



Learning Theories as Strategic Branding Resources: A Conceptual Framework for Market Positioning of Higher Education Institutions

Ozioma Ikonne

Abstract: This paper advances a conceptual framework that positions learning theories and pedagogical practices as strategic branding resources in higher education institutions. Drawing on contemporary branding theory and transformative learning literature, the study addresses a critical gap in higher education marketing by introducing the notion of a pedagogy paradox, whereby institutional brand narratives emphasise transformation, innovation, and societal impact without sufficient alignment with pedagogical realities. The paper integrates insights from constructivist, connectivist, and transformative learning paradigms to conceptualise learning-theory orientation as a foundational strategic input that shapes pedagogical design, student learning experiences, and, ultimately, institutional brand value. It proposes that transformative learning functions as a core branding logic by generating experiential value signals that influence perceptions of brand authenticity, differentiation, legitimacy, and long-term brand equity. A conceptual model is developed to articulate the relationships among pedagogical orientation, transformative learning experiences, and sequential brand outcomes, supported by four propositions that link pedagogy-based value creation to market positioning outcomes. The framework highlights the role of academic staff as internal brand agents and emphasises the importance of aligning pedagogical systems with institutional branding strategies. The paper contributes to higher education marketing scholarship by extending branding theory into the pedagogical domain and introducing the Pedagogy-based Higher Education Brand Identity Matrix (P-HEBIM) as a mechanism for integrating educational philosophy with brand strategy. Managerial implications underscore the need for experience-led brand governance. At the same time, future research directions call for empirical validation of the proposed relationships and the development of measurement scales for pedagogy-driven brand constructs.

Keywords: Higher Education Branding; Institutional Branding; Learning Theories and Branding; Market Positioning; Transformative Learning; Brand Authenticity.

Nomenclature:

HEIs: Higher Education Institutions

HE: Higher Education

TEA: Technology-Enabled Agency

TLT: Transformative Learning Theory

P-HEBIM: Pedagogy-based Higher Education Brand Identity Matrix

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I. INTRODUCTION

Conceptual Background: Marketisation, Branding, and Pedagogy in Higher Education. Higher education systems worldwide have become increasingly market-oriented, characterised by intensified competition for students, funding, partnerships, and reputation. In this context, branding has evolved from a peripheral communication activity to a central strategic function that shapes institutional identity, stakeholder trust, and long-term viability (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2020). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are now required to articulate compelling value propositions that extend beyond academic credentials to encompass employability, global relevance, social responsibility, and personal development.

Despite this shift, higher education marketing scholarship has largely treated pedagogy as an internal academic concern, disconnected from brand strategy. This conceptual paper challenges that separation by positioning learning theories as foundational branding resources that inform how HEIs design, communicate, and deliver their brand promises. Learning theories shape not only teaching and learning practices but also the lived experiences through which students, alumni, and employers construct perceptions of institutional value. Hence, the hermeneutic-phenomenological narratives of students and other higher education stakeholders contribute to the reputational equity of higher education brands, thereby making teaching and learning theory a critical element of the branding construct and positioning of HELs.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Brands and Branding are Defined

Brands may be described as value enhancers which confer superior value on products and services. The branding of products and services, including higher education services, emerges as the conferment of a differentiated value proposition. Scholars argue that authentic brands draw on both consumers' rational and emotional needs to confer differentiation, legitimacy, identification, and recognition on products and services. Drawing its theoretical impetus from marketing orientation theory, organisational branding practices rely on evidence of target consumer needs to mobilise cross-functional resources in support of brand development processes (Kotler, 2020) [16].

Learning Theories as Strategic Branding Resources: A Conceptual Framework for Market Positioning of Higher Education Institutions

Brands are increasingly conceptualised not only as identifiable symbols but also as value-laden constructs that communicate relevance, uniqueness, and superior benefits aligned with stakeholder expectations. In this regard, brands may be described as unique symbols, identities, or customer experiences represented through images, ideas, logos, slogans, and design schemes through which a product or service is differentiated and recognised. Contemporary scholarship further extends this view by positioning brands as socially constructed systems of meaning, comprising complex configurations of attributes, associations, and stakeholder perceptions (Kuriakose, 2023) [17].

Building on this perspective, Osmanova et al. (2023) [26] conceptualise brands as identity constructs whose essence integrates symbolic and emotional value, functional superiority, risk reduction, legal protection, and value-based legitimacy. This expanded view reflects a shift from traditional product-centric branding toward experience-based and relational paradigms, where value is co-created through ongoing interactions between organisations and stakeholders. In higher education contexts, such interactions are increasingly embedded within pedagogical processes, positioning learning experiences as central to the construction of institutional brand meaning.

