

Brand conceptualization for academic libraries: A grounded theory approach

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ABSTRACT

Marketing and branding are still regarded as aspects of the business world irrelevant to libraries. Understanding the impact of brand and its evolution on the success of academic libraries necessitates elucidating the meaning of brand and its contributions to libraries. The lack of a comprehensive definition of marketing and branding and their functions in Iranian libraries also confirms the idea that they are unnecessary in libraries and prevents libraries from moving in the right direction in marketing and branding. To this end, this study aimed to investigate the brand concept of academic libraries in Iran. This qualitative study employed the grounded theory (GT) methodology based on two of the three coding steps suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998): "open coding" and "axial coding". Twenty experts in fields such as branding, marketing, and librarianship, among others, were interviewed for data collection purposes. Out of these experts, nine were faculty members, three were researchers, and eight were library employees. Using the MAXQDA software, the content of the interviews was analyzed qualitatively. In addition, the academic library brand was also conceptualized with 12 dimensions, including brand identity, brand associations, brand awareness, brand imagery, brand compatibility, brand quality, brand credibility, brand superiority, brand security, brand excitement, behavioral loyalty, and attitudinal attachment. Therefore, it made sense for the brand to focus on providing its customers with the best possible library experience. This study is the first to define the brand concept for academic libraries in order to shed light on the concept and its significance in these libraries.

Keywords: Library brand; Brand concept; Academic Libraries; University libraries; Library marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Over time, various definitions of 'brand' have emerged, each reflecting evolving perspectives. Traditional interpretations of a brand tend to emphasize visual components such as the name, logo, and design, with the aim of differentiating a product from its competitors. This approach is exemplified by the definition put forth by the American Marketing Association (American Marketing Association, 1960). In contrast, contemporary definitions of a brand encompass internal and organizational processes, as well as diverse aspects of brand identity and its evolution (Heding et al., 2009, p. 9).

Strong brand development has become a priority for organizations, as it can yield numerous financial benefits. To have a strong brand, organizations must develop a desirable brand identity and the correct brand meaning through brand associations, gain positive brand responses, and establish brand relationships with users (Keller, 2001). Brand compliance with buyers' expectations and fulfilling promises leads to a strong brand (Clifton & Simmons, 2004, p. 18). Well-known brands are signs of quality, expertise, and

product differentiation that can guide customers in choosing a particular product or service (Rowley, 1997). A strong brand increases customers' confidence in purchasing a service and enables them to visualize its nature before purchasing (Walton, 2008). Branding identifies and meets customers' needs (Roughen, 2016); wherein the information age, brands are more important as they save customers time and money (Rowley, 2004b).

In today's complex and competitive market, universities need distinctive brands to present their strengths to the target audience (Jevons, 2006). Factors such as strong strategic plans, brand management support, public relations, marketing communications, and brand experience are effective in building a successful brand for the university (Chapleo, 2010). Some facets of brand equity, like the perceived quality of professors, the university's reputation, the university's emotional environment, loyalty, and awareness, are crucial to the university's brand. As one of the supporting dimensions of brand equity, library services contribute to developing a strong university brand (Pinar et al., 2013). Consequently, in this study, we attempted to conceptualize the brand of academic libraries as one of the effective factors in establishing the university's brand.

Some individuals possess a traditional view of libraries, often based on the assumption that they do not provide sufficient value. Many information professionals counter this viewpoint by emphasizing collection and service strategy changes more than adherence to traditions. They must alter the current course of their organization to ensure its future success. This is valuable if information professionals highlight the successes of their strategic changes. In this regard, marketing efforts and cultivating relationships with community members can assist information professionals in demonstrating their commitment to community support. Branding can help highlight the importance of libraries as vital resources (Singh & Trinchetta, 2019) and assist libraries in achieving stability and success (Hommerová et al., 2020).

Advances in technology and societal changes have had a significant impact on libraries (Khattab, 2018). The current challenges of academic libraries include reducing reliance on the library and its resources (Sharma et al., 2017), as well as the issues associated with using online library resources such as slow internet speed, digital divide, and low digital literacy among users (Hojjat Hosseini, 2021). Additionally, academic libraries face the challenge of competing with other information providers (Tian & Song, 2024). They also need to align with the changes and developments in university curricula to better support teaching, research, and academic quality for students (Peng, 2021). Also, academic libraries face other challenges, such as competition for funding, the inability to meet all users' needs due to budget constraints, the need for librarians' career advancement, keeping up with changes in the field of technology, managing library operations, tracking employee performance, presenting librarians value to users, and managing the transition from print to digital collection (Cheng, 2016).

Academic libraries in Iran face various challenges, including a lack of manpower, space, and budget (Beyranvand & Ranjbar, 2010). There is also a shortage of educated librarians (Mohsenzadeh & Isfandyari-Moghaddam, 2009), and a lack of knowledge among librarians about the importance of Web 2 in improving the quality of library services (Abarghoian et al. 2017). Additionally, there is little attention given to the proper use of academic library applications (Eltemasi et al., 2022), an imbalance between research and education, and a failure to align with other academic libraries worldwide during special circumstances such as illness (Beglou & Akhshik, 2023). Furthermore, there are legal shortcomings regarding the copyright of digital textual resources (Amouzgar et al., 2022) that pose additional challenges. The comparison of 104 libraries under the Ministry of Science, Research and

Technology (MSRT) with the standard of the academic year 2020-2021 also reveals unfavorable conditions in lending, education, and expenditure for acquiring resources (Beyrami Taruni, 2022, p.10-28). To enhance their capabilities, these libraries must improve their current condition by focusing on human resources standards, information resources and services, and library equipment (Shaboni & Muqrafzali, 2016).

