

**Brand Architecture for Business Schools:  
Is the University or the Benefactor the Brand?**

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**Abstract**

This research highlights the branding strategies employed by the top 30 business schools listed in the Financial Times Global MBA Rankings 2008. Based on a content analysis of brand elements and website content, each business school is classified according to Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) brand relationship spectrum. Results indicate that these business schools adopt brand architectures across the relationship spectrum, but certain regional differences are apparent. In addition, business schools associated with prestigious universities tend to emphasise the university brand, whereas those named after a benefactor are more likely to emphasise the school brand.

Keywords: brand architecture, branding strategies, business schools, brand elements

## **Brand Architecture for Business Schools: Is the University or the Benefactor the Brand?**

### **Introduction: Branding Business Schools**

A brand refers to the “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition” (Keller, 2008, p.7). The components identifying and differentiating brands include brand names, URLs, logos, symbols, characters, spokespersons, slogans, jingles, packages, and signage. These brand elements are managed strategically in many industries in order to convey clear and consistent images and value propositions to consumers, but universities have been slow to consider the value of developing strong business school brands (Jevons, 2006), which are often simply named after benefactors with little else done to differentiate the brand (Altbach, 2006).

Argenti (2000) has suggested that business schools should move from a “reputation building” perspective to reputation or brand management. He asserts that a school reputation represents the sum of multiple stakeholders’ perceptions of school identity or brand. Successful reputation is construed as an association with a reputable university, a high-quality faculty and students, strong image in the corporate sector, prominent alumni and high survey rankings (Argenti, 2000, p. 177). Successful brands were perceived to have good reputations (Chapleo, 2005). Heyes and Liston-Heyes (2004) suggest that U.S. business schools should benchmark their reputation based on the percentage of full-time staff with PhDs, research rating based on academic publications, entry fees, ratio of full-time staff to full-time students, academic aptitude of students, starting salary of students after graduation, percentage of students employed upon graduating, and the university overall reputation. These criteria echo the Financial Times (FT) MBA Ranking survey. The ranking summarised the responses from alumni and business schools and the FT database. However, they offer little assistance for multiple stakeholders to identify and differentiate one business school from another.

Management and marketing researches suggest that reputation management includes managing brand image strategically (see Baden-Fuller, Ravazzola and Scheizer, 2000). Strategic brand management for the current business schools requires the understanding of their branding strategies. Gopalan, Stitts and Herring III’s (2006) exploration of branding strategies of the top 50 global MBA programmes based on a previously proposed branding typology wherein business schools (1) emphasize the school only (e.g., Wharton), (2) feature the school as primary and the university as secondary (e.g., Schulich School at York University), (3) make both the school and the university equally prominent (e.g., the Sloan School at M.I.T.), (4) feature the university as primary and the school as secondary (e.g., Said School at the University of Oxford), and (5) emphasize the university only (e.g., Harvard Business School), found that European and Asian business schools employ branding strategies that do not easily fit into these categories.

What is needed is a framework that accommodates the current brand architectures of the top business schools from around the world. The research reported below adopts Aaker and Joachimsthaler’s (2000) brand relationship spectrum (i.e. house of brand, endorsed brand, subbrand, and branded house) for this purpose. First, the top 30 business schools listed in the FT Global MBA Rankings 2008 and their affiliated institutions or universities are identified. Then the websites of each business school were content analysed to assign each school to the

spectrum. Finally, regional patterns in the branding strategies are identified and directions for the future branding of business schools are discussed.

### **Method**

The content analysis of the top 30 business schools focused on four of Keller's (2008) brand main elements: brand names, URLs, logos and symbols. Brand name and URLs assist brand awareness and association; logos and symbols indicate origin, ownership or association; Based on the combination of these brand elements presented on the websites, the authors classified the business schools into three brand types: school dominant, mixed, and university dominant. Business schools combining the university name with a generic name such as "business", "graduate" or "management" school were considered university dominant (e.g., Stanford Graduate School of Business). These business schools have both the school and the parent university names or acronyms in their URLs. Their logos were assumed to consistently reflect the schools and the parent universities. Business schools that have parent universities in their specific school names or their URLs were classified as mixed brands. These mixed brands were differentiated further based on their logos and symbols into endorsed brands (e.g., Wharton), where the school was more prominent, and sub-brands (e.g., MITSloan), where the university was more prominent. Prominence was based on the font size and the sequence of each name in the logos. The part of the brand appearing first and in larger font was assumed to be the more prominent of the two components. Those business schools not affiliated with any higher education institution and offering only postgraduate courses were considered school dominant (e.g., INSEAD). They generally had independent URLs, logos and symbols.

When there was disagreement the authors met to discuss their differences until consensus could be reached. Two such cases arose. The website for the IE Business School (IE BS) in Madrid had no obvious indication of an affiliation with IE University. However, it was agreed that the use of "IE" in the name, the URL and the logo clearly indicated the connection, so IE BS was classified as an endorsed brand. A similar issue arose with the London Business School (LBS), which was made even more ambiguous because London is both the city in which the school is located and the name of the affiliated university. However, a brief review of the history of LBS indicated that the name was intended to reflect the university affiliation, which in some ways, offset the growing administrative independence of LBS, so it too was classified as an endorsed brand.

