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# Service branding from the perspective of higher education administrators

Service branding from the perspective of HEAs

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide empirical insights about service branding from higher education administrators (HEAs) perspectives and to identify the main factors involved in their strategic thinking in this sector.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Adopting a qualitative approach, 22 in-depth interviews were performed in Brazilian HEAs to analyze service branding as a strategic institutional process in this context.

**Findings** – Findings reveal that service branding depends on several factors, e.g., in this case, deep integration between branding and services, leadership involvement, strong value propositions, sharing of strategic guidelines, branding experiences and, finally, credibility and reputation. Excellence of service is considered essential in higher education (HE) and, therefore, service branding faces the challenge of promoting the provision of quality services.

**Originality/value** – Although there have been many studies relating to HE and branding, few authors have studied service branding in educational sector and which issues must be observed in a competitive marketplace.

**Keywords** Brazil, Higher education

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Promoting educational development is one of the UNESCO's (2014) priorities for a more sustainable, inclusive and just society. According to Al-Dulaimi (2016, p. 58), "at the global level, education is seen as the main factor of sustainable economic, social and human development" and has as its aim the full development both of the individual and of society.

The "World development report 2018" stated that there are 200m higher education (HE) students in the world (World Bank, 2018). Anywhere in the world, "university education is regarded as one of the most important factors that influence the development of a highly skilled workforce" (Al-Dulaimi, 2016, p. 58). However, education does not happen through government action alone but also through private initiatives at several levels (Fried and Hill, 2009; Saviani, 2011; Queiroz *et al.*, 2013; Sampaio, 2013, 2014; Tonegutti, 2017; Knobel and Verhine, 2017). In Brazil, HE is provided by a governmental system that allows the strong presence of private higher education institutions (HEIs), which include universities and colleges, in a competitive marketplace.

HE is a sector that has been under study from several perspectives: services marketing (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2001; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Judson *et al.*, 2006; Ng and Forbes, 2009; Molesworth *et al.*, 2011; Khanna *et al.*, 2014; Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014; Hemsley-Brown *et al.*, 2016; Al-Dulaimi, 2016), brand management (Williams and Omar, 2014), branding (Temple, 2006; Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009; Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014; Tolbert, 2014; Abbas, 2014; Williams and Omar, 2014),



strategies (Judson *et al.*, 2006; Chapleo, 2010; Pinar *et al.*, 2011; Khanna *et al.*, 2014; Balmer and Wang, 2015; Chapleo, 2015a; Chapleo and Clark, 2016), education and services (Ostrom and Iacobucci, 1998; Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010; Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014; Al-Dulaimi, 2016).

Although many authors have focused on HE, in the same way, “extant literature on ingredient branding is directed at tangible products but does not account for the role of services as ingredients” (Helm and Özergin, 2015, p. 142). Service branding is an emergent aspect area of the literature and it can be effective in such a competitive marketplace. In a scenario dominated by private HEIs and large educational groups, Brazilian higher education administrators (HEAs) should observe service branding issues, increasing understanding of perceptions of this strategic thinking.

This research has the following aims:

- (1) to analyze service branding from perspective of HEAs and to identify the main factors involved in their strategic thinking;
- (2) to identify the main issues related to service branding in HE; and
- (3) to analyze the challenges those integrate service branding in educational sector.

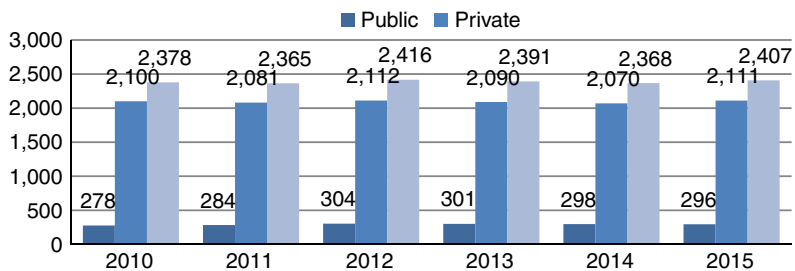
Overall, this study aimed to provide a better understanding of service branding in the educational context. This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, focusing on Brazilian Census of Higher Education (2010–2015), an annual survey of the education system by the Ministry of Education (<http://portal.inep.gov.br>) and service branding in HE; Section 3 presents the methodological approach; Section 4 describes the main insights and findings; and Section 5 provides the discussion and conclusion, including managerial implications, study limitations and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Brazilian higher education

