

Branding China's University Think Tanks: Pathways and Challenges in the Era of Educational Strengthening

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Abstract

Research Purpose: University think tanks in colleges and universities are of great significance to promoting the modernization of national governance system and governance capacity and building an educational power. **Method:** By introducing brand theory, through case analysis, according to the ranking, achievements, comprehensive influence and important characteristics of 795 think tanks in CTTI, five typical models of brand building of think tanks in colleges and universities are summarized, and four common problems are analyzed in the process of brand building of think tanks in colleges and universities, such as the tendency of large quantity of think tanks, the lack of leading role of think tanks, the publication of achievements based on papers and the cognitive deviation of think tanks' main identity. **Result and Conclusion:** In the context of accelerating the building of a strong education system, the brand development of university-affiliated think tanks can be optimized through four pathways: emphasizing brand positioning, strengthening a product-oriented mindset, integrating brand communication, and building specialized teams. This will fully leverage the brand effect of university think tanks and address the epochal question of "what role should they play in national rejuvenation."

Keywords

University think tanks; Types of think tanks; Brand theory; Brand building; Optimization path; A strong education system.

1. Introduction

Currently, China is accelerating its efforts to build itself into a powerhouse in education, setting new requirements for the construction of university think tanks. In February 2014, the Ministry of Education released the "Promotion Plan for the Construction of New-Type University Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics," providing a comprehensive blueprint for the development of university think tanks [1]. Against this backdrop, university think tanks in China have experienced rapid growth, with numerous think tanks being established at universities across the country. By 2024, there were 795 university think tanks included in the CTTI (China Think Tank Index), accounting for 72.6% of the total. This demonstrates the significant role that new-type university think tanks play in the construction of new-type think tanks overall. This paper takes several typical construction models of university think tanks as entry points to deeply explore the optimization paths for brand building among Chinese university think tanks, offering insights for the construction of university think tanks in the new era.

2. Patterns and Types: A Review of Brand Building in University Think Tanks

2.1. Perspectives and Methodologies of Brand Theory

Brand theory encompasses a series of concepts, models, and theories that study and explain brand phenomena. It primarily focuses on aspects such as brand construction, dissemination, and maintenance, aiming to assist enterprises in understanding and managing the influence and value of their brands. Core viewpoints within brand theory include David Aaker's assertion that a brand is a symbolic system with a unique identity and personality, capable of establishing and maintaining brand relationships through emotional and cognitive interactions with consumers [2]. Keller proposed the "Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Theory," indicating that brand value can be constructed and evaluated through multiple dimensions such as brand awareness, brand image, and brand relationships [3]. Kapferer pointed out that enterprises engage in a series of activities to shape and maintain their brands through brand strategies, positioning, and communication [4]. The research methodologies of brand theory mainly include empirical research and theoretical modeling, which validate and explore hypotheses and relationships within brand theory by collecting and analyzing vast amounts of empirical data, or explain and predict the development and changes of brand phenomena by constructing mathematical models and theoretical frameworks.

2.2. Definition, Value, and Current Research Status of University Think Tank Brands

Gardner and Levy argue that brand influence plays a particularly prominent role in the market [5]. In the consumer market, brand influence manifests as outward-facing awareness, reputation, and consumer loyalty [6]. For think tank institutions, to win favor in the policy market, they need to establish their own distinctive brands [7]. In recent years, universities, as incubators and platforms for think tank development, have strived to create think tank brands with distinct characteristics and inherent advantages. However, research on university think tank brands has relatively lagged behind. In the CNKI database, there are 95 CSSCI papers studying the influence of university think tanks, among which only 9 involve brand building, and merely one specifically focuses on think tank brand building. Among them, Guo Bao et al. suggest that think tanks should adopt strategies such as an overall brand approach to enhance the overall product influence of think tanks, thereby elevating their overall influence [8]. Ding Xuankai et al. were the first to introduce brand theory and the CBBE model into think tank research, arguing that brand building is integral to university think tanks and positively correlated with their influence rankings [7].

After more than a decade of development, the extensive, quantity-driven approach of new-type university think tanks can no longer meet the demands of the policy market. Facts have proven that during the construction of university think tanks in the new era, it is essential to adhere to the Ministry of Education's requirements of "overall design, combining point and surface, highlighting key points, and implementing in categories" [9]. The focus should shift from extensive operations to intensive management [8], with a primary emphasis on brand building [6]. In practice, since 2018, following the release of the Top 100 University Think Tank Rankings by the Global Think Tank Research Center at Zhejiang University of Technology, some research institutions and provinces have begun to select lists of university think tank brands.

