



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Brand identification in higher education: A conditional process analysis

Adrian Palmer^{a,*}, Nicole Koenig-Lewis^b, Yousra Asaad^c^a Keele Management School, Keele University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Darwin Building, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK^b Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK^c School of Management, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 March 2015

Received in revised form 1 October 2015

Accepted 1 November 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Brand identification

Higher education

Alumni

Experience

ABSTRACT

The dimensions and dynamics of higher education brands remain excessively informed by general principles of branding, with inadequate empirical testing in the specific context. This paper advances understanding of brand identification in higher education by empirically assessing its antecedents and relating brand identification to brand loyalty and brand support as outcome variables, moderated by time since direct experience of the university. Results of a conditional process analysis with a sample of 791 alumni indicate that recalled academic and social experiences significantly influence brand identification, and that brand identification is a good predictor of alumni brand loyalty and brand support. While the direct effects of recalled academic and social experience on brand loyalty decrease over time, the indirect effect of academic experience on loyalty via brand identification increases, indicating that the mediation effect of brand identification becomes stronger with the passage of time. The study makes important theoretical contributions to the branding literature by emphasizing the mediating role of brand identification and by examining the moderating effects of time on these variables. The results also inform marketing of higher education, suggesting that universities which focus on offering great academic experiences to their students will be more effective in developing strong brand identification over time which in turn leads to greater brand loyalty and brand support.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Universities are frequently conceptualized as brands. The general literature distinguishes between salient brand dimensions, typically functional/emotional and utilitarian/hedonistic. Brand strength has been conceptualized as the strength of memory of a product which acts as a long-lasting and stable reference in discriminating between otherwise generic products (Kapferer, 2008). The branding literature increasingly emphasizes brand identity as a dynamic process which develops over time (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013; Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012). Recently, the application of a social identity perspective highlights a pivotal role of brand identification in the process of brand loyalty development (He, Li, & Harris, 2012; Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008).

In the higher education context, the dimensions of brands have been less precisely conceptualized and empirically tested. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the dynamics of brands and brand identification in the sector. This paper advances understanding of the mediating role of brand identification in the higher education context taking

into account time since direct experience of the brand. Brand identification is conceptualized here as alumni members' sense of belonging to and identification with a university. This research builds on previous studies that have identified academic and social experience as two key processes and memorable outcomes of attending a university. A model is developed in which recalled academic and social components of experience are antecedents of identification with a university brand. Hypotheses are developed relating to the longevity of brand experience, testing whether alumni identification changes with the passage of time since graduation, and if it does, what might explain this? This paper reflects previous calls for further empirical research to examine antecedents and consequences of brand identification within higher education and the integration of social identity and social exchange perspectives of brand loyalty (He & Li, 2011; He et al., 2012; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013).

2. Branding in higher education

Intensification of market based pressures facing higher education providers has led many to adopt practices of marketing and corporate branding (Asaad, Melewar, & Cohen, 2014; Melewar & Akel, 2005). Despite its importance, little empirical research on branding is directly relevant to the higher education sector (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). The few empirical studies focus on branding policies (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007), brand personality (Watkins & Gonzenbach,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: a.palmer@keele.ac.uk (A. Palmer), koenig-lewisn@cardiff.ac.uk (N. Koenig-Lewis), y.asaad@swansea.ac.uk (Y. Asaad).

2013), corporate brand identity and management (Balmer, Liao, & Wang, 2010), and corporate brand identification (Balmer & Liao, 2007; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). Other contributions have been more theoretical in nature, for example, discussing educational brand ecosystems (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011), the emergence of brand identities (Lowrie, 2007), and the concept of successful education brands (Chapleo, 2005). With the exceptions of Balmer and Liao (2007) and Stephenson and Yerger (2014), most studies take a strategic management perspective. The understanding of how consumers and other stakeholders perceive universities as brands remains largely informed by analogy with general consumer goods and service brands.

A number of theoretical challenges to the extension of general branding principles to higher education have been raised. Although many studies now explore the key components of a brand perceived by consumers, often involving qualitative, interpretative techniques (e.g. Gambetti, Graffigna, & Biraghi, 2012; Roberts, 2004), traditional, measurable brand dimensions such as functional/emotional and utilitarian/hedonistic (Aaker, 1991) may have limited use beyond relatively simple products. However, higher education brands typically comprise complex bundles of benefits, most notably academic and social benefits (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Superficially, the former may appear to correspond to functional definitions of a brand, representing the fundamental purpose of a university, while social benefits provide supplementary bases for differentiation of universities. In fact, the distinction between these two brand dimensions may be complex, with some students seeing the primary benefit of higher education as a process of socialization.