Brazilian HE sector consists of 2,407 institutions, among which 2,111 are private, represented by universities and colleges (2016 Brazilian Higher Education Census). The country is considered the “largest higher education system in Latin America and one of the more dynamic and fastest growing systems” (Salto, 2017, p. 822). “Fifty years ago, Higher Education in Brazil [...] was predominantly public” (Knobel and Verhine, 2017, p. 27). Nowadays, private HEIs represent 75.3 percent of the market share and approximately 6.1m students in undergraduate courses, which represents three out of every four students studying in a private institution (see Figure 1).

These numbers reveal the strength of private educational services in Brazil as part of a business the value of which is estimated at 15bn euros per year (Hoper Educational Advisory, 2016). “Through planned and unplanned factors, Brazil has given the private



**Figure 1.**  
Brazilian higher education – public vs private (2010–2015)

**Source:** 2016 Brazilian Higher Education Census (<http://portal.inep.gov.br>)

sector overall – now very much including the for-profit sub-sector – a major role in access, keeping most selective institutions in the public sector” (Salmi, 2017, p. 19).

Data from recent years (2010–2015) show moderate growth in this market (0.52 percent), marked by mergers and acquisitions in the Brazilian educational sector, leading to strong competition among these players. According to the auditing and consulting firm KPMG, approximately 180 such transactions were carried out between 2008 and 2014, demonstrating the high profitability of the Brazilian educational sector (Brigatto, 2016). Organizations with billions in net assets have transformed this sector into a true movement of the “monetization of education,” with “strong performance in terms of return on invested capital, well above the historical average of other Brazilian publicly traded companies, confirming the operations as an effectively profitable businesses” (Cunha, 2016). Recently, a possible merger of two education giants was rejected by the Brazilian Administrative Council for Economic Defense, a federal agency that regulates competitiveness and is responsible for promoting free competition, as this action would have created an educational unit with approximately 1.5m students.

Some authors considered “the study of for-profit higher education is a controversial issue in educational research mainly because it addresses explicit ways in which higher education enters the market territory to the extent where for-profit higher education institutions are managed like any other private business firm” (Salto, 2017, p. 812). It makes sense in Brazilian market, with the presence of “giants” in education, where there are four large autochthonous, domestic publicly traded companies in Brazil: Anhanguera Educacional S.A.; Estácio Participações; Kroton Educacional; and Sistema Educacional Brasileiro S.A. (Chaves, 2010, quoted by Salto, 2017), all of them located in southeast region.

Many countries have experienced factors such as increased competition, driving “marketization” that has forced many countries, even developed ones, to adopt the concepts and practices of branding (Chapleo, 2015a). This is also the case in Brazil. In fact, there are many authors who study private HE in Brazil in terms of supply and demand and the role of private institutions (Barbosa, 2012; Martins, 2013; Sampaio, 2015; Bezerra *et al.*, 2017; Salto, 2017; De Campos *et al.*, 2017; Knobel and Verhine, 2017). However, “these studies develop a research agenda related to the privatization and marketization of higher education” (Salto, 2017, p. 814), without focus on service branding, the main proposal of this research.

According to the 2016 Brazilian Higher Education Census, this region is the most attractive in terms of market share and has the highest number of HEIs. São Paulo state is considered the most important state in country from the social and economic point of view and it is also the most attractive in terms of market share and numbers of students; it has five students enrolled in private HEIs for everyone enrolled in a public HEI, while the national average is 2.5 students.

