Look at Me and What I Achieved: Competing Visual Displays of an Institutional Brand

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Abstract

Purpose- The purpose of this paper is to explore the institutional branding conveyed by displays worn by students, such as honour cords intended to signify institutional achievement.
Design/methodology/approach- Analysis of variance was undertaken using the software SPSS to determine if there was any difference in the number of honour cords worn based on academic achievement or financial status.
Results / findings- The results from students at one university (n = 445) suggest that honour cords are in fact used by students to promote individual identity more so than to foster the academic value of an institutional brand. From a branding perspective this questions the inclusion of externally purchased academic bling at commencement. Results of survey research on institutional commencement policies (n = 298) indicate that the majority of universities offer little guidance regarding apparel and accessories thus diminishing the institutional brand for the sake of promoting individual student achievement.

Key words: Branding; marketing; consumer decision making; higher education.

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Introduction

The history of academic regalia dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries with modifications made up until the 19th century when the Intercollegiate Bureau on Academic Costumes established a standard code of academic dress in 1895 that is for the most part still in use today (Sullivan 1997). The traditional black gown with a hood for advanced degrees, along with cap and tassel, is standard attire for most commencement ceremonies. This uniform attire, sometimes adorned with Latin Honor Cords (i.e., cum laude, magna cum laude, summa cum laude) reinforces the institutional brand based on academic achievement. All graduates have a place in the collegiate community as alumni for which they have earned lifetime membership.

However, at some institutions the cap and gown is the basic outfit on which students affix tokens of individual expression. The most notable are non-Latin (non-institutional) honor cords purchased from one of many national honor societies. The more students are adorned with academic bling from various sources outside of the institution the less visual identity at commencement is associated with the institutional brand. The easier each honor cord is to attain via grade inflation and greater access to honor societies, a positive feedback system takes over where students feel they need even more individual honors to stand out and in so doing further detract from the visual identity of the institutional brand at commencement. This study investigates institutional policies for commencement attire and its unintended effect on institutional branding.

Literature Review

Academics have long held negative feelings towards marketing higher education (Kirp 2003). However it has become clearer that colleges and universities by necessity must embrace the marketing discipline (Beneke 2011). A practical application of marketing is in establishing an institutional brand which reflects academic status and reputation. A brand is a distinguishing name or symbol to uniquely identify a corporation or institution (Aaker 1991). Brands have tangible manifestations as well as human personality or non-physical elements. Having a general positive feeling or sense of success that cannot be attributed to one particular institutional factor reflects this sentiment. Although an institutional brand identity may be intangible it none the less adds value to the organization (Keller 2003).

The value of an institutional brand is relevant to the entire collegiate campus because prospective students consider academic reputation as part of the institutional brand image and is a critical factor in choosing which college to attend (Warwick & Mansfield 2003). As a result resources spent on branding an institution are significant (Rolfe, 2003). Qualitative research on institutional branding found that the objectives can include gaining a competitive advantage, creating the correct image and communicating university performance (Chapleo 2011).

Developing a clear, consistent brand identity helps to uniquely position an institution in a higher education marketplace where institutions may be viewed as indistinguishable from each other. Institutions for the most part know this and therefore invest time and resources to build a unique institutional brand that elicits favorable student response (Bennett & Ali-Choudbury 2009). Institutions of higher education also employ a number of strategies to foster a unique institutional brand. This can be a challenge particularly for smaller institutions that do not have a national alumni base that endorse the institution long after they graduate.

Successful branding can lead to people wanting to voluntarily verbalize their association with the brand (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley 2005). Verbalization can be manifested in apparel, cheering at sporting events or joining an online fan base. In general brand image and loyalty are fostered by institutional visual displays often associated with licensed merchandise (Lee et. al. 2008). However colleges and universities are also intentional about brand promotion through advertisements. For example a particular brand personality, such as success, tradition or excitement (Watkins & Gozenback 2013) is the highlight for many promotions run during collegiate athletic events (Harris 2009). These characteristics are reinforced by visual displays incorporated in licensed merchandise but also by images on campus such as building design, affixed placards, flags and banners.
The visual component of the institutional brand is the physical manifestation of its elements. Consumers rely more on visual elements to make meaning of the value proposition (McQuarrie & Phillips 2008). This is how students and the community can physically see the institutional brand and appreciate its benefits. For example, students perceive that they will reap social benefits from the institutional affiliation as well as the prospect of greater returns post-graduation based on the prestige conveyed by the institutional brand. Institutions at the same time profit from the monetary investment made by students and their families. As a result, a highly regarded institutional brand increases benefits for students and the institution alike (Beneke 2011). This is the case at all institutions, however, even though image helps create a positive view of the institution (Pampaloni 2010) image is of greater importance to smaller schools, such as the one in this study where context and connection to the institution is limited (Sung & Yang 2008). The value of physical manifestations of the brand such as symbols is heightened because a national presence through NCAA Division I athletes for example is not present.