Both from a theoretical and practical standpoint, it is evident that brand building should be regarded as an essential path for university think tanks [10]. The brand of a university think tank serves as crucial proof of its comprehensive strength, representing its overall credibility and quality. It embodies the unique development characteristics formed during the think tank construction process and serves as a significant marker distinguishing it from other institutions.

Drawing on brand theory, the value of a university think tank brand to an individual think tank primarily manifests in two aspects: first, awareness, which refers to the extent to which a university think tank is recognized and understood by the public, serving as a quantitative measure; second, reputation, which denotes the degree to which a university think tank and its research outcomes are trusted and praised by the public, or how the public evaluates the think tank, serving as a qualitative measure. In summary, the brand of a university think tank represents its image. Only by cultivating unique characteristics and leveraging brand effects can university think tanks better respond to the requirements of building a powerhouse in education and provide vital intellectual support for the scientific decision-making of the Party and the state.

3. Current Situation and Dilemmas: Issues in Brand Building of University Think Tanks

3.1. Tendency Towards Quantity Over Quality and Homogeneity

While university think tanks in China clearly hold a numerical advantage, a deeper analysis reveals a tendency towards a large quantity with a high degree of homogeneity [11]. This phenomenon can be attributed to various factors, notably the "indicator curse" prevalent at all levels within universities, which leads to the establishment of multiple think tanks within a single institution. This results in overlapping research personnel and duplicated research findings, causing redundant studies. Not only does this waste research resources and create academic redundancy, but it also hinders the production of high-quality, distinctive research outcomes by university think tanks. Particularly for high-level universities, which should align with major national strategic needs and focus on pivotal issues that influence the overall situation, conducting forward-looking, targeted, and preparatory policy research to directly serve the decision-making of the Party Central Committee and the State Council is crucial. However, when multiple think tanks exist within such universities, their collective advantages are weakened and diluted, making it difficult to develop influential products that can compete with internationally renowned think tanks, ultimately constraining the development of university think tanks.

3.2. Lack of Leading Influence in Think Tank Outcomes

Despite significant progress in the construction of university think tanks, with their outcomes frequently receiving recognition from decision-makers, there remains a general deficiency in their ability to drive policy directions and lead public opinion. In some cases, there is even a phenomenon of "politicizing intelligence" [12]. Many university think tanks tend to focus on interpreting government documents, policies, and hot-button issues, resulting in outcomes that are superficial, specific, fragmented, and lacking in strategic, forward-looking, and leading qualities. In contrast, renowned foreign think tanks excel at producing groundbreaking and explosive original ideas, such as "The Clash of Civilizations" and the "China-US G2 model." Compared to their foreign counterparts, Chinese university think tanks play a less prominent intellectual guiding role in national governance, particularly lacking the ability to proactively counter Western discourse hegemony. They rarely produce immediate leading outcomes in response, often resorting to passive reactions and engaging in discussions within the Western discourse framework [13].

3.3. Predominance of Papers in Outcome Publication

With the exponential growth in the overall number of university think tanks, there has been an explosive increase in the volume of outcomes produced. However, due to multiple layers of review and scrutiny, experts from university think tanks primarily publish their outcomes in the form of decision-making consultation reports, journal articles, research reports,

monographs, briefings, and internal references. During the dissemination process, these outcomes are often directly submitted to decision-makers in government departments or presented to senior leaders in the form of papers for speeches and reports, providing crucial references for their scientific decision-making. The academic nature and paper-based medium of outcomes from Chinese university think tanks create barriers between them and the public, making direct dialogue difficult and constraining the dissemination and influence of think tank outcomes.

3.4. Misconceptions About the Identity of Think Tank Practitioners

Foreign think tanks, having started earlier, possess more experience in building a professional talent pool. Taking the renowned RAND Corporation as an example, it employs a "revolving door" mechanism to gather elites from academia, politics, business, and the media to form a professional think tank team [14]. In contrast, Chinese university think tanks, having started later, need to strengthen their talent development mechanisms. Practitioners often transition from related social science disciplines [15], leading to misconceptions about their identity, equating think tank practitioners with social science researchers. Think tank practitioners should emphasize both actionability and ideological depth, conducting empirical research while possessing a strong sense of topic selection, profound forward-thinking, high political sensitivity, and proficient media experience.