## 2.2 Service branding

The services sector is both complex (Grönroos, 2009, 2015; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009) and heterogeneous (Keller and Lehmann, 2006), characteristics that make it prone to quality variation (*SERI Quarterly*, 2013). This is also true for providers in the educational sector and these characteristics make service branding a challenging area.

Educational sector is also subject to its strong link to the services (Ostrom and Iacobucci, 1998; Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010; Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014; Al-Dulaimi, 2016). “As a sector under increasing pressure, educational services, represented here by private HEIs, will benefit from considering traditional business theories and processes while making strategic and organizational” (Williams and Omar, 2014, p. 1).

First studies about branding emerged in the nineteenth century (Temple, 2006). Since then, “branding is a management concept that has gained increasing popularity in higher education institutions over the last few years” (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009, p. 449)

and has been seen as “a strategic issue and focus for universities and other post-compulsory educational institutions” (Pinar *et al.*, 2011, p. 725). Successful branding involves much more than the simply “the crest on its headed notepaper letterhead” (Temple, 2006, p. 15). In line with other parts of the businesses world, branding has acquired progressively more legitimacy and prestige.

Although institutions do not always “recognize the importance of the corporate brand and understand its strategic nature” (Balmer and Wang, 2015, p. 19), the branding of higher education institutions occurs within a context that is characterized by an increasing transfer of “good” business practices from the private sector (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009, p. 449). Branding has increasingly linked to success in many organizations and strongly connected to marketing strategy (Pinar *et al.*, 2011) and particularly to institutional strategy. Marketization has forced “UK universities to adopt the concepts and practices of branding” (Chapleo, 2015a, b, p. 1151). The challenge of establishing a strategic position seems to be important to a successful brand (Chapleo, 2010), as well as reconciling or address the advantages and potential disadvantages that may exist in marketing and making decisions regarding the brand (Keller and Richey, 2006). And the same happens in Brazil.

Service branding “is generally seen as more complicated than product branding, as the corporate brand is intangible and organizations consist of people whose attitudes, beliefs, and values may vary considerably” (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009, p. 451). Service branding arises as an important issue in strategic thinking in educational context and has transformed into a requirement for leaders in educational services. Several dimensions of service are “interrelated such that a change in one area of service could impact other areas” (Pinar *et al.*, 2011, p. 726). It takes to the following proposition:

*P1.* Different dimensions integrate the service branding in HE.

“Clearly the core [education service] cannot function effectively without supplementary services and although we categorize them separately, the two often interact dynamically in the construction of the university experience” (Ng and Forbes, 2009, pp. 11-26). The actions occurred in university – from classroom to the campus and services – impacting deeply the students’ experiences. It takes to the following proposition:

*P2.* Service branding in HE impacts deeply the students’ educational experiences.

“Universities increasingly adopting branding concepts and approaches, only limited progress has been made towards a culture (and corresponding infrastructure) in HE that whole embraces branding” (Chapleo and Clark, 2016). This occurs because service branding depends on clarifying the reason for the institution’s existence in a “clear vision and the support of leadership” (Chapleo, 2010, p. 178), involving “efforts to provide the best services between brands and consumers” (Khanna *et al.*, 2014). This means including all the employees as “part-time marketers,” preparing them “to serve” and “to accept a customer focus aspect of their responsibilities” (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014, p. 225) – including the CEO. It demands “devote time and resources in building and managing the corporate brand” (Balmer and Wang, 2015, p. 19), regardless of where they are, especially in a competitive market, “institutions face a multitude of issues and challenges in the current era of higher education endeavours” (Beneke, 2011, p. 30). It takes to the following proposition:

*P3.* Service branding depends on involving all employees to serve as “part-time marketers.”