Understanding how libraries are evolving and ensuring that libraries can play a central role in higher education has become a significant challenge (Pinfield et al., 2017). In addition, marketing and rebranding strategies are necessary for libraries to thrive in a competitive environment (Rahmad et al., 2013). Academic libraries can compete with their information competitors by branding and representing their key values in the information age (Sahli & Alidousti, 2023). Libraries must demonstrate their brand management skills. However, due to the novelty of this field, some believe the brand is useless for libraries (Hommerová et al., 2020). Branding is a component of marketing that has implications for library promotional efforts. As branding plays an essential role in identifying the library's image, it should be defined by stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, and managers) (Germain, 2008). A review of the relevant literature revealed no exhaustive definition of the brand for libraries. Therefore, brand conceptualization is required to comprehend its nature in libraries properly.

A review of marketing literature in Iran has also revealed that marketing in Iranian libraries and information centers is inadequate and requires more focus (Jalilpour, 2015). Brand and branding, essential marketing instruments, have been neglected in Iranian libraries, particularly academic ones; this notion has not been clarified for librarians and managers. The importance of brand development in the success of libraries may be misunderstood if there is a lack of transparency regarding the brand concept and its consequences.

Marketing and branding are still regarded as aspects of the business world irrelevant to libraries. The lack of a comprehensive definition of marketing and branding and their functions in libraries confirms the idea that they are unnecessary in libraries and prevents libraries from moving in the right direction in marketing and branding. This study examines the brand concept in academic libraries affiliated with the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) to provide managers and librarians with an understanding of how to proceed in this direction. In other words, this research aims to address the question of which aspects can be identified in the brand of academic libraries, or from which perspectives the brand can be examined in an organization such as a library.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drawing from the research conducted by Sahli et al. (2023a; 2023b) and their subsequent findings, the literature review is organised into the following dimensions:

The role of library managers and staff in brand building

Library Managers and staff play a key role in brand development. Researchers such as Rowley (2004a), Roughen and Solomon (2011), Worley (2015), Albert (2017), and Wengler (2018) have studied the role of library managers and staff in brand building. Sahli et al. (2023a) presented the role of library management in acquiring scientific and functional competencies by conducting a systematic literature review. Based on their qualitative content analysis results, the library management should have library knowledge, protect

the brand against competitors and environmental changes, and supervise the employees' actions to advance the library's branding. In addition, researchers have focused on enhancing librarians' academic and practical skills. Librarians must have formal library training and regularly update their knowledge. They should understand the significance of information, be familiar with their users, act per their requirements, and develop a personal brand.

The role of physical and structural changes in brand building

Stimson (2007), Roughen (2015), Mwanzu and Wendo (2017), and Safaei et al. (2022) have investigated the role of physical and structural changes in libraries in branding. The architecture of the library building and the structure of its internal and external environment are among the topics discussed in the research. The use of appropriate equipment (Singh & Ovsak, 2013; Trendler, 2016; Mwanzu & Wendo 2017; Safaei et al., 2022), effective colors (Mwanzu & Wendo, 2017; Worley, 2015), sufficient lighting (Mwanzu & Wendo, 2017), and a user-friendly and user-oriented appearance of the library building (Safaei et al., 2022) can create a brand for the library. The library space should be created in an interactive way for study and research (Sahli & Esmaeili Givi, 2014). Furthermore, library facilities such as parking (Singh 2011; Sahli & Esmaeili Givi, 2014), coffee shops (Singh & Ovsak, 2013), and access to food and beverages (Singh, 2011) can also be effective in creating a good and interactive atmosphere in libraries.

In designing the exterior space, Mwanzu and Wendo cited the building's facade and the influence of modern architecture on how people learn and enjoy books in the digital age (Mwanzu & Wendo, 2017). Constructing the library based on the principles and professional engineering procedures (Sahli & Esmaeili Givi, 2014) and its unique architecture (Roughen, 2016; 2015) are several topics discussed in the previous research. The green environment around the library also affects the library brand (Sahli & Esmaeili Givi, 2014; Mwanzu & Wendo, 2017). In addition, libraries must be situated in a desirable location (Sahli & Ismaeili Givi, 2014; Trendler, 2016; Safaei et al., 2022) with easy access to public transportation and away from polluted urban areas, traffic, and other factors (Sahli & Esmaeili Givi, 2014).

Personal branding of librarians

Personal branding attempts to manage and control people's perceptions of librarians and emphasize positive traits (Gall, 2010), which is used to reposition librarians as information professionals and create a favorable image of them (Ottong et al., 2014). Librarians should optimize their personal brand within the digital community so that their reputation transcends the local level and crosses the international threshold (Eke, 2012). Beyond the confines of libraries, librarians must communicate their values and present themselves as valuable brands (Albert, 2017).

Personal branding is essential for boosting quality (Gall, 2010), well-being (Baharuddin & Kassim, 2014), and reputation (Gall, 2010; Baharuddin & Kassim, 2014; Ahmad et al., 2016). Gall (2010), Eke (2012), Baharuddin and Kassim (2014), Ottong et al. (2014), Ahmad et al. (2016), Brigham (2016), Kalbande (2019), and Safaei et al. (2021a) have conducted research along these lines. Various strategies, such as promoting the librarian's scientific and functional abilities, managing the personal brand and reputation of the librarians, creating a personal brand in the physical space of the library, using relational marketing by librarians, and establishing a digital footprint through the use of various information technologies, have been outlined in studies on building the personal brand of librarians (Sahli et al., 2023a). The outcomes of Sahli et al.'s investigation within the context of Iranian

academic libraries have also reaffirmed these conclusions (Sahli et al., 2023b). Safaei and colleagues (Safaei, 2021a) have also emphasized cognitive, professional-specialized, and communication skills.