Liu & Ghasemy (2025). [20] further highlight the limited integration within higher education branding research and other scholars, who argue that branding scholarship has evolved along two parallel but insufficiently integrated streams: the identification stream and the differentiation stream. The identification stream, associated with brand identity formation, examines how visual, symbolic, and communicative elements construct brand meaning (He & Zhang, 2022) [10]. In contrast, the differentiation stream focuses on how brands achieve competitive distinction through perceived value and stakeholder experience (Pinar et al., 2020) [31]. However, the weak integration of these streams has resulted in a conceptual gap, particularly in higher education contexts where experiential and behavioural dimensions, such as pedagogy, play a central role in shaping institutional brand meaning.

Despite their complementary nature, these streams remain only weakly integrated, leading to conceptual fragmentation in branding theory. This fragmentation becomes more pronounced in higher education contexts, where branding must operate within complex, non-commercial environments characterised by multiple stakeholders and intangible value propositions. Existing research suggests that the identification pathway establishes the foundational elements of brand identity through visual articulation and symbolic representation, which subsequently inform differentiation strategies.

However, a critical gap persists in the literature. This gap manifests as limited integration of visual identity elements with behavioural identity features, particularly institutional pedagogical identity, in shaping brand positioning in higher education institutions. Recent studies emphasise that contemporary higher education branding increasingly relies on experiential and value-based differentiation, in which institutional practices, including teaching and learning processes, play a central role in shaping stakeholder perceptions (Xiao et al., 2023) [34].

B. Branding in Higher Education

Following the emergence of marketisation, commercialisation, and commodification in higher education, competition for students, favourable rankings, and strategic partnerships have become defining features of higher education management. This evolution reflects broader transformations in knowledge production, delivery, and consumption, as well as the changing role of higher education institutions (HEIs) within global knowledge economies (Pawar, 2025) [29].

Within this context, branding and brand positioning have emerged as strategic tools through which HEIs seek to construct competitive legitimacy, enhance differentiation, and secure stakeholder trust in increasingly competitive higher education markets. The growing practitioner interest in higher education branding has been accompanied by a corresponding expansion in scholarly inquiry, particularly in adapting traditional branding principles to the complex, multi-stakeholder environment of higher education.

O'Sullivan (2024) [27] asserts that contemporary research in higher education branding is evolving across several interconnected domains, including pedagogy as a branding resource, higher education brand equity (Perera et al., 2021) [30], and institutional brand identity formation. Scholars such as Clark et al. (2020) [6] and Struweg and Wait (2025) [32] have examined the multidimensional nature of brand identity in higher education, highlighting the roles of student experience, institutional credibility, and stakeholder engagement in shaping brand meaning.

In parallel, research on internal branding and higher education brand communities has emphasised the importance of aligning organisational practices with institutional brand narratives. Internal branding perspectives highlight academic and administrative staff as key agents in enacting institutional brand values through teaching, research, and student engagement (Mampaey et al., 2020) [21]. This alignment between internal processes and external brand communication is critical for sustaining brand authenticity and long-term stakeholder trust.

Furthermore, recent studies suggest that brand capital in higher education is significantly mediated by brand identity, with brand loyalty emerging as a function of consistent and credible institutional experiences (Chen, 2022) [4]. These insights reinforce the view that higher education branding extends beyond symbolic representation to encompass lived experiences that shape stakeholder perceptions and institutional reputation.

The emerging evidence on what may be described as the pedagogy paradox, where institutions promote transformative and innovative brand narratives without fully embedding these values in pedagogical practice, further underscores the need to integrate teaching and learning processes into higher education branding frameworks. This paradox highlights the critical role of enacted pedagogical doctrines in shaping reputational equity. It provides the conceptual basis for positioning learning theories as foundational elements in understanding and articulating the meaning and positioning of higher education brands.

C. Learning Theories as Foundations of Brand Meaning

Learning theories encode implicit assumptions about knowledge, learners, and educational purpose, which, when institutionalised, translate into distinctive brand meanings. These theories shape not only pedagogical design but also the experiential signals through which higher education institutions (HEIs) communicate value to their stakeholders.

Contemporary interpretations of learning theory suggest that behaviourist orientations continue to inform branding narratives centred on efficiency, accountability, employability, and measurable outcomes, particularly in performance-driven educational environments (Kumari, 2022) [18]. In parallel, cognitivist and constructivist perspectives underpin student-centred educational models that emphasise intellectual growth, creativity, problem-solving, and the active construction of knowledge through experience and interaction (Merzel, 2023).