Service branding can provide that in many organizations, including HEIs, which are “facing an increasingly competitive environment in which they must find ways to differentiate their institution and tell their story” (Judson *et al.*, 2006, p. 101). Finally, other issue to be considered consists in caring about brand values that “have to be unique: ‘you must focus your branding efforts on owning a word in the prospect’s mind’” (Temple, 2006, p. 17). Such approach

contributes to the evolution of the value propositions, considered a “cumulative process” (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014, p. 222). It takes to the following proposition:

*P4.* Service branding provides different value propositions in brand building.

All these propositions can be strong and deeply impacted by “adopting a service perspective” (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014, p. 220), “evolved into a role that suggests a promise to meet consumer expectations” (Judson *et al.*, 2006, p. 97). Implementing branding on a service perspective mean consists on integrating education and services marketing research (Ng and Forbes, 2009), as well as “rethinking the very term marketing” (Grönroos and Gummerus, 2014, p. 226) – or branding. “Whilst branding in general receives considerable academic investigation, in the higher education context the specific models are still not wholly understood” (Chapleo, 2015a, b, p. 1151). This paper aims to understand services branding in the HE context, seeking to clarify some aspects related to this segment.

### 3. Methodological approach

The main focus of this study was to explore service branding in Brazilian universities from the perspective of HEAs, to promote a deeper understanding of this theme in a scenario of private HE. In this study, an empirical research approach was adopted to understand the perspectives of those interviewed, specifically an inductive approach, i.e. the researcher may construct theories or hypotheses, explanations and conceptualizations from details provided by a participant for exploratory research (Harwell, 2011). The aim is to gain insights about the main factors that influence service branding, specifically private HEIs in Brazil. Qualitative research is also a method that depends of the systematic classification process of coding of the content of text data and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In this study, narratives describe the perceptions of those interviewed.

In-depth interviews were planned and conducted individually. The convenience sampling technique was used for the sample. Respondents from 22 Brazilian HEAs were interviewed, including: presidents, deans and vice-deans ( $n = 5$ ); directors of marketing ( $n = 8$ ); board directors board ( $n = 3$ ); and educational market experts ( $n = 6$ ). All of them can be considered “significant decision makers in their own right where branding issues are concerned” (Ali-Choudhury *et al.*, 2009). They also represent “elite interviews that are conducted with those who are at the top of an organization or social structure” (Brooks and Normore, 2015, p. 801). The interview is one of the sources of information used as a guided talk (Yin, 2013) to lead the discussion and respondents were encouraged to expand on their perceptions. In the in-depth interview, the “respondents are frequently essential to the success of a case study,” since they may provide important insights about the research topic (Yin, 2013).

Based on the literature review, key questions covered the points that helped in understanding the factors influencing service branding as a strategic phenomenon in HE. Questions pertained to issues such as educational marketing and branding and the key elements that “come to mind” when somebody talks about this issue.

The interviews consisted on the following questions:

- Which are the main issues observed regarding the service branding in the context of HE?
- Which are the main dimensions observed in their perceptions?
- Which are the impacts observed in students’ experience?
- Which value propositions are most valued in the context of service branding in HE?
- Which are the strategic guidelines adopted by HEIs in a high competitiveness scenario?

- How deep are the employees truly involved in this strategy? How about the presence of leaders and CEOs?
- Which are the main challenges related to service branding in educational sector?

Those interviewed were encouraged to speak freely about the main elements that hindered or facilitated their work in private HEIs, as well as how much attention was paid to branding during their planning, thinking about the business, marketing and communications.

The interviews occurred over a period of six months (April to September 2017) and the responses of each person interviewed were recorded and transcribed for analysis and interpretation. The period of each interview varied from 35 to 65 min. Researchers have suggested that 20–30 interviews on the same topic are necessary to understand the collective views on specific issues and obtain 90–95 percent of customer needs and should be sufficient to ensure that subsequent coding exercises result in all emergent coding categories being saturated (Griffin and Hauser, 1993; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The sample is intentional and not probabilistic. Due to confidentiality reasons, the names of these institutions are here identified with letters from A to Q (Table I), which, combined, have more than 360,000 students. None of four large traded companies in Brazil quoted in Section 2.1 was included to avoid creating a new bias on this research.