Brand development strategies and library experiences in building a brand

Many researchers have investigated brand-building strategies and library experiences in this regard (Rowley, 2004b; Hood & Henderson, 2005; Kenneway, 2006; Yap & Yeo, 2007; Hepburn & Lewis, 2008; Brantz & Sadowski, 2010; Litsey & Daniel, 2013; Boyer et al., 2014; Badran, 2014; Tomcik, 2015; Roughen, 2016; Bennett & Thompson, 2016; Singh & Trinchetta, 2019; Mahdi & Ramadhan, 2019; Ogbonnaya, 2019; Roughen & Swain, 2020; Henry, 2021; Peng 2021; Safaei et al., 2021b; Safaei, et al., 2023; Sahli & Alidousti, 2023). Numerous aspects of brand development and their implications for libraries have been the subject of such research. Studies cover topics such as library architecture, information resources and services, marketing, Librarians' branding, and library management (Sahli et al., 2023a). The literature has also addressed issues such as the significance of developing a proper identity, brand name, logo design, and promoting the library's collection, services, role, and performance through various promotional strategies. Focusing on users and their needs to develop the desired brand image of the library, library compatibility with the new information environment and the varying needs of library users, and establishing a positive and productive relationship with beneficiaries are a few additional research issues (Sahli & Alidousti, 2021).

Brand name of libraries

The brand name is one of the prominent dimensions in branding, which is effective in building favorable brand associations. The library should possess a suitable name to present the key message of its service (Wengler, 2018) and use a distinctive name in its branding (Hepburn & Lewis, 2008) to be more successful in attracting its users. Myers et al. (1979) and Katsirikou and Oikonomou (2012) discuss how to develop a brand name in libraries.

Library logo

The brand defines the best function of the library, its differentiation, and its relationship to the needs of the users and includes the value and personality of the library (Kenneway, 2006). In addition, logo development aids in branding libraries (Roughen, 2016; Trendler, 2016; Worley, 2015). The library brand can be embodied in a logo (Trendler, 2016), a permanent sign that evokes the product in the customer's mind (Myers et al., 1979). This logo should be drawn in a simple and good font (Trendler, 2016) by a graphic artist (Roughen, 2016) or marketing team (Worley, 2015). Furthermore, legal advisors should be employed to name the library and build its visual identity (Roughen, 2016). Additionally, since the logo impacts the library's position in society and the relationship between users and the library, it is necessary to consider these factors in the design and implementation of the logo (Tian & Song, 2024). On the subject of creating a new library logo, Epstein's (2020) and Tian and Song's (2024) research were found to be relevant.

Brand concept, branding elements, and their impact on the library's success

The brand concept and branding elements and their impact on the library's success have been investigated in numerous studies (Shaffer, 2003; Singh, 2011; Hariff & Rowley, 2011; Rahmad et al., 2013; Singh & Ovsak, 2013; Peters & Kemp, 2014; Hommerová, 2016; Shuan-Neng & Chia-Hua, 2016; Twum et al., 2021). However, no research was found that comprehensively conceptualizes the brand for libraries. Several studies have briefly mentioned the brand definition for libraries. Shaffer (2003), for instance, defined a brand

in its market and outlined some of the branding principles considered by information professionals, professional associations, and their academic institutions. The results highlighted the significance of tangible and intangible characteristics of the product, service, or organization in defining the brand. Internal and external aspects of the brand definition have also been considered.

Singh (2011) investigated the concept of organizational brand and its effects on libraries and also highlighted the research objective, methodological considerations, and significance of ongoing research in academic libraries in Kansas. The results indicate that library users' experiences depend on library resources, services, and other empirical factors.

Rahmad et al. (2013) examined the impact of rebranding on consumer behavior and satisfaction. Their research identified rebranding as a method for altering library objectives, cultivating appreciative users, and encouraging employees to work more dynamically.

Singh and Ovsak (2013) analyzed the concept of service brands in libraries and information organizations through a literature review and interviews with librarians. Their research also examined the community's perception of the brand value of public and academic libraries and librarians' suggestions for enhancing the library community experience. Their research revealed the significance of enhancing the library's vision, developing a brand strategy plan, and creating an engaging environment to provide the community with strong, compelling, and meaningful experiences.

Moreover, by applying a systematic review of research on branding in libraries and analyzing their content to conduct this study, it became evident that the brand of libraries has nine dimensions. These dimensions include "brand identity, brand association, brand awareness, brand imagery, brand compatibility, brand quality, brand credibility (brand expertise and brand trustworthiness), brand superiority, and behavioral loyalty" (Sahli & Alidousti 2021, p. 103-104).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study¹ applied a qualitative approach and used grounded theory to investigate the brand concept for academic libraries. Grounded theory is a set of systematic methodological strategies that provides an alternative approach to conducting research and analyzing data, resulting in a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the data (Charmaz & Bryant, 2010, p.406). This method is employed when the objective is to explain a process or develop a broad theory, especially when current theories do not adequately address the study challenge (Creswell, 2012, p.423). Grounded theory method was chosen in this research because no comprehensive theory or definition currently exists for branding academic libraries. Among the several approaches used to apply grounded theory, the

¹ This manuscript is the result of a PhD dissertation, parts of which are being published in the form of a book in Persian language in Iran entitled "Brand and Academic Libraries". From the systematic review section of this dissertation, the following article was published in an Iranian journal that is not indexed internationally, which was also cited in the submitted article.

Sahli, F. and Alidousti, S. 2021. Conceptualization of the libraries' brand based on a systematic literature review. *Research on Information Science & Public Libraries*, Vol. 27, no. 1: 103-134. [In Persian]. <http://publij.ir/article-1-2251-fa.html>.

