Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification

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ABSTRACT

The study proposes and empirically tests a comprehensive model of student-university identification based on social identity theory. This study examines the role of university brand personality, university brand knowledge, and university brand prestige in developing student-university identification. Furthermore, the effects of student-university identification on various university-supportive behaviors such as university affiliation, suggestions for improvement, advocacy intentions, and participation in future activities are examined. Findings reveal that university brand knowledge and university brand prestige plays a key role in determining the student-university identification. In addition, students who identify with their university perceive their destiny as interweaved with the university which drives their desire to engage in university supportive behaviors. Findings suggest that universities should engage in branding activities that develop strong student-university identification in order to enhance the students' university supportive behaviors.

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1. Introduction

To overcome the challenges of competitive pressures, shrinking financial support from governments, decline in university-going population, and widespread changes in an educational environment, higher education institutions (hereafter HEI) are increasingly adopting marketing and branding strategies that are typically associated with the for-profit sector (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2015). In fact, main stream reports indicate that HEIs world over have seen an increase in their marketing and branding budget in the past few years (Chapleo, 2014). As the value offered by HEIs is being increasingly scrutinized, various researchers argue that branding cuts through the clutter in effectively communicating the value proposition of HEI's to students. Branding conveys a favorable image by communicating signals of quality and trust (Casidy, 2013). Perhaps, an important benefit of branding is its ability to turn students into university ambassadors by offering a sense of identification or belongingness with the HEIs (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Wilkins et al., 2015).

University identification is a specific form of social identification characterized by students' attachment or belongingness with the university (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), university identification allows students to enhance their self-concept or self-image by associating with the university. Students who strongly identify with the university are likely to be more committed and perform beyond their role requirements. This allows the students to represent and support their university (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Thus, university identification provides an opportunity for the students to develop a long-lasting relationship with the university. With consumerization changing students into customers and universities into service providers (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2009), university identification has the potential to provide new and valuable insights into how branding can influence students' perceptions and behaviors towards the university.

However, very limited research evidence exists which examines the role of university identification in the HEI context (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). For example, university identification is found to influence the alumni's promotion, donation giving, competitive attitude, and seeking contact through website and social media (Porter, Hartman, & Johnson, 2011; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). In addition, university identification is related to prospective students' behavioral intentions towards the university (Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). Among the current students, university identification is found to influence their perceptions towards university merchandise, well-being, and overall attitude and support towards the university (Cameron, 1999; Jiménez-Castillo, Sánchez-Fernández, & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2013). While these studies confirm that university identification can enhance students' perception towards the university, there is a lack of understanding of how university identification is formed and how this

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influences students' behavior towards the university? Therefore, this research has the following research objectives:

1. To examine the antecedents of university identification, and
2. To investigate the role of university identification on students' supportive behaviors towards the university.

Specifically, this study aims to provide a better understanding of the antecedents and consequences of university identification. While previous literature has identified antecedents such as prestige (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014), this study introduces university brand knowledge and university brand personality into the model. Similarly, this study examines the role of university identification on university supportive behaviors such as advocacy intentions, university affiliation, suggestions for improvement, and participation in future activities. The originality of this study relates to the development and examination of an integrated model of university brand identification in HEI context. The findings of this study have important implications for HEIs in developing and executing brand management strategies that turn students into university ambassadors. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, the theoretical background of the study is explained along with a review of relevant literature and proposed hypotheses. Next, the research methodology employed is detailed. Third, data analysis and results are explained. Finally, the implications are discussed along with the limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Social identity theory

Social identity theory (hereafter SIT: Tajfel, 1978) is based on the premise that individuals define their own identities with regard to certain groups and such identification enhances their self-identity. The identification with a social group involves both categorization of self within the group and tendency to view one's group with a positive bias compared to other rival groups. In fact, individuals with strong identification with a specific group define themselves in relations with the group and evaluate any group threats as threats to the self. Thus, identification with a specific group is directly related to the motive to enhance self-identity and self-regard (Tajfel, 1978).