This study was organized in terms of categories for qualitative analysis, based on the literature review (see Table II for the categories and themes) (Jervis and Drake, 2014) and supported by the software WebQDA.

The categories of analysis were supported by the literature review and chosen to identify the main questions related to branding services. The deductive method was used for this analysis.

Institution	Institution type	Position	Students (×1,000)	Year founded
A	University	Board of directors director of marketing	21.9	1938
B	College	Director of marketing	5.0	1993
C	College	Director of marketing	120.0	1974
D	University	Director of marketing	18.0	1941
E	University	Director of marketing President	10.0	1964
F	College	Director of marketing	15.0	1971
G		Educational marketing expert		
H		Educational marketing expert		
I		Educational marketing expert		
J	University	Board of directors Vice-dean Board of directors	45.0	1871
K	College	Vice-dean	4.5	1902
L		Educational marketing expert		
M	College	Director of marketing President	5.0	1981
N		Educational marketing expert		
O	College	Director of marketing	120.0	1944
P		Educational marketing expert		
Q	Rectors council	President		

**Table I.**  
Respondents

**Notes:** Institution D was ranked in The Times Higher Education BRICS & Emerging Economies University Rankings 2017. Blank cells = not applicable

**Table II.** Categories and themes of analysis regarding service branding

Category	Indicators	Authors
Services	Complexity and heterogeneity of services Intangibility	Keller and Lehmann (2006), Ng and Forbes (2009), Grönroos (2009), Waeraas and Solbakk (2009)
Branding	Clarify the reason for the institutions' existence Legitimacy and prestige Strongly connected to marketing strategy Strategic issue	Chapleo (2010), Pinar <i>et al.</i> (2011), Grönroos and Gummerus (2014), Chapleo (2015a)
Value propositions	Provide the best services Cumulative process, demands differentiation	Khanna <i>et al.</i> (2014), Grönroos and Gummerus (2014)
Challenges	Top-level leadership engagement Rethinking marketing in service branding perspective Employees serving as part-time marketers	Khanna <i>et al.</i> (2014), Grönroos and Gummerus (2014), Balmer and Wang (2015)

## 4. Findings and insights

### 4.1 Deep integration between branding and services

Service branding is a strategic issue and has a strong connection to institutional strategy. Once branding must “clarify the reason for the institutions’ existence” (Chapleo, 2010), the same happens to service branding. It needs a strong strategic thinking of top-level direction and leadership (DM, Institution M), as well as top-level leadership engagement – in terms of resources and planning time – in building and managing the corporate brand (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009; Balmer and Wang, 2015).

In the context of educational service, service branding requires a deep analysis of all services that demand more attention in contact to the academics, promoting the coexistence and closeness between students and institution. It is worth considering that service branding is a set of efforts that help to develop and to integrate branding and services.

Whereas service branding requires the inclusion of efforts to provide and deliver the best services to the students and all community, interviewees considered that “service branding involves practically all actions that can affect the brand” (DM, Institution E) and “it is a beacon for almost every decision” (DM, Institution G), synchronizing organizational culture and what is transmitted by the brand.

### 4.2 Leadership involvement

Being strategic requires continuous planning by top-level educational leadership, especially from the board of directors, presidents, deans and vice-deans. As a “constant worry” (DM, Institution E; VD, Institution K; PP, Institution M) that involves “a 100 percent of my concerns” (DM, Institution D), respondents indicated that service branding encompasses all actions that affect the brand and it cannot be seen as an isolated activity by only one department within the institution but should be worked out in an integrated manner.

It is important to notice that service branding occupies a significant proportion of the school leadership’s time, and “it is something intrinsic to my work in the organization” (DB, Institution J), as quoted by some directors, after all, “administration engagement in the decision-making process is necessary to support the actions that will be implemented” (DM, Institution D).