Straussian Grounded Theory (SGT) provides a more systematic method of data analysis than other grounded theory methods, making it a better option for novice researchers (Santos et al. 2018).

Sampling and data collection

This study used interviews to collect data, and theoretical sampling was used to select experts. In this type of sampling, the researcher collects and analyzes data concurrently and then determines what additional information is required to build the theory (Suddaby, 2006, p.634). The interviews for this research were conducted between January and July 2021, with an average duration of 40 minutes per interview. Throughout the research, experts were selected for interviews based on the specific requirements of the study, ensuring that all aspects of the subject mentioned in the existing literature and previous interviews were covered, and reached saturation. Through theoretical sampling and an exhaustive review encompassing all facets of the topics explored in existing literature and interviews, we engaged in discussions with 20 distinguished experts. These individuals were meticulously selected and each was assigned a distinct code from P1 to P20. Some were specialists in branding and marketing, while others were librarianship experts. A small group was also knowledgeable in both fields. The latter were researchers in areas such as publishing systems, digital libraries, copyright, library website design, and library marketing, or were employees in academic, public, or school libraries, as well as libraries of the Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents. Two of these experts had a PhD in management, ten experts had a PhD in information science and knowledge studies, and one had a PhD in law. Seven experts were masters of information science and knowledge studies. Eleven of these experts were women and nine were men. Table 1 outlines the particulars of the involved experts.

Table 1: Academic Field and Position of the Interviewed Experts

Academic field	Position	N	Academic field	Position	N	
PhD of information science and Knowledge Studies	Associate Professor	3	PhD of law	Assistant Professor	1	
	Assistant Professor	3		Master of information science and Knowledge Studies	The instructor in charge of the library at the center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents	1
	Researcher in the field of library website design	1			Researcher in the field of personal branding	1
	Former manager and current researcher of the public library	1			Manager of the academic library	1
	Deputy of the academic library	1			Former manager of the academic library	1
	University professor and activist in the field of school libraries	1			Public library librarian	1
PhD of management - policy making in the public sector	Assistant Professor	1	Academic library librarian		2	
PhD of Marketing Management	Assistant Professor	1	---	-----	20	

In this research, first by interviewing marketing and branding experts, the general dimensions of the brand and its concept in non-profit organizations (such as libraries) came out. Then, based on the opinion of experts in two subject areas, these dimensions were placed in the form of a more specialized structure in the subject area of librarianship. Finally, by interviewing experts in the field of academic libraries, each of the mentioned dimensions was examined in more details.

To conduct the interviews properly, we attempted to ask various questions based on the expertise of the interviewees. For instance, in the interview with branding experts, the topic and questions were framed from a branding perspective, whereas they were framed from a librarianship perspective for the librarianship experts. Since our research is exploratory, we did not have a set list of specific questions. Instead, each interview began with one or more general questions and then progressed based on the insights and dimensions provided by the expert. Here are some instances of the broad questions asked.

General questions for brand experts:

- Can non-profit organizations or businesses, like academic libraries, have a brand?
- If yes, how can the brand be imagined, represented, or defined for such organizations?
- What is the role of these libraries in attracting and retaining stakeholders?

General questions for other experts:

- What are the characteristics of a suitable academic library in the information age?
- How do these libraries attract and retain stakeholders?

The data were then analyzed and interpreted using the branding strategy. To analyze the data obtained from various experts, first we increased our knowledge in the fields of marketing, branding, and librarianship. Then, based on that knowledge, we analyzed the different data in a coordinated and aligned manner. For example, the concept of "library with up-to-date resources, services, and technologies" to define the brand in the language of librarianship was meaningful with the concept of "library brand compatibility" in the language of branding. The concept of "focusing on stakeholders and their values and needs" in the language of librarianship was shown by the concept of "brand trustworthiness" in the language of branding.

Data analysis

The data analysis steps of Strauss and Corbin's approach include "open coding", "axial coding", and "selective coding". Open coding involves breaking down data into separate sections, analyzing them, and comparing similarities and differences. Data that share conceptual or semantic similarities are grouped under more abstract concepts (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.101-102). The objective of axial coding is to initiate the process of aggregating data that has been fragmented through open coding. In this stage, the categories are paired with sub-categories to provide more precise and comprehensive explanations of the phenomena (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.123). Selective coding as the third step in the research process, involves integrating and refining theories. This step is not required if the goal of the research is to simply gather findings without focusing solely on theory development (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.155).

In this study, interview transcripts were entered into MAXQDA software and analyzed using qualitative content analysis, line by line. We followed the guidelines of Miles et al., (2014) and Saldana (2013) for data coding and analysis. First, the key topics of the interviews were summarized in the form of a word or a short phrase using descriptive coding. Then, the codes extracted from the interviews were categorized based on conceptual similarity using focused coding. Throughout this process, we compared the collected and analyzed data to clarify the opposing perspectives. After collecting additional data, the correct option was then determined. The data, which were semantically and conceptually similar, were then classified into a single category. As the objective of this study was not to develop a model and theory, we moved on to axial coding and the simple extraction of main and sub-categories.

Validity and reliability of data

In this research, ways used to improve the data validity, including prolonged engagement in the field, peer debriefing, disconfirming evidence, and thick and rich description. These methods are among the ones described in Creswell and Miller (2000).

(a) Prolonged engagement in the field

The strength of the evidence and the ability to compare data are two factors that contribute to the significance of prolonged involvement in a field. This research spent approximately six months selecting and interviewing candidates. In addition, a substantial amount of time was spent analyzing the interviews, especially the initial interviews, in order to develop an appropriate analytical framework.