Students and graduates both use these symbols as signs of status and success of the institutional brand community (Sevier 2001). Symbols such as crests, insignias, mottoes and academic regalia include but are not limited to those displayed at collegiate events such as commencement. Here, one can see the uniformity in the pomp and circumstance associated with celebrating student achievement and full inclusion in the life of the college. Ideally, the graduate engages in a continual affiliation with the institution as part of its institutional brand community. Satisfaction with the experience and loyalty help foster a brand community where social relationships are based on a common admiration for a particular brand, in this case the academic institution (McAlexander & Koenig, 2010; Muniz & O’Guinn 2001).

Commencement is one of the academic functions that define the social dimensions of the institutional identity and institutional brand. Strategically using the graduation ceremony to reinforce the institutional brand and its community is consistent with the tenets of relationship marketing where engaging students with the institution helps to build its prestige and sense of lifetime commitment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006). This brand loyalty is further established in the graduation ceremony by only wearing institutional Latin Honor Cords and not the commencement accessories provided by external organizations.

Adding items to the commencement outfit may also dilute the institutional feeling of community and identity, which at the outset is difficult to establish (Lowrie 2007). That is to say when attention is drawn to graduates as individuals, something is lost in bringing recognition to the institution as a whole. This weak visual identity may send the message that the institution does not really aspire to be unique or established (Baker & Balmer 1997) and to the detriment of graduates and the college alike the institution does not desire a cohesive collegiate identity (Waerass & Solbakk 2009). In contrast, consistent visual communications about the institution helps to support a successful institutional brand (Chapleo 2005). The lack of visual conformity could be even more fragmenting to the institutional brand when academic accessories become merely a reflection of economic status because honors societies require paid membership with some also requiring payment for earned honor cords.

Institutional branding for recruitment (Heslop & Nadeau 2010; Pampaloni 2010; Sung & Yang 2008; Vander Schee 2010), athletics (Clayton, Cavanagh, & Hettche 2012; Johnson, Jubenville, & Goss 2009; Ross, Bang, & Lee 2007) and reputation (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury 2009; Yang, Alessandri, & Kinsey 2008) has flourished. McAlexander and Koenig (2010) have even examined brand community and student loyalty seeking to understand differences based on institutional size and alumni willing to endorse the institution. Students who remain loyal to the institution after graduation are more likely to provide financial support, refer prospective students or provide some other service to the institution (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen 2001). However, institutional branding for the commencement event itself which ties to post-graduation activity is not as fully understood. This is particularly the case for visual elements of the ceremony such as academic bling including honor cords.
Method

This study was conducted at the commencement ceremony of a private liberal arts college in the Midwest of the United States. The researcher recorded the number of honor cords worn by each undergraduate student earning a bachelor’s degree (n = 445) at that particular institution. The commencement ceremony program was then used to determine who wore a Latin Honor Cord, which is supplied by the institution for free. The number of non-Latin Honor Cords (i.e., those that were purchased for a fee) was calculated by taking the total number worn less one for a Latin Honor cord, if appropriate. Matching data regarding academic achievement and financial need was also recorded. Analysis of variance was then used in SPSS to determine if there was any difference in the number of honor cords worn based on academic achievement or financial status. Each analysis was conducted at the .05 alpha level.

Registrars in the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers were also asked to complete an online survey regarding commencement, honors, and institutional policies. Completed responses with information regarding commencement policies were received from 298 institutions. The data was also tabulated using SPSS.

Results

Of the 577 students who earned a bachelor’s degree in the academic year from the institution where the study took place, 445 (79%) attended the spring commencement ceremony. Of the total number of graduates 207 (36%) earned no-cost Latin Honor Cords. Of these students 18 of them also earned no-cost honor stoles as part of the academic honors program at the institution. Medallions or pins were worn by 25 students who attended the ceremony. Most had only one medallion or pin but one student had four in total.