### 4.3 Strong value propositions

Positive and coherent experiences “in the scope of pedagogical-professional formation” (EXP, Institution P) can contribute with value propositions in all touch points, with both the brand and stakeholders’ experiences. In this sense, “main elements that ‘come to mind’



when talking about branding are: values, mission, differentiation” (PP, Institution M), as frequently mentioned in the narratives. This differentiation creates a competitive advantage in the “mind of the consumer” (EXP, Institution G; DM, Institution E). In this scenario, value propositions are a concern to the areas that focus on actions taken and highlight the lack of an integrated marketing, which is usually the cause of misunderstandings about branding in the context of educational services.

Respondents’ statements in the interviews highlighted both the value of integrated marketing and positive experiences, which include preparing employees to serve as part-time marketers (Grönroos, 2009, p. 226), as mentioned by narratives. The starting point for effective service branding is the identification of the action pillars and the present values in corporate communications, either visual identity, “voice tone” or by the way that it relates with its stakeholders (DM, Institution B), that require “differentiated communication for each one, in terms of language and channels” (EXP, Institution H).

#### 4.4 *Strategic guidelines shared*

The capacity to demonstrate and to communicate the shared strategies guidelines can reduce “the gap between the actual and desired corporate brand identity and the resultant images of the business schools held by the school’s key stakeholders” (Balmer and Wang, 2015, p. 17).

There is a recurring theme here regarding promoting the alignment of the image, mission and institutional values in the actions implemented during the process of service branding. For this, the value propositions must be clarified at all messages and actions in all experiences and touch points, particularly “to inspire trust” (EXP, Institution J).

Other favorable elements in high competitiveness scenarios are the valuation of what the institution believes to have the best. Strategic guidelines are often adopted as a function of the short-term operation that needs to be developed on a day-to-day basis, which can hinder the relation with the student’s “break the expectation” view, harming the perception of the brand:

It may be necessary to reinforce values such as the tradition or the presence of student entities as something essential to develop this positive relationship with the brand (VD, Institution K).

The excellence in service branding is also a relevant element to be considered, to “deliver the best you can” (DM, Institution M). It requires planning “to development value actions in all touch points between students and educational brand” (MD, Institution O), after all, “more touch points, more possibilities to manage this branding” (VD, Institution J).

#### 4.5 *Branding experiences*

Service branding is connected to institutional strategy in the student’s perception once their actions impact deeply the educational experience. “Influencing customer experiences is a complex process that involves interactions among several stakeholder groups” (Schlager *et al.*, 2011, p. 497), which is especially important in service settings to formulate branding experiences.

Some interviewees cited the conditions that an HEI should have in order to value this service branding as part of the student’s experience and emphasized the importance of extra class activities in this context. These activities ranged from the offered environments to sports, music or any other action whose experience allows the engagement on the part of the student. “They are important experiences in the scope of academic-professional formation” (ESP, Institution P). In that sense, sports are often a driving force, highly prized by most students, said some professionals, who believe that, by doing this, you are collaborating with the core business of the institution, which is effective teaching:

Service branding is a set of things that develop the “esprit corpus” between students and educational brand (PP, Institution M).

An educational institution should offer high-quality teaching while at the same time generate a sense of belonging and high employability of its alumni, by a service branding that values the branding experience.

#### 4.6 *Credibility and reputation*

Service branding must include different stakeholders' views in institutional planning in order to reflect their perspectives (Williams and Omar, 2014; Balmer and Wang, 2015). This perception is corroborated by some statements. "I need to understand the perceptions of all stakeholders have about my institution, and how they compare it with its competitors" (DM, Institution D) to "give them the best responses to the student" (DM, Institution C).

It is a great challenge to meet the expectations of each stakeholder and to understand "how they perceive the brand" (DM, Institution E). Targeting the fulfillment of both ends, one of the main private institutions in Brazil conveyed the statement: "teaching competence, high employability and internationalization are factors that favour the choice of our university" (VD, Institution J). But they are no longer sufficient. Credibility must walk in the same direction. "Service branding includes the perceptions of stakeholders have about the institution, and how they compare it with others competitors" (DM, Institution D).