(b) Peer debriefing

Individuals in the role of researcher counterpart or reviewer familiar with the research and the phenomenon under study provide the researcher with written feedback on the data and research process. On this basis, a faculty member familiar with the research was selected to strengthen the research's coding and final results.

(c) Disconfirming evidence

After developing the initial themes, the researcher looks for evidence in the data to confirm or refute these themes. We first analyzed the content of the literature to familiarize ourselves with the topic of branding, to be aware of its various dimensions in libraries, and to ensure that our initial interviews were conducted in the right direction. In light of this, researchers devised themes and dimensions to be considered during interviews. In interviews, some of these dimensions, such as logo and brand name, were met with opposition from interviewees. To determine the precise meaning of these types of concepts in academic libraries, researchers examined them from various angles. The contrasting opinions of the interviewees were compared to the difficulty of understanding the logo and brand name in academic libraries.

(d) Thick and rich description

Study topics were described in sufficient detail for readers to feel they had participated in the study. All the main and sub-categories taken from the interviews were analyzed clearly and thoroughly to minimize any confusion.

Gibbs (2007) suggested ensuring the codes are defined correctly during the coding process and holding regular team meetings in research to foster relationships and sharing among research coders. The interviews were listened to multiple times, and the transcripts were edited to obtain an accurate transcript of the interviews for this study. To ensure the correct definition of the codes in the coding process, they were checked several times and edited if necessary. The interviewees were selected with great care to increase their reliability. MAXQDA 10 qualitative data analysis software was utilized to analyze the data more systematically and better manage the coding procedure to increase the data's reliability.

Generalizability of results

Since this study delves into the brand concept of academic libraries in Iran, the findings presented in this section are tailored to Iranian academic libraries. Nevertheless, these insights hold potential applicability to libraries worldwide. While the interviews primarily centered on the existing status of Iranian academic libraries and strategies for enhancing

their brand in alignment with global standards, the lessons drawn could resonate beyond Iran's borders, offering valuable insights for libraries globally.

RESULTS

Based on the content analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with 20 experts, 345 sub-categories for the academic library brand concept were extracted and classified into 20 key categories (Table 2).

Table 2: The Brand Concept of Academic Libraries

No	Key categories	
1	Brand identity management	
2	Build a brand name	
3	Logo design	
4	Publicize the library resources and services	
5	Apply advertising strategies	
6	Build and manage a library image	
7	Build a compatible library with the information environment	
8	Build a compatible library with user needs	
9	Promote the quality of library resources and services	
10	Provide library resources and services based on the scientific role of the library in the university	
11	Focus on stakeholders, their perceptions, values, needs, and experiences	
12	Build a competitive advantage for libraries	
13	Evaluate library performance	Internal brand evaluation
14	Obtain feedback from users	
15	Library staff management	
16	Build trust in library capabilities in users	
17	Feel the excitement of being in the library	
18	Attract and retain users	
19	Build a stable and effective relationship with users	
20	Build a professional attitude towards library and librarian	

After analyzing the interviews, it became evident that the brand could not be adequately defined for academic libraries using librarianship terminology. Because branding has its own terminology, it was necessary to translate the language of librarianship into the language of branding. To solve this issue, several leading models in the field of branding were analyzed, and their degree of conformity with the dimensions of the academic library brand concept (Table 2) was evaluated. Aaker's brand equity model (Aaker, 1991, p.7) and Keller's customer-based brand equity model (Keller, 2013, p.107) were chosen because they comprehensively covered all aspects of this study. Since Keller's model presented brand equity dimensions in greater detail, its dimensions were utilized to rename the research categories. Based on Keller's model, therefore, 20 key research categories were categorized into 12 key categories. These were placed into form of Keller's model steps (Table 3). According to Table 3, the brand concept of academic libraries in Iran has twelve components. These include brand identity, brand associations, brand awareness, brand imagery, brand compatibility, brand quality, brand credibility, brand superiority, brand security, brand excitement, behavioral loyalty, and attitudinal attachment. The following content explains the components based on the current situation of Iranian academic libraries and suggests what they should do in the future.

Table 3: Academic Library Brand Concepts as Represented by Keller's Customer-based Brand Equity Model

Key categories	Key categories based on the Keller model		Keller's model steps	
Brand identity management	Brand identity		Brand Salience	Step 1: Brand identity
Build a brand name	Brand associations			
Logo design	Brand awareness			
Publicize the library resources and services Apply advertising strategies				
Build and manage a library image	Brand imagery		Brand imagery	Step 2: The meaning of the brand
Build a compatible library with the information environment Build a compatible library with user needs	Brand compatibility		Brand performance	
Promote the quality of library resources and services	Brand quality		Brand judgments	Step 3: Brand response
Provide library resources and services based on the scientific role of the library in the university	Brand expertise	Brand Credibility		
Focus on stakeholders, their perceptions, values, needs, and experiences	Brand trustworthiness			
Build a competitive advantage for libraries	Brand superiority			
Evaluate library performance	Internal brand evaluation			
Obtain feedback from users				
Library staff management				
Build trust in library capabilities in users	Brand security		Brand feelings	
Feel the excitement of being in the library	Brand excitement			
Attract and retain users	Behavioral loyalty		Brand resonance	Step 4: Brand relationships
Build a stable and effective relationship with users Build a professional attitude towards library and librarian	Attitudinal attachment			

Brand identity

In academic libraries, brand identity defines objectives, policies, content, information services, and the user community. In other words, brand identity in academic libraries involves creating a clear and updated mission statement that reflects the changing information environment and the needs of library users. P2 suggested that this statement should be communicated on the library's website.

P2: For every library, its goals, tasks, policies, employees, services, and target audience, among others, should be specified.