Furthermore, recent developments in learning theory highlight the increasing relevance of networked and technology-enabled learning environments. These approaches conceptualise learning as a distributed and digitally mediated process, aligning with institutional brand positioning that emphasises flexibility, connectivity, and lifelong learning within knowledge-based economies (Chen et al., 2025) [5].

The adoption and integration of these theoretical orientations into the behavioural and pedagogical identity of HEIs generate distinctive value propositions that underpin institutional differentiation and brand positioning. In this regard, learning theories function not merely as pedagogical frameworks but as strategic resources that shape how institutions design, deliver, and communicate their brand meaning.

D. Evolutionary Symmetry Between Learning Theories and Brand Management Practice

The overarching purpose of higher education (HE) is to acquire and advance knowledge. However, knowledge and its variants are not static; they evolve in response to changing societal, technological, and economic contexts. This recognition has significant implications for the structure of national knowledge systems and for how higher education institutions (HEIs) contribute to their development. Scholars argue that such systems are underpinned by shifting

epistemological foundations, particularly within the objectivist, constructivist, and connectivist spectrum of learning theories (Liu & Ghasemy, 2025).

Building on this perspective, it can be argued that higher education practice, both at the pedagogical and institutional levels, has evolved in a manner that mirrors the trajectory of brand and branding development. On the one hand, learning theories have transitioned from positivist and behaviourist orientations toward constructivist, experiential, and networked paradigms that emphasise learner agency, interaction, and contextual meaning-making. On the other hand, brand management practice has evolved from economically driven and transaction-oriented models toward relational, experiential, and co-creative approaches to value formation (Heding et al., 2020) [11].

In contemporary contexts, this evolution has extended to what may be described as a heutagogic–connectivist branding paradigm, in which brands are conceptualised as dynamic, technology-enabled assets that create personalised, purpose-driven value through continuous interaction with stakeholders. Within this paradigm, brand value is not merely communicated but co-created through digitally mediated experiences, stakeholder engagement, and the integration of technology-enabled agency (TEA) into brand identity.

This shift reflects a broader hermeneutic and phenomenological orientation in branding, where understanding stakeholder experiences, contexts, and interpretations becomes central to value creation. In this sense, brand meaning emerges through iterative processes of co-ownership, dialogue, and exchange between institutions and their stakeholders. Such developments align closely with contemporary learning theories that emphasise distributed knowledge, networked learning, and the socially constructed nature of meaning (Chen et al., 2025).

Accordingly, it may be argued that each evolutionary phase in brand management practice corresponds to a parallel phase in the development of learning theories. This evolutionary symmetry provides a compelling conceptual basis for integrating pedagogical theory into branding scholarship. It suggests that the way institutions conceptualise learning fundamentally shapes how they create, communicate, and sustain brand value in increasingly complex and competitive higher education environments.

Learning Theory Orientation	Core Learning Assumptions	Corresponding Branding Paradigm	Brand Logic & Value Creation Mechanism
Objectivist Orientation (Kumari, 2022)	Knowledge exists as objective, stable, and transferable. Learning is structured, standardised, and instructor-driven.	Economic / Transactional Branding (Heding et al., 2020)	Brands are institutional assets focused on efficiency, consistency, and value delivery through controlled messaging and transactional exchange.
Behaviourist–Cognitive Orientation (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020 [13]; Merzel, 2023)	Learning is shaped by observable behaviour, reinforcement, and cognitive processing—emphasis on measurable outcomes and performance.	Relational / Identity-Based Branding (Heding et al., 2020)	Brand meaning is constructed through repeated interactions, behavioural signals, and stakeholder experiences across institutional touchpoints.
Constructivist Orientation (Kumari, 2022)	Knowledge is actively constructed through interaction, reflection, and social engagement. Learning is contextual and collaborative.	Community-Based Branding (Heding et al., 2020)	Brands are co-created within communities of stakeholders, where shared values, participation, and collective identity shape brand meaning.
Connectivist Orientation (Chen et al., 2025)	Learning occurs through networks of people and technologies. Knowledge is distributed, dynamic, and digitally mediated.	Heutagogic-Connectivist Branding Paradigm (Mogaji et al., 2020) [24]	Brands function as digital, adaptive ecosystems that create personalised, purpose-driven value through technology-enabled agency (TEA), co-creation, and continuous stakeholder interaction.

