Education Institutions are influenced by policies and socioeconomic changes in their environment. Social mobility has decreased, and institutions are striving to strengthen themselves in order to become more competitive and efficient in different markets.

Digital strategies present a great opportunity for educational institutions in terms of promotion. Prokhorova & Shpolyanskaya (2018) propose that internet-based technologies offer better opportunities for universities to interact with their internal and external markets. These technologies also provide valuable information, such as the time users spend on the digital platform, their browsing behavior, and other indicators that can be used to improve commercial structures and strategies. The digital platform can serve as a unique and accessible point of interaction for measuring the effectiveness of educational institutions' commercial actions. Sainz de Vicuña (2018) asserts that to evaluate and analyze a digital marketing strategy in companies, the focus should be on the consumer, user, or client as the recipient and reference point for commercial activity. To highlight the importance of digital platforms in the communication processes of educational institutions, it is important to mention Grajales-Montoya et al. (2021), who affirm that universities must communicate their academic quality not only internally but also to a broader audience to ensure that their external reputation is closely linked to the internal one, thereby guaranteeing the authenticity of both. Positioning a higher education institution in a competitive market is not an easy task, and marketing,

along with other tools, contributes to the function of positioning the institution in a highly focused market. To expand on this approach, the research of Montes de Oca et al. (2021) can be cited, which points out that, regarding brand and branding, there are three key concepts: brand identity (how the brand is perceived); brand image (how it is currently perceived); and brand positioning (its value position in the consumer's mind).

Currently, companies need to adapt to market demands and explore new horizons and markets to seize business opportunities globally, aiming for a greater impact within niche markets. Kotler and Armstrong (2011) argue that it is essential to generate customer satisfaction and long-term social well-being through sustainable marketing strategies to achieve company goals and meet social responsibilities.

When making marketing-related decisions within an organization, it is essential to have individuals trained in digital marketing who possess up-to-date knowledge and the ability to create innovative and high-quality content for a specific market. There are no predetermined marketing strategies for institutions, so it is necessary to tailor them to the needs and characteristics of each one.

5. Methodology

In the development of this study, the research methodology involved a documentary design with a cross-sectional approach. This means that data from a single point in time, specifically the year 2021, were used to conduct a descriptive investigation identifying the characteristics of educational marketing employed by higher education institutions in their efforts to improve brand positioning, in line with the general objective of the study. Regarding data collection techniques, documentary evidence was gathered and analyzed through the collection, observation, and analysis of promotional information from five educational institutions in Puebla: Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla, Trozmer Centro Universitario, Universidad Anáhuac Puebla, Universidad de Oriente, and Instituto de EstudiosUniversitarios.

The following are the characteristics with which this research was designed (Table 1).

Table 1. ResearchDesign

<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Description</i>
Level of Research: Descriptive Research	The characteristics of a given phenomenon are described through the collection and analysis of data. In this case, it involves the educational marketing practices that higher education institutions undertake in their efforts to improve brand positioning.
Research Design: DocumentaryResearch	Information was collected through observations and the analysis of documents and information issued by the institutions under study, with an emphasis on educational promotion.
Purpose of the Research: Basic Research	This is a basic or pure research study aimed at expanding knowledge about educational marketing.

Scope of the Study: Information generated by higher education institutions in the city of
 Cross-Sectional Puebla was analyzed at the digital level during the year 2021.
 Research

Source: Created by the author.

6. Results Obtained

Below, the results obtained based on the methodology of this study are summarized in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2: Elements that Favor Brand Positioning in Private Universities in Puebla through Educational Marketing

Stage	Purpose	Elements	Actors
1. Campaign	Conceptualize the image, syntax, and writing aligned with institutional values	Objectives Target Market Message Value Proposition Media CRM Conversion Evaluation Website	Marketing Management Communications Management Community Manager Promoters Digital Analysts Sales/Promotions Representative
2. Promotion	Disseminate the academic offer of undergraduate programs to the target market.	Public Relations Events Activations Interested Parties Mobile Devices Online Chat CRM Prospective Studies	Promoters Marketing Department University Promotion University Aspirants Parents Call Center Areas
3. Positioning	Assess the level of brand awareness in the minds of prospective university students.	Market research Primary sources Secondary sources Social listening	Marketing management Communication management University promotion University applicants Employers Graduates Parents Stakeholders Digital specialists Marketintelligence

4. PerceivedValue	Differentiating factors of a brand compared to its competition.	Market Studies Primary Sources Secondary Sources Social Listening	Marketing Management University Aspirants Target Market Faculty Graduates
5. Enrollment	Enrollment process for the aspirant and document reception.	Admission format Documentation Registration fee	University promotion Admissions Student services
6. Retention	Develop strategies to complete the academic program	Entry surveys Exit surveys	Academic management Student services

Source: Created by the author (2023)

The results support that there are activities that enhance brand positioning in private universities in Puebla through educational marketing. It is plausible to assert that the analyzed educational institutions required services and advice from experts in promotion and brand positioning regarding key considerations when developing a brand positioning strategy. This study allows us to affirm that comprehensive strategies incorporating several of the elements identified in this study, which favor brand positioning, are relevant options for positioning the educational institution in the target market.

7. Conclusions and Discussion

This study has identified elements that favor brand positioning in private universities in Puebla through educational marketing, contributing to the design of effective strategies for attracting students to increase enrollment. According to the theoretical framework analyzed, educational marketing involves a series of actions that educational institutions undertake using processes, models, tools, and platforms. The media and tools used change rapidly in today's fast-paced digital environment, requiring constant updates in information and communication technology to leverage technological and innovative advantages. The analysis conducted in this document could be replicated for other types of organizations beyond the educational sector in the search for elements that positively impact brand positioning.

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