Brand associations

Brand association refers to constructing desirable associations with brand names and logo designs in academic libraries. A library logo can give its customers a distinct visual identity. However, creating a unique logo is uncommon in academic libraries, and their logo is typically the university logo with minor modifications. The brand name is also uncommon in academic libraries, but it can influence library users' perceptions. P1 highlighted that the brand name is predominantly associated with special libraries.

P1: In the brand name section, the parent organization's name is used instead of the library's brand name. Shiraz University, for instance, has a Kharazmi library. This may create a brand, as students will associate Kharazmi with engineering resources.

Brand awareness

Brand awareness refers to the extent to which library users recognize the library's brand and services. This awareness fosters positive brand associations. Academic libraries should actively promote their resources and services, utilizing suitable advertising strategies to reach their target audience.

(a) Publicize the library resources and services

Many users are unaware of the extensive resources and services offered by academic libraries. Librarians can showcase their ability to assist faculty members and students with research by hosting workshops tailored to their needs. However, a significant portion of the user base remains unaware of these capabilities. To address this issue, implementing various advertising strategies can be highly effective.

P9: In academic libraries, a key challenge we face is that many resources, purchased at considerable expense, go either unnoticed by students or are underutilized, or sometimes both.

(b) Apply advertising strategies

Publicizing library resources and services through various advertising strategies can be effective. Making catalogs and brochures to introduce the library and holding workshops at the beginning of each academic year to introduce the objectives and provide students with resources and services are promotional strategies for the academic library. Effectively introducing and promoting the library and its services, while enhancing users' awareness, can be achieved by leveraging Web 2.0 tools like library websites, as well as popular social networks such as Telegram and Instagram. However, the effective utilization of social networks requires marketing and branding expertise.

Brand imagery

The purpose of brand imagery is to build and manage the image of a library. The brand image refers to stakeholders' perceptions regarding the library's resources and services. If the image of the library in the minds of users is not current and comprehensive, libraries must construct and manage it based on the implications of the digital environment. A portion of the incomplete or outdated imagery is attributable to the inability of some librarians to provide a variety of library services and cultivate positive relationships with customers. Academic librarians possess various skills that can enhance their and the library's image in the library users' minds.

Some academic libraries use their skilled librarians for cataloging and indexing, among other tasks, and staff the service desk with individuals with less technical and communication support. This circumstance creates an unfavorable impression of libraries and librarians in users' minds. Incomplete or outdated faculty beliefs and perceptions about the library and the lack of interaction between education and the library have also contributed to this situation. The library's resources, services, and promotion efforts collectively shape its image. However, a lack of understanding regarding the library's role and objectives hinders users from visiting and forming a positive impression. This outdated perspective persists despite efforts to modernize library services. As explained by P8:

P8: The user's conception of a library is a room with shelves, resources, and a study area. You also read foreign articles acknowledging that the users' perspectives and perceptions of libraries remain outdated. They have not yet realized that various services are available to facilitate their research. Even librarians themselves are guilty [contribute to this].

Brand compatibility

In academic libraries, brand compatibility is considered from two perspectives: building a library compatible with the information environment and building a library compatible with user needs.

(a) Build a compatible library with the information environment

A library that is compatible with an information environment uses current technologies within the confines of the law to promote and provide quality services to its users. The digitization of resources, multiple information delivery channels, and remote and online access are crucial for user convenience. However, obstacles in the publishing industry, such as copyright laws in the digital environment, prevent academic libraries from entering the digital library seriously, thereby transforming the library service environment. This information environment is also the context of academic libraries. P20 emphasized the importance of academic libraries being context-aware and operating according to their unique context and position within it.

P20: My opinion is that the library should be both user- and context-focused. It implies that the library should be aware of its context and act accordingly.

(b) Build a compatible library with user needs

A library compatible with all its customers' scientific and interactive needs is a type of comprehensive research facility. Focusing on the information and service needs of library users by providing a variety of information sources, scientific content such as digital theses and dissertations, various service channels to response the needs of users, and creating educational resources and services according to the actual needs of users constitutes a library compatible with user needs.

Brand quality

In academic libraries, brand quality refers to promoting the quality of library resources and services in the new information environment. Academic libraries need new information, up-to-date resources, and various services to become a brand. Academic libraries should first educate themselves on the status and requirements of providing users with special needs (such as blind, deaf, and others) with suitable services and then provide high-quality services. P2 emphasized the paramount importance of quality:

P2: The quality must first be determined. The brand is synonymous with quality. To become a brand, a library or other organization must define its own quality and standards.

Brand credibility

The organization's credibility is derived from the brand's expertise and trustworthiness, which can be investigated in academic libraries.

(a) Brand Expertise

Brand expertise refers to expertise and innovation in libraries. Universities' libraries can provide this expertise by providing services and resources based on their scientific role. Academic libraries must provide faculty and students with specialized research resources and services to fulfill their scientific role in the university. In this regard, the librarian's knowledge is crucial. This expertise pertains to the professional and research knowledge of librarians in delivering services and engaging with users throughout both traditional and digital research processes. Mentorship and knowledge transfer from experienced librarians to those with less experience prove to be highly effective strategies for cultivating this applied knowledge. Librarians should promote their professional expertise, offer scientific workshops relevant to users' research needs, and assist faculty members in the classroom.

They should also be active on social media to create a positive image. Universities must also possess an appropriate educational system for librarianship students and train librarians with exceptional skills.

(b) Brand Trustworthiness

Brand credibility refers to the brand's sensitivity to stakeholders' needs in libraries. Academic libraries should provide information services and presentation space based on their various users' information and service requirements. The entire library and its facilities, including space, personnel, resources, and services, among others, should be designed to provide users with a positive in-person and online library experience. These experiences generate favorable associations and the desired mental picture of the library. P20 emphasized this aspect:

P20: The library must be capable of analyzing its users' market situation. If the library does not conduct this analysis, it will be unaware [remain oblivious] of its active and potential users, and consequently, it will be unable to achieve a desirable outcome.