Table 1 illustrates the conceptual alignment between the evolution of learning theories and corresponding shifts in brand management paradigms. The symmetry highlights how

epistemological transformations in education are mirrored by parallel developments in

Learning Theories as Strategic Branding Resources: A Conceptual Framework for Market Positioning of Higher Education Institutions

organisations' conceptualisation, construction, and communication of brand value. This alignment provides the theoretical foundation for positioning learning theories—particularly transformative and connectivist paradigms—as strategic resources for higher education branding and market positioning.

E. Theoretical Synthesis of Transformative Learning as a Brand Value Proposition of HEIs

Transformative learning theory (TLT) extends the preceding learning paradigms by conceptualising education as a process that produces big, enduring changes in learners' frames of reference, identity, and meaning-making structures. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that transformative learning is not a singular construct but a multidimensional process encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social transformation (Hoggan, 2023) [12].

Recent literature identifies multiple strands within transformative learning theory, reflecting its conceptual diversity and theoretical evolution. These strands include transformation as a consciousness-raising process, transformation through critical reflection and rational discourse, transformation as a developmental process, and transformation as individuation (McClain, 2024) [22]. While

these strands draw on foundational theoretical traditions, contemporary interpretations integrate them into a more unified understanding of transformation as a holistic and context-dependent learning process.

Contemporary scholarship emphasises that transformative learning extends beyond cognitive processes to encompass the affective and emotional dimensions of meaning-making, in which feelings, imagination, and subjective experience play a central role in shaping transformation (Acheson & Dirks, 2021) [1]. This affective dimension is particularly relevant in higher education contexts, where emotionally grounded learning experiences contribute to deeper engagement and the formation of enduring perceptions of institutional value.

The theoretical foundations of these distinct strands are synthesised in Table 2, which illustrates how different conceptualisations of transformative learning contribute to a broader understanding of transformation as both an individual and socially embedded process. This synthesis provides the basis for positioning transformative learning as a strategic value proposition in higher education, particularly in relation to institutional branding, identity formation, and stakeholder engagement.

Theoretical Strand	Contemporary Interpretation	Core Transformation Logic	Implication for HE Value Proposition
Consciousness-Raising Transformation (Freirean tradition)	Transformation as critical awareness of social, cultural, and structural conditions (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2022; McClain, 2024)	Learning occurs through critical dialogue, reflection, and emancipation from limiting assumptions	Positions HEIs as agents of social impact, equity, and civic transformation
Critical Reflection Transformation (Mezirowan tradition)	Transformation as a shift in meaning perspectives through critical reflection and rational discourse (Fleming, 2022 [8]; Hoggan, 2023)	Learning is triggered by disorienting dilemmas that lead to reassessment of prior beliefs and assumptions	Positions HEIs as facilitators of deep intellectual development and adaptive thinking
Individuation Transformation (Boydian tradition)	Transformation is the integration of cognitive, emotional, and unconscious dimensions of the self (McClain, 2024)	Learning involves self-awareness, internal dialogue, and identity reconstruction.	Positions HEIs as enablers of personal identity formation and psychological development
Developmental Transformation (Daloizian tradition)	Transformation may also be understood as a holistic process of growth and meaning-making that unfolds differently across disciplinary contexts, reflecting variations in epistemological orientation, learning design, and professional application (Baldwin, 2025) [2]; Trevisan et al., 2024) [33].	The search for meaning, purpose, and developmental progression across life stages drives learning.	Positions HEIs as platforms for lifelong learning, purpose discovery, and holistic capability development.

Hence, transformative learning (TL) may be viewed as a teaching and learning process that triggers and sustains students' perspective transformation (Fleming, 2022). This perspective conceptualises TL as the restructuring of learners' prior frames of reference, enabling them to develop critical awareness of their tacit assumptions, expectations, and those of others within their social context.

Situating these assumptions within the ongoing psychosocial changes individuals experience across the lifespan, Merzel (2023) [23] characterises transformative learning theory (TLT) as a paradigm-shifting process that introduces disequilibrium into learners' existing beliefs and meaning structures. Through critical reflection and dialogic engagement, TLT provides a framework for designing learning experiences that reshape how individuals interpret and interact with the world. This orientation aligns with constructivist pedagogical assumptions, particularly in its emphasis on experiential learning, cultural immersion, and

the development of higher-order cognitive and intercultural competencies.