According to the interviewees, credibility and reputation by stakeholders may result from the presence in educational rankings in good positions, from the selectivity to join any institution and even from the avant-garde institution's mind-set to bring innovating initiatives to their market, being unusual or standing next to other references brands. "It is not allowed to misunderstand the meaning of the real definition of the desires that each stakeholder has" (DM, Institution D). To achieve full customer satisfaction, some universities work on being attentive and monitor the stakeholders' needs, preferences and expectations, increase the demands related to delivery and the conscious on competition practices. Still, many things must happen so that desire and appreciation are associated with the brand.

#### 4.7 *Challenges in educational services*

Service branding requires deep integration between administrative and pedagogical areas as an essential element in decision-making processes. One aim reveals the needs of integrating pedagogical and administrative leadership in an effective way to deliver the best the brand can offer also motivating and creating trustworthiness in the academics and for the others stakeholders:

The main efforts are related to the alignment of the business with academic area (DM, Institution O).

Brand management must integrate academic areas, to be more participative in terms of governance (DM, Institution M).

A well-established brand brings desire and trustworthiness to its stakeholder (DM, Institution A).

In summary, while the academic area is concerned with creating new course offerings, often in isolation, the administrative area is responsible for the financial and sustainable balance of the business. Both should have more integrated outlooks since strong competition for market share was cited as a potential difficulty by several interviewees. It seems, however, "there is a still conflicting view of academic and market challenges," perceived by several respondents (DM, Institution M; DM, Institution O). New ways of governance must be found, although "this integration has missed" (DM, Institution M).

Service branding clarifies the strategic thinking (DM, Institution M) and it depends on all people truly involved in the strategic process, especially from employees. Educational leadership must work it properly (DM, Institution M). "In order to raise efficiency,

it is proposed that companies focus on creating a strong employer brand as this constitutes an efficient way of service branding” (Schlager *et al.*, 2011, p. 497).

Finally, affectivity and emotional bonds (VD, Institution K, 2017) are factors that should appear in integrated marketing as part of service branding. “It can focus on emotional attributes” (VD, Institution K). Therefore, seeking the relationship, emotional involvement – deed and truth, word and gesture – is a “significant strategy for service branding” (ESP, Institution P). Marketing communications can collaborate with focusing “on the appeal of affectivity, which the brand can arouse” (DB, Institution J). In the view of the interviewees, the strategy is not only to offer a better educational service, but also to offer an increasingly better value proposition, so that the student can feel that the educational brand was made especially for him, creating an emotional connection with the brand. This bond with the educational segment involves meeting the expectations of each one and, overall, to deliver what was promised.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

From 2010 to 2015, the Brazilian educational sector has grown moderately. Although the number of private HEIs remained stable, this was a period of mergers and acquisitions. This increasing competitiveness in the educational sector has forced HEAs to focus on better service branding, in line with a strategic management vision (Williams and Omar, 2014). This research seeks to fill the gap between theory and practice. In practical terms, it shows strategic findings and implications that may be observed in the service branding in HE by leadership – academic and administrative.

This study confirms *P1*. In HE, the superiority or excellence of a service is considered essential not only at the classrooms, but also in several other aspects, involving leaders, employees, professors and students, in a collaborative culture. Service branding is a strong strategic thinking of direction in educational sector, which demands continuous planning time by top-level educational leadership. In this case, several aspects must be observed as: deep integration between branding and services; leadership involvement; value propositions; strategic guidelines, branding experiences, credibility and reputation – issues that were explained previously – to deliver the best services to the students, as well as to all community.