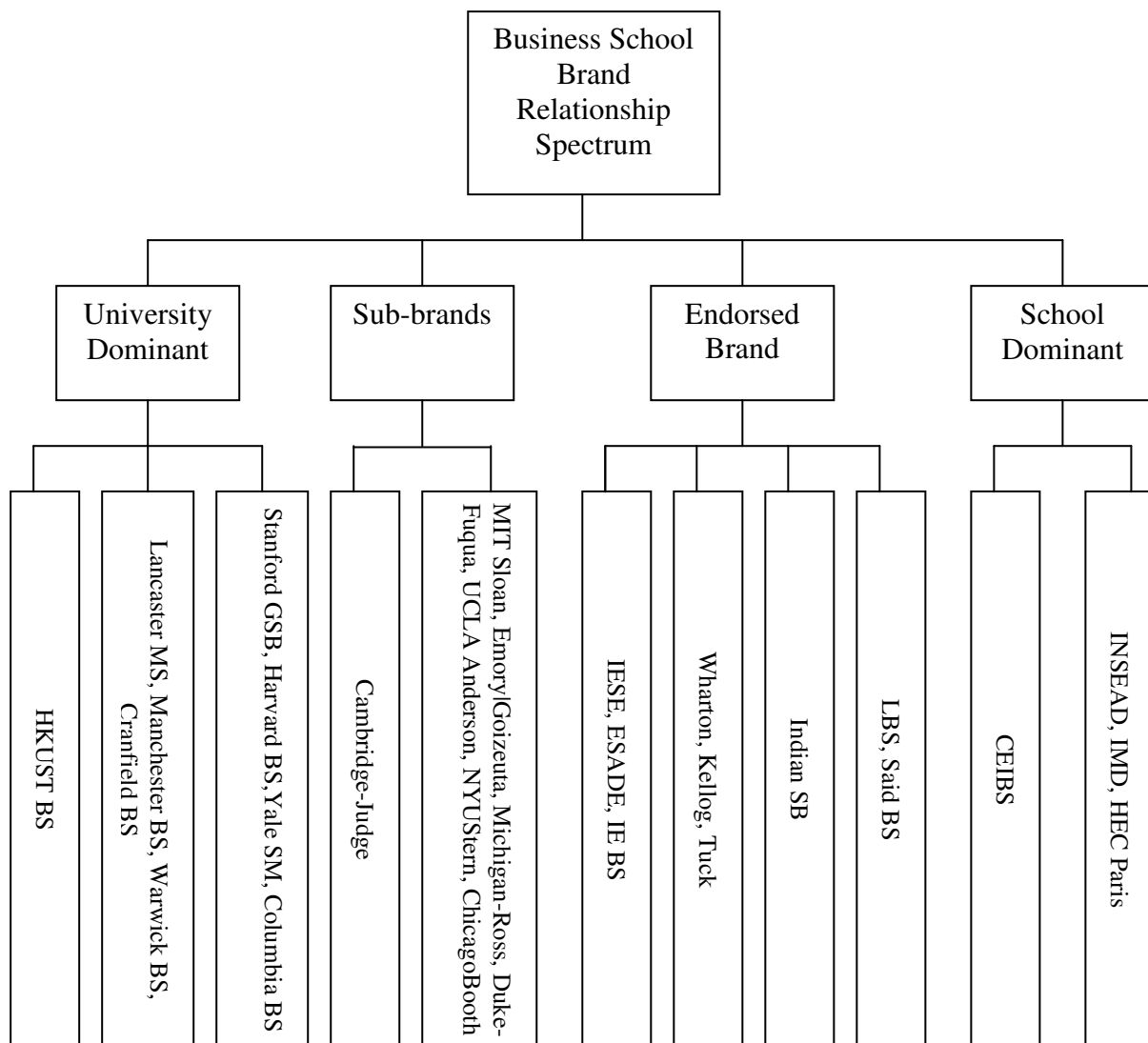
### **Results and Discussions**

Figure 1 groups the 30 business schools according to the four major brand architectures in the brand relationship spectrum. Within each brand architecture category, the schools are organised according to country/region.

The content analysis of each business school main homepage and the associated links revealed some interesting patterns. The university dominant category was populated by the Ivy League schools from the U.S. and prestigious universities in the U.K., with the exception of the business school at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). They made up a third of the business schools analysed in this study. The sub-brands also encompassed the U.S.-based and U.K.-based business schools whilst the endorsed brands

captured business schools across regions ranging from Europe to Asia. These two groups represented almost half of the number of top business schools analysed. The top European business schools mainly reflected individual school brands. Most of these business schools have no university affiliation (e.g., INSEAD, IMD, HEC Paris), whilst one school dominant brand emphasised regional alliances over the university name (e.g., CEIBS).