Building on this, contemporary interpretations of TLT conceptualise transformation as a process that produces significant and enduring changes in how individuals experience, conceptualise, and engage with reality (Hoggan, 2023). Such transformations are characterised by their depth (the intensity of change), breadth (the range of contexts affected), and relative stability (the durability of the change over time). These criteria provide a useful analytical basis for distinguishing transformative learning processes from routine or incremental learning, thereby reinforcing the role of TLT as a framework for understanding deep, identity-level learning outcomes in higher education contexts.

F. Transformative Learning and Student Engagement in Higher Education

Empirical research increasingly demonstrates a strong relationship between



transformative learning (TL) and student engagement in higher education contexts. Nielsen (2020) [25] reports that project-oriented pedagogical approaches provide transformative learning experiences that enhance classroom engagement and improve student retention. Similarly, Feng et al. (2021) [7] conclude that the application of transformative pedagogies—particularly those grounded in experiential and problem-based learning significantly increases student engagement and academic performance.

These findings suggest that transformative learning extends beyond cognitive development to encompass active participation, emotional investment, and sustained learner involvement. However, the effectiveness of transformative learning interventions depends on educators’ understanding and application of the underlying principles of transformative learning theory (TLT). In this regard, Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert (2023) [9] argue that meaningful transformation occurs through the deliberate design of learning environments that challenge existing assumptions and facilitate critical reflection.

Such environments are characterised by processes that stimulate perspective transformation, including

disorientation from prior meaning structures, critical self-examination, reassessment of assumptions, and exploration of new roles and identities. These processes also involve developing and testing new knowledge frameworks, leading to increased competence and confidence and to the reintegration of transformed perspectives into learners’ personal and professional lives (Hoggan, 2023).

Concepts such as transformative digital learning and professional learning communities illustrate how higher education institutions can design collaborative and reflective pedagogical environments that sustain transformative engagement over time (Brennan & Gorman, 2023) [3]. Such environments, characterised by interaction, shared inquiry, and continuous reflection, contribute to the creation of meaningful learning experiences that shape stakeholder perceptions of institutional value.

Table 3 provides a synthesis of pedagogical approaches that support transformative learning, particularly within general education, engineering, and entrepreneurship education contexts.

Table 1: Transformative Learning Pedagogies in Higher Education

HE Discipline	Transformative Pedagogical Approaches	Core Transformative Mechanisms	Learning Outcomes / Value Signals
General Education	Collaborative learning; problem-based learning; experiential activities (field trips, simulations); reflective practices (journaling, guided inquiry); multimodal and interactive learning (Formenti & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Merzel, 2023)	Critical reflection; experiential engagement; perspective questioning; contextual awareness; identity exploration	Personal growth; self-awareness; critical thinking; adaptability; socio-cultural sensitivity
Engineering & IT Education	Hands-on and project-based learning; flipped classrooms; digital and technology-enabled learning; human-centred design; applied problem-solving (Pan et al., 2025) [28]	Applied cognition; iterative problem-solving; contextual learning; integration of theory and practice	Technical competence; innovation capability; systems thinking; real-world problem-solving ability
Entrepreneurship & Management Education	Dialogic learning; action learning; design thinking; experiential and disruptive learning; network-based learning; relational engagement	Reflexivity; opportunity recognition; relational proximity; decision-making under uncertainty	Entrepreneurial mindset; leadership capability; value creation skills; strategic thinking; global and cultural competence

Table 3 illustrates a clear trend of epistemological alignment, indicating that transformative learning (TL) approaches in higher education are predominantly grounded in constructivist and connectivist learning paradigms (Kheang, 2025) [15]. These pedagogical orientations emphasise learner agency, interaction, and context-sensitive knowledge construction, reinforcing the centrality of experience and reflection in transformative learning processes.

The identified pedagogical approaches further suggest that transformative learning in higher education can be effectively achieved through the integration of instrumental and communicative learning activities. Instrumental learning focuses on task-oriented and experiential approaches that enable learners to apply knowledge in practical contexts. In contrast, communicative learning emphasises critical self-reflection and rational discourse, fostering higher-order thinking and metacognitive development. The combination of these learning modes enables both competence development and perspective transformation, which are essential components of transformative learning outcomes.

In addition, Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert (2023) highlight that the effective implementation of transformative learning requires educators’ awareness of learners’ contexts

and supportive institutional environments that facilitate relational proximity between academic staff and students. Such environments align closely with the principles of a pedagogy of care, where meaningful engagement and personalised learning experiences are prioritised. The absence of these conditions may contribute to persistent student attrition challenges, particularly in technically demanding programmes such as engineering.