4. Breakthroughs and Prospects: Optimization Pathways for Brand Building of University Think Tanks

4.1. Emphasizing Brand Positioning

University think tank construction should draw inspiration from the "positioning" concept in brand theory, highlighting brand differentiation to overcome the bottleneck of homogeneity. For university think tanks, it is crucial to identify unique brand positions and differentiate themselves from similar entities, thereby forging core brand values. High-level institutions such as those in the "985 Project" and "Double First-Class" initiative should leverage their policy advantages, financial support, talent pools, and disciplinary systems. By integrating their distinctive strengths with school-specific fields, they can advance research on major theoretical and practical issues in economic, social, and scientific innovation domains, addressing hot and challenging topics. This approach will yield forward-looking, targeted, innovative, and policy-preparatory think tank outcomes, forming competitive products that can rival internationally renowned think tanks. Meanwhile, ordinary universities should focus on creating small yet specialized think tanks. As specialized or local institutions, they should reevaluate their developmental positioning, harness their local service-oriented supply-side characteristics, and pursue a high-quality, niche development path characterized by small scale, precision, and excellence, thereby enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of their think tank research.

4.2. Strengthening Product Consciousness

The production and application of high-quality think tank products constitute the paramount objective of university think tank construction. Successful foreign think tanks, as exemplified by their "unique selling propositions" [16], have established themselves as global leaders by generating influential policy recommendations. Chinese university think tanks should cultivate a strong "product consciousness," considering the "utility value" of their outputs, particularly their impact on policy roles. Simultaneously, during product dissemination, they should integrate a "product mindset," designing appropriate marketing strategies and agenda settings to proactively showcase Chinese wisdom and perspectives, generating more leading concepts and original viewpoints, and providing intellectual support for planning, decision-making, scientific guidance, and evaluation and verification.

4.3. Integrating Brand Communication

The key task of integrated brand communication is to align the communication system with brand planning and establish corresponding communication pathways [17]. As new-generation university think tanks in the all-media era, they should emphasize systematic communication and information consistency, constructing an organizational communication framework and outcome dissemination pathways to ensure the effectiveness and operability of think tank communication. Firstly, enhance communication platform construction. University think tanks should strengthen their websites, mobile applications (APPs), and WeChat official accounts, while registering accounts on major domestic and international social media platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter). This enables real-time dissemination of think tank activities and latest outcomes, facilitating online interactions with international audiences, expanding influence in the think tank sector, and broadening audience reach and engagement. Secondly, improve experts' media literacy. Think tank experts should enhance their new media communication awareness and media literacy, engaging with media and audiences to deliver "high-quality voices" characterized by professionalism and intellectual value. Thirdly, innovate communication methods. In the context of generative artificial intelligence (AIGC), university think tanks should leverage new technologies to empower communication, utilizing them to precisely identify user needs and preferences for targeted dissemination, thereby attracting a wider target audience.

4.4. Building a Professional Team

Analyzing the successful practices of the Public Policy Research Institute of South China University of Technology and the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China reveals that a professional team is a crucial factor in the rapid development of university think tanks and a necessary path for brand development. Firstly, reinforce identity recognition. As the primary communicators of university think tanks, practitioners must first strengthen their own identity recognition, shift their mindset, and clarify their role as think tank researchers. Taking the world-renowned Brookings Institution as an example, it sets three criteria for its researchers: being "academic leaders in their fields," possessing a forward-looking vision, and having influence in the public sphere [18]. Therefore, the requirements for think tank practitioners fundamentally differ from those of ordinary social science practitioners. Chinese university think tanks should draw on the personnel standards of renowned foreign think tanks, urging their practitioners to continuously enhance their professional qualities, pursue a professional development path, strengthen their comprehensive research and strategic planning capabilities, and build a team of think tank experts with both Chinese and international perspectives. Secondly, strengthen professional development. Currently, Chinese think tank research spans interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary fields, lacking a distinct theoretical, disciplinary, and discourse system specific to think tanks. "There is a need to construct a core knowledge system and training framework unique to think tanks" [19]. For university think tanks, it is essential to accelerate the disciplinary development of think tank studies, clarify its disciplinary scope and framework, establish a comprehensive knowledge system for think tank studies [20], and cultivate professional think tank talents.

5. Conclusion

Strengthening brand building for university think tanks represents a crucial avenue for leveraging the intellectual resources of universities to cultivate their core competitive advantages and is an inevitable requirement for building a strong education nation. Drawing from the perspective of brand theory, this study identifies five typical models of brand building for university think tanks and analyzes the common challenges encountered in current brand-

building efforts. Based on this analysis, it contemplates pathways for brand development, focusing on several key factors. University think tanks should proactively align with the strategic demands of national and regional economic development, capitalize on their resource advantages and research strengths, accurately identify their unique brand positions, and employ appropriate strategies to meticulously craft distinctive brands. By doing so, they can continuously enhance their capacities to contribute insights to educational policymaking, offer support for public satisfaction, and provide intellectual contributions to academic research, thereby addressing the pressing question of our era: "What role should university think tanks play in building a strong nation?"

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