**Figure 1: Brand Architecture of the Financial Times Top 30 Global MBA**



The analysis found that business schools associated with highly-ranked, prestigious universities, tended to highlight the university brand either solely (i.e., university dominant), or in conjunction with a less prominent school brand (i.e., sub-brands). Business schools associated with less prestigious universities or not associated with any university were more likely to feature their school brand. There were, of course, exceptions. The University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth University, and Northwestern University are prestigious, have long histories, and are ranked among the best universities in the world, yet they emphasise the school brand over the university brand. This may, in part, be because Wharton (1881), Tuck

(1900), and Kellogg (1908) are among the oldest business schools in the world. A shift in emphasis from the university to the school could have gradually taken place over time.

Another major pattern occurs within business schools from the U.S. and U.K. When business schools from these regions are named after a major benefactor, the school brand appeared to be more prominent in the brand architecture. Comparing the sub-brand and university dominant categories revealed that all of the U.S. and U.K. schools in the former category were named after benefactors, whereas none of the schools in the latter category were. This could implicitly reflect the nature of the agreement between a major benefactor and the university. If the university wants the benefactor's money, it must name the business school accordingly and feature that name in all marketing-related communications. In short, the benefactor's name comes with the dollars, yet the association of the school brand with the housing universities has been clearly preserved.

Further analysis of the four brand elements indicated a variety of branding practices among university dominant brands, sub-brands and endorsed brands. The business schools with university dominant brand did not necessarily have the same logos or symbols with the parent universities. Stanford GSB, Lancaster MS, Manchester BS, Cranfield SM and HKUST presented the same logos and symbols with their parent universities whilst the others did not. Both sub-brands and endorsed brands had the affiliated university names in the logos. Of these mixed brands, only the U.S. business schools, Cambridge-Judge and Said BS employed the same logos and symbols with their affiliated universities. The sub-brands have clearly presented the affiliated university names more prominently in the logos compared to the endorsed brands. These findings appear to suggest that not all top business schools have reflected their brand relationship with their affiliated university through logos and symbols.

The incongruity of logos and symbols may not greatly affect the university dominant brands. This may apply if the equity of the dominant university brand has a spill-over on the business school. However, for endorsed brands, the association allows stakeholders to be simultaneously aware of and recognise the business schools and the universities. For example, IESE and ESADE had only their acronyms in the URLs, but they are clearly associated with the parent universities through logos. The logos help stakeholders to identify the location/regions of the university and associate any favourable image of the affiliated universities with the business schools. The opposite scenario applies to the London Business School (LBS). The school brand relationship with University of London is less obvious through its different logo and symbol, but the use of the term "London" reflects the university as well as the city itself. Since the association with the university is less obvious, the school may have lost any potential gain from the university's established image among stakeholders. For the Indian School of Business (ISB), its clear association with top ranking universities, Kellogg, Wharton, and London Business School (LBS), as displayed on its main webpage, offers a better opportunity for brand equity transfer.

In short, the analysis of the four brand elements suggests that business schools should take advantage of the brand equity of their parent university or affiliated institutions if they have the opportunity. This rule applies to the university dominant brands and sub-brands. Endorsed brands are applicable to business schools that have prestigious benefactors with long legacies. Meanwhile, business schools without prestigious parent universities should seek endorsement from other prestigious business schools. The endorsement appears to facilitate the transfer of brand equity between the two business schools and to enhance the brand awareness of each school among stakeholders. School dominant brands are obviously the dominant approach for

independent business schools, but in these cases brand equity can be enhanced through strategic alliances with other business schools.

### **Limitations and Conclusions**

There are limitations of the method used in this research. First, the relative prominence of the university brand and the school brand elements may not reflect a deliberate attempt to brand a business school in a certain way, a necessary assumption for this research. For example, some business schools may have specific names to acknowledge a major benefactor, which has little or nothing to do with a branding “strategy”. Second, URLs are subject to the availability of domain names at the time of registration. Thus, this element may not be easily amended to conform to other branding decisions. Third, some business schools and universities may have not placed any conscious effort in conveying their associations with each others through logos and symbols. Finally, besides these four elements, Keller’s (2008) other brand elements such as slogans and spokespersons were not analysed since the study has limited its focus to understanding business schools brand architecture, not brand image. Future research should include them to identify branding strategies that positions and differentiates each business school.

Despite these limitations, Aaker and Joachimsthaler’s (2000) brand relationship spectrum has captured the brand architecture of business schools across continents, regardless of the status of the business schools with respect to a host university. The results of the research suggest a clear pattern driving the branding of business schools. Business schools housed within highly ranked, prestigious universities tend to emphasise the university brand over the school brand. Even when the business school is named after a benefactor, they have been associated with the prestigious host universities. Schools not linked to prestigious universities tend to focus on the school brand, perhaps out of necessity.

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