From a branding perspective, these insights reposition higher education institutions (HEIs) as transformation-oriented organisations that offer identity development, leadership formation, and societal impact as core elements of their value proposition. These attributes increasingly resonate with value-conscious student-consumers who seek education that extends beyond credential acquisition. Consequently, the growing trend of consumerism in higher education further underscores the importance of institutional pedagogical doctrines as critical mechanisms for establishing legitimacy, differentiation, and sustained stakeholder engagement.

G. Pedagogy as a Brand Feature in Higher Education

Pedagogy may be understood as the set of principles, methods, and approaches that guide the



Learning Theories as Strategic Branding Resources: A Conceptual Framework for Market Positioning of Higher Education Institutions

design and delivery of learning experiences across institutional, disciplinary, and programme contexts. Beyond its instructional function, pedagogy operates as a mediating framework through which knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and experienced. In this regard, pedagogy may be conceptualised as a dynamic and, at times, contested medium that reflects underlying assumptions about knowledge, learning, and value creation. This perspective positions pedagogy and its underpinning learning theories as central components of institutional identity and as critical elements in the value exchange processes between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their stakeholders.

However, there is growing evidence that emerging global trends are challenging the efficacy of traditional university models. Developments such as the rise of consumerism in higher education, the expansion of the digital economy, the disruptive effects of global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing emphasis on employability for millennial and Generation Z learners have reshaped expectations of the value of higher education. These shifts have prompted significant adaptations in both the epistemological foundations and pedagogical practices of HEIs, including the increasing influence of managerial and market-oriented logics in higher education governance.

Despite its centrality in shaping student experience and institutional value, pedagogy has remained largely under-theorised within higher education branding scholarship. This disconnect gives rise to what has been described as the pedagogy paradox, where institutions promote narratives of transformation, innovation, and impact without fully embedding these claims within their pedagogical systems. As a result, a misalignment arises between institutional brand promises and students' lived experiences.

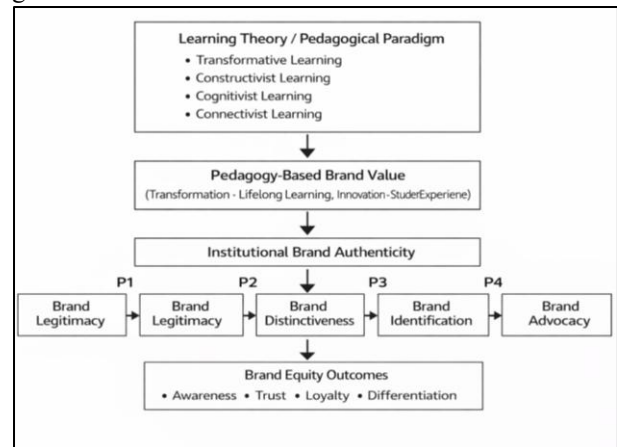
Addressing this paradox requires a reconceptualisation of pedagogy as a strategic branding resource rather than a purely academic function. From this perspective, pedagogical practices constitute the primary mechanism through which institutional value is created, experienced, and validated. Consequently, aligning pedagogical design with brand strategy becomes essential for enhancing authenticity, differentiation, and stakeholder trust.

This argument is operationalised through the proposition of the Pedagogy-based Higher Education Brand Identity Matrix (P-HEBIM) in extant studies. The P-HEBIM, which positions pedagogy as the central pillar of higher education brand identity, provides a structured approach for integrating learning theories and pedagogical practices with institutional branding strategy. This integration enables HEIs to articulate coherent value propositions that are grounded in lived student experiences and aligned with evolving market expectations.

III. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper conceptualises learning theories and related pedagogical practices as strategic branding resources in higher education. Building on this premise, it argues that the persistent pedagogy paradox, in which institutional brand narratives are not fully aligned with pedagogical realities, must be addressed to enhance the coherence and effectiveness of higher education branding.

The proposed framework addresses this gap by integrating educational philosophy with branding theory, thereby expanding the scope of scholarship in higher education marketing. Specifically, it positions learning theory as a strategic marketing variable that shapes institutional identity, value creation, and stakeholder engagement. In doing so, the framework bridges existing knowledge gaps by introducing a theory-driven approach to the management and positioning of higher education brands. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1.



[Fig.1: Conceptual Framework Linking Learning Theories, Transformative Pedagogy, and Market Positioning of Higher Education Institutions]

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework linking learning theories to higher education branding and market positioning. The framework conceptualises learning theory orientation as a foundational strategic input that informs pedagogical design and shapes the nature of student learning experiences.