Table 1:
Honor Cord Recipient Academic Achievement and Financial Status (n = 445)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Non-Latin Honor Cords Worn</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Cumulative Grade Point Average</th>
<th>Expected Family Contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>3.27 a</td>
<td>$9,396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>$10,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>$11,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>$9,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>$25,637 b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a GPA significantly lower than all others, $F(4, 440) = 15.25, p < .001.$  
b EFC significantly higher than all others, $F(4, 440) = 3.49, p = .008.$

Table 1 shows the distribution of students based on the number of non-Latin Honor Cords worn at graduation. Only the non-Latin Honor Cords were used as they represent those for which students had to pay a fee to obtain. It is clear that on average those who earned at least one non-Latin Honor Cord had a significantly higher cumulative grade point average (1 = 3.52, 2 = 3.60, 3 = 3.75, 4 = 3.78) than those who did not earn any (0 = 3.27), $F(4, 440) = 15.25, p < .001.$ This is a rather expected result as Honor Cords are based, at least in part on academic achievement as expressed by cumulative GPA or class rank.

Table 1 also shows the average Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of students based on the number of non-Latin Honor Cords worn at graduation. EFC, established by US federal law, is used as a measure of access to financial resources or family financial strength. The higher the dollar amount, the higher one’s family has the ability to pay for higher education expenses. Only those who earned 4 non-Latin Honor Cords had a significantly higher average EFC ($4 = $25,637) than those who earned 3 or less (0 = $9,395, 1 = $10,407, 2 = $11,494, 3 = $9,400), $F(4, 440) = 3.49, p = .008.$ This suggests that even though a student needs a high enough cumulative GPA to
earn non-Latin Honor Cords, the student must also have the financial resources available to afford them.

The survey sent to registrars asked about institutional policies regarding Latin Honor cords. The majority (57%) of responding institutions have students wear Latin Honor cords at commencement. Of those that do, the vast majority provides the cords for free or has them included in a graduation fee charged to all graduating students. Only 12 institutions indicated that Latin Honor cords are not given to students for free or included in a graduation fee. The price for such ranged from $3 to $25.

Registrars were also asked if any specific policies were in place regarding cap accessories, such as mortarboards or tassels as well as gown accessories, such as stoles or pins. Of the survey respondents who provided an answer, 36% have specific institutional policies regarding cap accessories. A common policy stated must wear cap and tassel provided by the university, no visible decorations are to be worn, and no writing on mortarboards. Table 2 displays the percentage of institutions with policies regarding cap and gown accessories.

Table 2: Commencement Attire Policy (n = 298)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commencement Policy</th>
<th>Percentage of Institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Cap Accessory Policy Only</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Gown Accessory Policy Only</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Cap and Gown Accessory Policy</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total - Specific Cap or Accessory Policy</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Specific Cap or Gown Accessory Policy</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey respondents were asked what non-discipline based national honor organizations are recognized by their institutions. This is of interest because honor societies offer students membership as well as the opportunity to purchase the corresponding honor cord. Although 43 different national honor societies were mentioned (some were discipline-specific) only 6 were cited by at least 7 institutions. Table 3 displays the characteristics of the national honor societies, including pricing mostly commonly cited by survey respondents.

Table 3: Representative National Honor Society Pricing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Society</th>
<th>Eligibility</th>
<th>Fee</th>
<th>Cord</th>
<th>Stole</th>
<th>Medallion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Sigma Lambda</td>
<td>Top 20%, non-trad, 3.2 GPA, 12 A&amp;S credits</td>
<td>$30^a</td>
<td>$16.50</td>
<td>$18.50</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Sigma Nu</td>
<td>Top 15%, loyalty, service, Jesuit institution</td>
<td>$60</td>
<td>$30^b</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden Key</td>
<td>Top 15%</td>
<td>$80</td>
<td>$16</td>
<td>$24</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kappa Gamma Pi</td>
<td>Top 10%, leadership, service</td>
<td>$30</td>
<td>$8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phi Beta Kappa</td>
<td>Top 10%, A&amp;S grads</td>
<td>$75^a</td>
<td>$9.50</td>
<td>$32</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phi Kappa Phi</td>
<td>Top 10%</td>
<td>$45</td>
<td>$10^c</td>
<td>$24</td>
<td>$11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Membership fee varies by institution.
b. Price for Lapel Pin. Honor Cord not available to members.
c. Watches ranging from $240 to $290 and rings for $45 to $485 are also available.

Discussion

At one time earning Latin Honors was a real distinction among the graduating class. At some institutions this is still the case. However, consider that the average undergraduate cumulative GPA in the United States has risen on average 0.1 on a 4.0 scale per decade from 1940 to 1990. It continued to rise going from 2.93 in 1991 to 3.11 in 2006. In 2010 the average cumulative GPA was 3.0 at public universities and 3.3 at private institutions (Rojstaczer & Healy 2010). Thus more and more students become eligible for Latin Honors as the overall average cumulative GPA continues to rise. At the institution in this study, 36% of graduating students earned Latin Honors. Now with so many students earning the Latin Honors distinction, is it really that distinctive? It is no wonder students look to honor societies outside of the institution for additional recognition.