SIT is applied in a wide variety of research areas such as understanding the social identities, motivations between identification with a group, multiple identities individuals inhabit, in-group relationships, and outcomes of identification of individuals, group, and social indicators. The growth of these research efforts has resulted in a variety of theoretical perspectives, including self-categorization theory, self-enhancement theory, and self-expansion theory among others. Self-categorization theory states that people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories and view group membership as important in developing self-identity (Turner, 1975). Self-enhancement theory (Jones, 1973) suggests that individuals strive to see themselves positively and discount negative self-information. Aron and Aron's (1996) social expansion theory contends that social relationships involve expanding self to accommodate the other. As these competing theories can be interpreted by in-group identification, self-concept, and positive self-regard components of social identification theory, this study considers SIT in examining the antecedents and consequences of university identification.

2.2. University identification

Ashforth and Mael (1989) describe identification as the extent to which an individual perceives a sense of belongingness or oneness with an organization. Individuals who identify with the organization define their self in relationship to the organization and see the organization's successes and failures as their own. Thus, identification

represents the degree to which an organization expresses and enhances an individual's identity. The strength of the identification is determined by an individual's awareness, knowledge, and experience with the organization (Balmer & Liao, 2007). Brand identification occurs mainly through direct interactions between an individual and an organization. However, recent studies suggest that identification is a perceptual construct that describes the extent to which an individual psychologically accepts the organization as part of his or her self (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). According to this view, non-members or individuals without any format ties or interactions can also identify with an organization.

In the present study, university identification is considered as a student's perceived sense of belongingness or oneness with the university following their direct interaction. University identification from the perceptual perspective is not considered in this study as this could be more relevant for alumni or other stakeholders of HEIs. Moreover, student's identification with the university as an outcome of their direct experiences is the dominant perspective in the higher education context (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2009; Wilkins et al., 2015). University identification occurs when students perceive that the university's salient and unique characteristics are self-defining and enhance his or her self-identity (Cameron, 1999). Thus, identification is a process of self-definition that occurs following the connection between university's identity and student's identity. The more attractive students perceive the university's identity, the stronger will be their identification with the university which results in shared goals, identities, and values between the university and the students.

Based on SIT, this study postulates that students' attitudes and behaviors can be predicted by their identification with the university. Accordingly, when a student identifies with the university, their attitudes towards the university are more positive, as compared to those who do not identify with the university. For example, Park (2000) finds that university identification impacts students' attitude and intentions to purchase university merchandise. Similarly, Cameron (1999) finds that university identification influences students' self-esteem and self-efficacy which in turn impacts their goal-directed behaviors. Halbesleben and Wheeler (2009) developed and validated a scale on student identification with business school and found empirical support for the relationship between business school identification and student performance, likelihood to donate, and satisfaction. More recently, Porter, Hartman and Johnson (2011) demonstrate that both status and affective drivers determine college identification which influences alumni giving and promotions. Thus, university identification is a very significant factor in fostering students' university supportive behaviors.

2.3. Antecedents of university identification

Fig. 1 presents the research model proposed and tested in this study. The three antecedents of university identification are university brand personality, university brand knowledge, and university brand prestige. While university brand personality and university brand prestige captures university-based perceptions, university brand knowledge represents the individual-level antecedent of university identification. These factors are often cited in literature as key outcomes of university branding (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Since university branding involves a systematically planned and implemented process of creating a favorable and unique identity for the university, this study proposes that understanding how students evaluate and relate to the university could influence their identification with the university.

University personality refers to the extent to which students consider the personality traits of the university in terms of being friendly, stab le, practical, and warmth (Sung &Yang, 2008). University brand personality is based on the idea that people select products and/or brands that correspond to their self-concept (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). University brand personality can develop through both direct and indirect