These pedagogical processes generate brand value grounded in pedagogy, reflecting the extent to which higher education institutions deliver transformation-oriented, student-centred, and innovation-driven learning outcomes. This value formation process subsequently contributes to the development of institutional brand authenticity, representing the alignment between institutional brand promises and the lived experiences of stakeholders.

The framework further posits that authentic pedagogical value translates into sequential brand outcomes, including brand legitimacy, distinctiveness, identification, and advocacy. These constructs collectively influence long-term brand equity outcomes, such as awareness, trust, loyalty, and differentiation, as perceived by key stakeholders, including students, employers, alumni, and society.

Accordingly, the framework advances a theory-driven explanation of how pedagogical systems function as strategic mechanisms in the construction, communication, and sustenance of higher education brand value.

A. Transformative Learning as a Strategic Branding Anchor

This paper conceptualises transformative learning as a core brand logic that integrates institutional purpose, pedagogical practice, and market positioning. Unlike transactional branding approaches that emphasise

functional benefits, transformative learning supports relational and purpose-driven branding models grounded in authenticity, value co-creation, and alignment between institutional claims and stakeholder experiences (Heding et al., 2020).

Transformative pedagogies—such as experiential learning, problem-based learning, immersive digital environments, and critical reflection—generate consistent experiential signals across disciplines. These signals enable higher education institutions (HEIs) to communicate coherent brand narratives despite disciplinary diversity. Importantly, transformative learning reorients brand evaluation criteria from short-term performance indicators (e.g., grades and rankings) to long-term developmental outcomes (e.g., adaptability, ethical leadership, and civic engagement).

i. Proposition 1 (P1)

HEIs that explicitly align their brand identity with transformative learning principles are more likely to be perceived as purpose-driven and socially relevant by key stakeholders.

B. Pedagogical Alignment and Brand Authenticity

Brand authenticity in higher education is contingent upon the congruence between institutional brand promises and students’ lived experiences. When pedagogical realities do not support branding claims, stakeholder trust is undermined. Conversely, alignment between pedagogical orientation and brand positioning enhances credibility, emotional engagement, and perceived authenticity.

Transformative learning strengthens authenticity by embedding brand meaning within learning experiences rather than relying solely on symbolic or communicative representations. Because transformation unfolds through sustained processes of reflection, challenge, and engagement, it generates durable and deeply internalised brand associations that extend beyond graduation.

i. Proposition 2 (P2)

Alignment between transformative pedagogical practices and institutional branding positively influences perceived brand authenticity and stakeholder trust in HEIs.

C. Differentiation and Competitive Market Positioning

In increasingly competitive higher education markets, differentiation based solely on rankings, infrastructure, or employability outcomes is becoming insufficient. Transformative learning provides a distinctive basis for differentiation by emphasising holistic development, identity formation, and long-term societal contribution.

While disciplinary variations exist in the interpretation and application of transformative learning—particularly in technical and applied fields (Lim & Richardson, 2022) [19]—the broader convergence of transformative pedagogical approaches enables institution-wide brand coherence. This allows HEIs to project unified brand narratives while maintaining disciplinary diversity and autonomy.

i. Proposition 3 (P3)

HEIs that leverage transformative learning as a core brand narrative achieve stronger differentiation in competitive higher-education markets than institutions that rely primarily on functional or transactional brand attributes.

D. Market Legitimacy and Long-Term Brand Equity

Beyond differentiation, transformative learning contributes to institutional legitimacy in marketised higher education systems, where stakeholders increasingly evaluate the social and developmental value of education. Positioning HEIs as agents of transformation aligns institutional brands with broader societal priorities such as sustainability, equity, and innovation (Karseth et al., 2024) [14]. By framing education as both a public and personal good, transformative learning enhances long-term brand equity, reflected in alumni advocacy, employer partnerships, and institutional resilience in dynamic environments.

i. Proposition 4 (P4)

Transformative learning-based brand positioning positively contributes to long-term brand equity by enhancing institutional legitimacy, alumni loyalty, and stakeholder advocacy.

ii. Framework Integration

The conceptual framework positions transformative learning as a central mechanism that strengthens alignment across all levels of the model. When pedagogical practices consistently reflect transformative principles such as critical reflection, experiential engagement, and learner agency, brand promises become embedded within lived student experiences. This alignment enhances brand authenticity, differentiation, and market legitimacy, ultimately contributing to sustainable brand equity in competitive higher education environments. The framework, therefore, supports Propositions P1–P4 by demonstrating that pedagogical orientation mediates the relationship between institutional identity and market positioning outcomes.