This study also confirms *P2*. Service branding requires a deep analysis of all services offered to the academics, to promote the coexistence and closeness between students and institution. Once service branding is connected to institutional strategy, the actions impact deeply the students’ educational experience as well as a set of factors that help to develop the “esprit corps.” The sum of these positive experiences has a profound impact on the students’ educational experiences and helps to build loyalty in service branding. However, given the multiplicity of stakeholders in HE, other features should be observed and cared for, including stakeholders’ views in institutional planning and helps to create credibility and reputation.

This research confirms partially *P3*. Whereas service branding encompasses all actions that affect the brand, it cannot be seen as an isolated activity by only one department within the institution, but should be worked out in an integrated manner, especially involving top-level direction and leadership. In HE, the superiority or excellence of a service is considered essential in several aspects and it must involve top leadership, employees, professors and students, in a collaborative culture. Employees must work in an integrated way to serve as “part-time marketers” and to deliver the best the brand can offer and to motivate, creating trustworthiness in the academics. It is a challenge concerning to organizational culture, since service branding is a responsibility to be taken by all that encompasses the brand. Despite that, it is a priority that that this is an objective that must be pursued by many of the institutions interviewed.

This research confirms *P4*. Service branding requires value propositions, as well as mission and differentiation, which create a competitive advantage in the “mind of the consumer.” In fact, “the value proposition of the brand must be truly understood by the consumer” (DB, Institution J). Value propositions concerns the areas focused on and actions taken and highlights the lack of an integrated marketing. Regarding value propositions, this study found: value propositions must be clarified at all messages and actions in all experiences and touch points, particularly “to inspire trust” (EXP – Institution J); and positive and coherent experiences “in the scope of pedagogical-professional formation” (EXP – Institution P) can contribute with value propositions. The capacity to demonstrate the strategies guidelines and act accordingly are essential to show what educational brand desires to communicate.

Grönroos (2009) highlighted the fact the marketing has become more tactical and has lost the control of the consumer-management process, hindering value creation in practices and daily processes. The marketing function and marketing department “cannot stand, alone, the process of value creation together with the consumers, and assume the total responsibility of fulfilling the value purposes” (Grönroos, 2009, p. 351).

One should consider that this process goes beyond the marketing department alone; it is responsibility of the entire institution (Chapleo, 2010) and should permeate the organizational culture, although this may not always be clearly perceived. In the context of this study, this must be monitored to ensure high quality and effective branding in a competitive scenario.

Finally, the future challenges mentioned were:

- Branding requires deep integration between administrative and pedagogical areas. New ways of governance must be found to accommodate this situation.
- To create a strategic and efficient thinking, employees should work in a collaborative culture in an effective way, to deliver the best the brand can offer.
- Service branding can create many opportunities of affectivity and emotional bonds, helping to improve a better brand image. After all, “we are talking about ‘life project,’ professional leverage, success, career, financial improvement, and employability” (DM, Institution M).

In the words of Furedi (2010, p. 6), once “provision of academic teaching does not fit easily into the paradigm of consumption [...] it easily becomes something commoditized, bought and sold. Commodification inexorably leads to the standardization, calculation, and stereotyped formulas.” However, “you can never communicate expectations by something that cannot happen, to avoid frustrations to students as consumers” (DB, Institution M).

### 5.1 Study limitations and directions for future research

This study focused on service branding in educational sector. However, this research did not consider the voice of students as consumers (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Nicolescu, 2009) and their perceived value to understand the “relationship of benefits” and the “perceptions of what is received” (Zeithaml, 1988; Abbas, 2014). Future studies could focus on perceived value, strategies and core value creation applied to universities and colleges, involving student experiences and academic services (Pinar *et al.*, 2011).

It would also be interesting to identify the efforts made to create bonds or amplify the affection relationship between institutions and students in educational services. In this context, studies could focus on brand love, a recent construct applied to the area of consumer–brand relationships, to understand, given that “more and more organizations are interested in acquiring knowledge about how consumers relate to brands, why some brands are preferred to others and even loved” (Loureiro, 2016, p. 1).

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