Wearing Latin Honor accessories are likely not viewed as a measure of economic status in that almost all institutions in the study provide Latin Honor cords for free. Wearing them is also not viewed as a tool to encourage personal attention in that students do not need to apply for them - they are automatically bestowed on those who meet the minimum academic criteria. This is part of the institutional brand making the visual statement, look how many of our graduates earned Latin Honors. The unintended effect is that each student feels less associated with the institutional brand as more and more of the graduating class shares the same distinction. Students then look to external organizations for additional recognition of their achievement. However external validation is not solely based on cumulative GPA as is the case with Latin Honors. Students must first be aware of the honor society opportunities, apply for membership, and then pay the membership fee. Once accepted a student can then purchase academic accessories including honor cords. This takes a concerted effort on the part of students who want to stand out as individuals at commencement. It also takes financial support as one can join a number of the 68 official members of the Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS Member Societies 2011) or dozens of other not officially recognized disciplinary associations.

Students who have a cumulative GPA in the top 10% of their class earning all credits from the same institution with a double major in Economics and Business, showing strong leadership skills with a high GPA earned in the first year could conceivably gain membership in a dozen honor societies. This number jumps to 17 or 18 if they happen to be of non-traditional age pursuing a liberal arts degree at an institution with a Jesuit or Catholic foundation. Of course they will have to pay $739 to cover the membership fees and another $179 to purchase the requisite honor cords.

So in addition to having high grades they must also have access to resources, both social and financial to accumulate academic bling. The results of this study support resources access as a factor in that those who wore four non-Latin Honor Cords had a significantly higher EFC than those who earned one to three non-Latin Honor Cords but not a significantly higher cumulative GPA. It is this process that diminishes the institutional brand as individual student promotion takes over with the message, look how many honors I earned which could be more accurately phrased, look how many honors I purchased.

Approximately one-third of institutions have commencement cap or gown policies in place in part to combat the accumulation of academic bling. Those that do not have commencement policies may want to foster a spirit of individual expression or a fun atmosphere or do not have the means to enforce policies and thus choose not to implement them. Again the unintended effect is the proliferation of non-institutional commencement accessories designed to bring attention to individual students. For those who can afford them, self promotion abounds or at least their noticeable display of purchasing distinction. An informal survey of graduating students at the institution in this study provided almost unanimous support for the idea that students purchase and wear accessories for self promotion, particularly for recognition for their parents.

The college aim and values are communicated through visual representations of the institution (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu 2006). This includes the academic attire and accessories
worn at commencement. When students trust academic policies they perceive greater value and thus higher loyalty or connection to the institutional brand (Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota 2010). This trust is fostered when students see that the administration equalizes opportunity for academic recognition that is based on scholastic achievement and not linked to financial resources. When colleges choose to not build an institutional brand in this way they leave the task to others who will relay their own institutional story (Judson et al., 2009). Thus students who amass academic accessories will send the message that individual identity is more important than the institutional brand. The longer term effect is graduates reminiscing, “look at me and what I achieved” rather than “we are lifetime alumni of this college.”

Implications

Perhaps raising the Latin Honor standards commensurate with the corresponding institutional grade inflation rate over time will once again make Latin Honors truly distinctive. This may dissuade students from looking for external validation of academic achievement and make a greater contribution to the institutional brand. Almost two-thirds of institutions have no policy regarding accessories to the cap and gown. Implementing an institutional Latin Honors only policy for commencement ceremonies could heighten the institutional brand while deterring notions of self promotion. Since a collegiate chapter is usually necessary for an individual student to apply for membership to an honors society, limiting the number of collegiate chapters allowed at the institution will also control the number of honor cords a student can acquire. The ideal situation is one where building the institutional brand is considered when setting policies regarding attire at commencement. To avoid the perception that the institution is limiting the freedom of personal expression, raising Latin Honor standards seems to be the least confrontational approach gaining the same intended outcomes, that of reversing the trend of self-promotion over institutional branding.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study are significant but there are things to consider when making direct application to other institutional settings. The study was limited to one institution using one commencement event. Perhaps with a larger pool of students from various institutions the results could be more generalized. Future research could focus on whether institutional policies regarding commencement directly influence student honor cord choices. Another line of inquiry could assess student motivation for the accumulation of academic bling. This would help in understanding how institutions could respond with policies that protect or promote the institutional brand while at the same time acknowledging individual student academic achievement.

References