Brand superiority

Brand superiority refers to libraries' competitive advantage. By providing appropriate resources, services, and study space, academic libraries can distinguish themselves from other information resource and service providers, such as Google, Amazon, among others. Doing so gives customers a positive impression of the library and confidence in meeting their informational needs. Internal brand evaluation plays a crucial role in enhancing the brand superiority of academic libraries. This involves conducting annual assessments of library performance, gathering user feedback on library services, and efficiently managing staff. P7 shared his approach to branding:

P7: I used to attend the faculty-wide introduction session and speak for five minutes about the library's exceptional services for new students. I utilized five of my exceptional services as slogans. Then I would suggest that they visit the library in groups of thirty.

Brand security

The sense of security refers to creating security for users to meet their needs and instill confidence in the library's current educational and research capabilities. This implies that the library effectively caters to users' academic and research requirements through its diverse resources, services, and informative workshops. P4 highlights the correlation between library security and trust:

P4: Although there is often a lack of trust, we are building it so that you can rely on us; we can do this, assist you with your education and research, and conduct many specialized workshops for you that faculty members may not have the capacity to provide.

Brand excitement

Brand excitement refers to the pleasant sensation and excitement of being in a scientific, appropriate, and aesthetically pleasing library setting. This exhilaration stems from the pride of being associated with such a space, as articulated by P5.

P5: When a person is in that environment (library) and physically turns the pages of a book, the sensation, and experience are naturally distinct from what is available on the website. Some elements cannot be experienced through web usage.

Behavioral loyalty

Behavioral loyalty refers to repeated visits and return of users to libraries. This refers to attracting and retaining users and building a stable and effective relationship with users in academic libraries.

(a) Attract and retain users

Academic libraries must strive to attract and retain their customers. Establishing an effective relationship between the library and the educational system is crucial in this regard. The library's desired resources and services, the experience of using the library and interacting with its librarians, and other factors create an image of the library that encourages users to return. Applying marketing principles in academic libraries is also crucial for informing users about library resources and services; as a result, users visit the library. P5's remarks suggested that academic libraries often neglect marketing efforts. This passive approach, according to P5, overlooks the importance of marketing in informing users about available resources and services, which can ultimately encourage more visits to the library.

P5: I think that libraries do not work on marketing at all. They are available to anyone who visits the library. They do not consider themselves obligated to refer customers to their side or attract customers. I believe they behave very passively.

(b) Build a stable and effective relationship with users

Academic libraries, as the university's beating heart, should have a positive rapport with the rest of the university and its users. There are various factors to establish a long-lasting and productive relationship with users. Among these issues are librarians' powerful virtual interaction on websites and social networks; welcoming users and defining library resources, services, and capabilities; appropriate interactions with the various library users; and promoting the librarian's professional and interactive skills over time. These factors influence user perceptions of the library and effectively bring them back.

Attitudinal Attachment

Brand attachment refers to favorable brand associations and their influence on user attitudes in libraries. The expertise of librarians and the desired interaction between librarians and users create the impression that users view librarians not as employees but as research partners. Desirable library resources and services, information facilities and space suited to users' needs, and an appropriate interactive space for users all contribute to forming such an attachment; these ultimately foster confidence. According to P4:

P4: The interaction between the librarian and the user, or rather the expertise of human resources in the type of service delivery, creates an interaction between the librarian and the user such that the students have a special affinity for the employees and view them as coworkers and supporters.

DISCUSSION

In academic libraries, brand means maintaining a consistent identity and adapting to user demands. This cohesive identity can be associated with the library's brand name and logo (if any) so that it is permanently distinguished and imprinted in users' minds. It is important to be aware of the library's resources and services and to employ various advertising techniques to keep the library in the minds of its users and make them aware of its significance. This is the library's brand awareness, which can increase its salience. Brand in academic libraries is managing the library's image per modern requirements. This image can be enhanced by promoting the diversity and quality of library resources and services, especially digital resources and services, and by improving its staff's professional and functional skills to construct libraries that are compatible with the new information environment and user requirements. These are considered brand quality, brand expertise,

and library brand compatibility, all of which are essential for fostering a high-quality library with knowledgeable personnel.

By providing library services and resources based on their scientific role at the university, these libraries can demonstrate their professional standing, i.e., their brand authority in the scientific community, and build the credibility of their brand. These libraries can create a unique identity by providing digital content that fulfills the requirements of users and utilizing various advanced technologies to offer it. As a result, users will have a positive experience while using the library. Focusing on stakeholders' perceptions, values, needs, and experiences builds trustworthiness in the library's brand by creating a desirable and positive experience for using the library for users. Users feel a sense of peace and scientific security because they have faith in the library's and its staff's abilities, which are made possible by these desirable experiences. In such a setting, a positive feeling and the excitement of being in such a location are generated, which is brand excitement. The users of such libraries frequently visit the library, and the library can attract and retain them by employing various tools and establishing a strong relationship with them. This behavioral loyalty in academic libraries can be transformed into an attitude attachment among users by promoting the library's standing and specialists. These customers gain confidence as they associate the library as the first place to meet their informational needs.