More recently, service dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2008) recognizes the importance of consumers in co-creating value in products. The nature of higher education processes (academic and social) implies co-creation of value involving students. Therefore brand values may be substantially influenced by students' own efforts.

Graduation offers students lifelong identification with their *alma mater* (Balmer & Liao, 2007) and universities have developed alumni associations to capitalize on graduates' need for identity. The value of alumni to higher education institutions is well documented, for example, with respect to their role in generating income and prestige (e.g. Tom & Elmer, 1994). However, despite the importance of alumni, little research has explained *why* former students remain loyal and supportive to their university and identify with its values. One notable exception is Stephenson and Yerger's (2014) study of the antecedents and consequences of alumni brand identification. Although their findings suggest that interpretations of brand, prestige, satisfaction with student affairs, and participation were positively associated with identification, their framework does not clearly ascertain the sources of alumni identification, for example, whether identification is related to their peers, the faculty, the location or its sports teams. A further limitation is the omission of the dynamics of university brand identification over time. If a brand is conceptualized as a remembered state of a product (Aaker, 1991), current identification by alumni with their university as a brand is likely to be influenced by the memory of their experience at their university.

Although student experience has become widely used as a term to describe students' activities while attending university, the term often fails to distinguish between academic and social elements of attendance. This paper adds to knowledge by studying how alumni members' identification within their university changes over time, reflecting their recall of different components of their experience at university.

3. Conceptual framework

3.1. The concept of brand identification in higher education

Despite objections from educational "purists" who may see education as a public good, universities are frequently conceptualized as corporate brands (Chapleo, Durán, & Díaz, 2011). In developing branding

strategy, universities have sought to cultivate identification with the university as a brand.

A long stream of research stemming from psychoanalysis has sought to define the concept of identification. One meta-analysis of previous studies defines identification as a psychological process whereby an individual assimilates an aspect, property, or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, by reference to the other (Koff, 1961). Theories and frameworks derived from psychoanalysis have more recently been used to explain consumers' identification with brands. Identification with brands contributes to the development of individual personality and provides a means of defending that personality (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, & Hayati, 2013; Tuškej et al., 2013). Exposure to a brand, or messages about it, leads to cognitive and affective linkages between the consumer and the brand contributing to brand identification (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Universities recognize the value of their institutions as brands, which students and alumni can identify with and benefit from the brand's associations with social status and access to lifetime opportunities (Asaad, Melewar, Cohen, & Balmer, 2013). Summarizing the emerging debate about brand identification in higher education, Balmer and Liao (2007) conceptualize brand identification as students'/alumni's defining of the self in terms of an association with the brand of their university *alma mater*. They argue that prior experience of a university brand predicts the strength of students' identification with their institution.

3.2. Antecedents of university brand identification

For a university, brand identification can derive from primary and secondary sources. In this paper, only direct sources derived through attendance are studied, and not indirect sources which may derive from exposure to broadcast and personal communication channels. One direct source of long-term identification with a university is students' learning experience (Ng & Forbes, 2008). However, the importance of social experience of attending university is increasingly recognized (Pinar et al., 2011). Even though a university as a service provider can only partially provide social experience, it facilitates its development through co-creation between fellow students (Payne, Strobbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009).

Brand identification has traditionally been seen as a static construct, but more recent literature (e.g. Kapferer, 2008; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) argues that focus should be on *recalled* brand perceptions rather than brand perceptions at the time of consumption. A brand as a memory of a product/experience should act as "a long lasting and stable reference" (Kapferer, 2008, p. 37). Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) call for research examining the link between recalled brand experience and brand identification in experience based services. The current study further probes this link in the specific context of higher education.

H1a/b. (a) Recalled academic experience and (b) recalled social experience associate positively with brand identification.

The established link between satisfaction with a consumption experience and subsequent loyalty to the service provider has been replicated in the higher education sector (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Sung & Yang, 2009). However, the drivers of loyalty/support to a university remain under-researched, with only limited evidence of the differential effects of students' academic and social experience on their subsequent loyalty behaviors (e.g. Berger & Milem, 1999; Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001). This study distinguishes the effects of academic and social experience on both general loyalty as an attitudinal outcome and intention to support the university as a more specific behavioral outcome.

H2a/b. (a) Recalled academic experience and (b) recalled social experience associate positively with loyalty to a university brand.

H3a/b. (a) Recalled academic experience and (b) recalled social experience associate positively with intention of brand support.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10492616>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10492616>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)