IV. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING

The managerial implications derived from Figure 1 highlight the need for closer strategic integration between academic leadership and marketing functions within higher education institutions (HEIs). The framework demonstrates that institutional branding extends beyond communication activities and should be understood as a pedagogically grounded strategic process shaped by learning theory orientation and the design of student learning experiences.

First, HEI leaders and marketing managers must ensure explicit alignment between institutional brand promises and pedagogical realities. Claims related to transformation, innovation, and societal impact should be substantiated through learning designs that incorporate experiential learning, critical reflection, and learner agency. Misalignment between branding narratives and lived student experiences undermines brand authenticity and erodes stakeholder trust.

Second, the framework positions academic staff as central actors in delivering institutional brand value. Because transformative learning is enacted through teaching, curriculum design, and student engagement, academics function as internal brand agents. Accordingly, marketing strategies should be informed by pedagogical practices and supported by internal branding initiatives that align faculty

Learning Theories as Strategic Branding Resources: A Conceptual Framework for Market Positioning of Higher Education Institutions

understanding with institutional positioning and value propositions.

Third, HEIs are encouraged to shift from credential-based market narratives toward transformation-based value propositions. While employability metrics and rankings remain important, transformative learning enables institutions to communicate differentiated value through leadership development, adaptability, ethical reasoning, and societal contribution. These attributes increasingly resonate with value-conscious student-consumers and employers in dynamic knowledge economies.

Fourth, the framework underscores the importance of designing experience-based brand touchpoints across the student journey. These include immersive learning environments, community engagement initiatives, digital learning ecosystems, and structured reflective milestones. Such touchpoints operationalise abstract brand values by embedding them within lived student experiences, thereby reinforcing brand meaning and authenticity.

Finally, marketing managers should adopt experience-informed brand monitoring systems that integrate student feedback, alumni narratives, and learning outcome indicators to assess the extent to which transformative learning claims are realised in practice. These mechanisms enable continuous alignment between pedagogical innovation and brand positioning, thereby strengthening institutional legitimacy, stakeholder engagement, and long-term brand equity.

V. CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper advances the argument that pedagogy and learning theories should be reconceptualised as strategic, market-facing brand assets rather than solely internal academic variables. In increasingly competitive and marketised higher education environments, stakeholders evaluate higher education institutions (HEIs) through lived experiences, including classroom practices, assessment cultures, digital learning ecosystems, relational proximity with academic staff, and the extent to which education produces durable capabilities and identity transformation.

The central contribution of this paper lies in positioning learning theories as **branding logics** that shape how institutional value is created, communicated, and validated. Specifically, learning theories inform the design of pedagogical systems (value creation), generate experiential signals through student engagement (value signalling), and influence stakeholder perceptions of authenticity, differentiation, and legitimacy (value validation). In this sense, institutional brand promises are only as credible as the pedagogical realities that consistently reinforce them.

Transformative learning theory, in particular, provides a robust epistemological foundation for contemporary higher education positioning. By integrating personal development, adaptability, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement, HEIs can articulate coherent, purpose-driven brand narratives across diverse disciplinary contexts. The proposed propositions (P1–P4) specify a causal pathway linking learning theory orientation to transformative student experiences, and subsequently to brand authenticity, differentiation, legitimacy, and long-term brand equity. This

pathway also clarifies the **pedagogy paradox**, wherein institutions promote narratives of transformation and impact while under-investing in the pedagogical systems required to deliver these outcomes consistently.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest a shift from communication-led branding toward **experience-led brand governance**. Marketing strategy should be co-developed with academic leadership around three key dimensions: (i) clearly articulated pedagogical doctrines, (ii) measurable and intentional experience touchpoints across the student journey—such as signature pedagogies, applied projects, reflective milestones, community engagement, and digitally mediated learning networks—and (iii) continuous brand monitoring systems that extend beyond awareness metrics to incorporate student experiences and alumni narratives.

Future research should empirically test the proposed framework using mixed-method approaches, including brand audits, student-experience measurement, stakeholder-trust models, and longitudinal analyses of alumni outcomes. Comparative studies across institutional types—such as applied, entrepreneurial, and research-intensive universities—and across national contexts would further clarify the boundary conditions under which transformative learning-based positioning is most effective. In addition, there is a need for scale development, particularly in relation to pedagogical brand authenticity, transformative experience signals, and pedagogy-brand congruence, to enable robust empirical testing and causal modelling of pedagogy-driven brand equity in higher education.

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