When comparing the results of this research with other studies, several similar findings were discovered. For example, Shaffer (2003) highlighted the significance of library resources, services, and the utilization of advertising, promotion, and communication strategies. Walton (2008) validated the presence of a strong connection between the library's quality and brand and recognized the employees' role in effectively establishing and enhancing its brand. Worley (2015) has highlighted the importance of promoting and delivering high-quality information services while also fostering trust and confidence between library users. Twum et al. (2020) have discussed how the library's brand image can be influenced by the quality of services and access to information. Chandratre and Chandratre (2015) have emphasized the significance of establishing long-term relationships with users through relationship marketing and offering specialized services. Hariff and Rowley (2011) have identified clear identity, competent employees, and national marketing campaigns as crucial factors for building a successful brand. Sahli and Esmaili Givi (2014) have raised the importance of establishing a distinct identity and utilizing effective marketing strategies to build the brand of libraries. Albert (2017) has also discovered that employing branding and marketing strategies is effective in gaining value and support for the library. Hommerová (2016) and Mahdi and Ramadhan (2019) have recognized the brand as a way to distinguish the library from its competitors. According to Peng's (2021) research, it is effective to determine the competitive advantage of the library brand and enhance its promotional activities in order to build a unique service brand and ensure the library's sustainable development. The research findings of Hommerová et al. (2020) also support the idea that branding and marketing efforts play a crucial role in maintaining the library's sustainability. Additionally, Katsirikou and Oikonomou (2012) have emphasized the significance of the service brand name in creating awareness and fostering loyalty among library users. Trendler (2016) found that using logos and other advertising tools is effective for promoting the library. Epstein (2020) also highlights the importance of the library logo's design and suggests considering the organization's logo for inspiration. Singh (2011) and Singh and Ovsak (2013) stress the significance of library users' experiences and various factors that influence their development.

CONCLUSIONS

This study marks the pioneering attempt to delineate the brand concept within academic libraries, aiming to elucidate its essence and importance within this context. The academic library brand is comprehensively conceptualized across 12 dimensions, encompassing brand identity, brand association, brand awareness, brand imagery, brand compatibility, brand quality, brand credibility, brand superiority, brand security, brand excitement, behavioral loyalty, and attitudinal attachment. The brand of academic libraries can be defined in four steps based on the dimensions above and their classification in the steps of Keller's model:

- The first step is to establish the academic library's brand identity. It is reflected in the library's brand name and logo, and users are informed using various promotional and advertising tools. These are known as brand identity, association, and awareness, contributing to the library's brand salience.
- The second step is establishing the meaning of the academic library's brand for users. Brand performance and brand imagery are linked to the construction of brand concept. Based on their performance, libraries create and manage an image in the minds of their users during this step.
- The third step is to obtain user feedback on the academic library's brand. These responses are associated with brand judgments and feelings. In this step, libraries are evaluated according to their scientific content quality, brand credibility, and brand superiority. Based on these evaluations, the brand's emotional responses are formed.
- Building brand relationships is the fourth step, in which brand resonance or the degree of mental connection between users and the brand and its activities is discussed. Appropriate brands will successfully foster a favorable and specialized perception of the library, increase brand loyalty, and entice customer participation.

Brand in academic libraries involves a multi-dimensional process: establishing the desired identity, delivering performance aligned with this identity, shaping the desired image based on performance, eliciting emotional or behavioral responses from stakeholders, and fostering meaningful connections with them. Essentially, it entails striving to offer stakeholders the optimum library experience. This study has culminated in the formulation of a comprehensive brand concept tailored specifically for academic libraries, as illustrated in Figure 1. However, it is important to acknowledge a limitation: while the brand concept presented here offers valuable insights and guidelines, its application may vary depending on the unique contexts and resources of individual academic libraries. Therefore, adaptation and customization to suit specific institutional needs and priorities are essential for successful implementation. Nonetheless, understanding and implementing this concept can significantly enhance the reputation, visibility, and user experience of academic libraries, thereby reinforcing their role as vital resources in the educational landscape.

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AUTHORS DECLARATION

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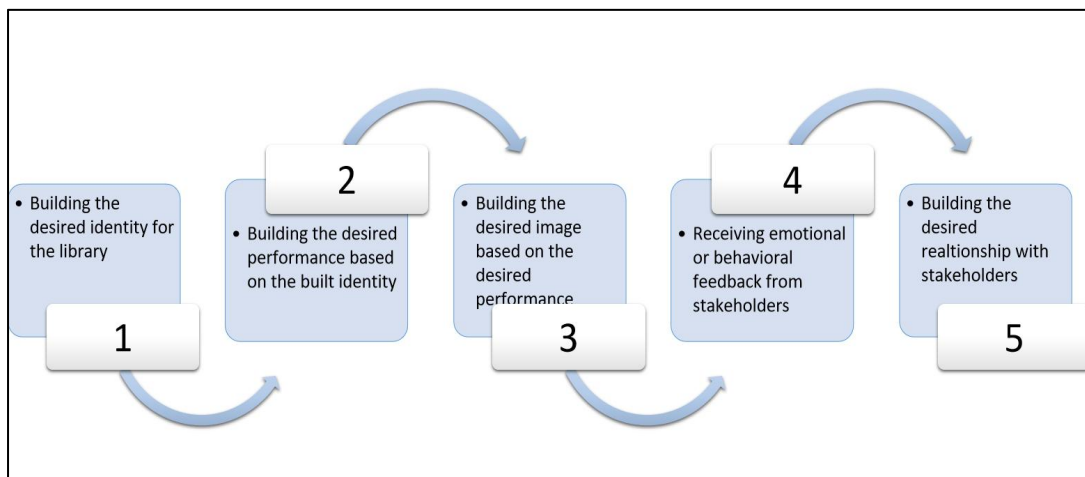


Figure 1: The Brand Concept of Academic Libraries

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Both authors contributed in the Conceptualization; Methodology: Formal analysis and investigation; Writing - original draft preparation; and Writing - review and editing of the manuscript.

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