



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Social media interaction, the university brand and recruitment performance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 March 2015

Received in revised form 1 December 2015

Accepted 1 December 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Branding

Performance

Social media

University

ABSTRACT

Commentators and academics now refer to Higher Education as a market and the language of the market frames and describes the sector. Considerable competition for students exists in the marketplace as institutions compete for students. Universities are aware of the importance of their reputations, but to what extent are they utilizing branding activity to deal with such competitive threats? Can institutions with lower reputational capital compete for students by increasing their brand presence? This study provides evidence from research into social media related branding activity and considers the impact of this activity, in particular social media interaction and social media validation, on student recruitment. The results demonstrate a positive effect for the use of social media on performance, especially when an institution attracts a large number of Likes on Facebook and Followers on Twitter. A particularly strong and positive effect results when universities use social media interactively.

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1. Introduction

The study here examines branding activity in relation to social media activity within the university sector. HEIs have adopted the language of the marketplace and the student-as-customer mantra, although not without some resistance (Whisman, 2009). Opponents of higher education (HE) marketing state that the business world morally contradicts the values of education (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Nonetheless, universities hold powerful and valuable positions in both society and the economy and few would argue that many universities have long-standing reputations. A growing emphasis on the university's role in the economy leads to the use of increasingly more commercial language and a rise in the uptake of the practices of branding and brand management. But, to what extent is brand related activity useful for a university? This paper develops the higher education branding literature by considering the use and impact of social media within the university sector. Commercial brands quickly harnessed the benefits of the interactive communication that Twitter and Facebook offer. This paper examines the use of social media by UK universities and the impact that the use of social media has on a specific higher education target, namely student recruitment.

Discussion of the importance of branding in higher education traces back to the 1990s. Researchers now explore more advanced branding concepts within the higher education sector (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett,

& Savani, 2009), such as brand as a logo (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006), image (Chapleo, 2007), brand awareness, brand identity (Lynch, 2006), brand meaning (Teh & Salleh, 2011), brand associations, brand personality (Opoku, 2005) and brand consistency (Alessandri et al., 2006). Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) and Sultan and Wong (2012) discuss the competitive market of higher education and argue for the importance of image and reputation to frame a university's offering, while Curtis, Abratt, and Minor (2009) postulate that HEIs feel these market pressures in many different nations. Casidy (2013) provides empirical evidence to demonstrate that a clear brand orientation works to a university's advantage. Her research reveals that students' perception of a university's brand orientation significantly relates to satisfaction, loyalty and post-enrolment communication behavior.

Social media increasingly represents an important part of a brand's communication strategy (Owyang, Bernoff, Cummings, & Bowen, 2009). Online advertising is relatively inexpensive (Cox, 2010) and recent literature suggests that whereas once social media (wikis, blogs, and other content sharing) was an afterthought to brands (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008), now social media represents a phenomenon which can drastically impact a brand's reputation and in some cases survival (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011b). This shift in emphasis from traditional brand communication to the use of social media often leads to positive outcomes for the brand, particularly in the case of co-creation of content between consumers and brands, and enables brands to reach new consumers. Although organizations know about the performance benefits of social media adoption and integration, research suggests that brands are unsure of how to manage their social media strategy and in turn achieve

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positive outcomes (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The higher education sector is no exception, with confused social media campaigns and misaligned strategies which ultimately hinder the potential for cultivating relationships with potential students (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

Twitter has an inextricable link with brands, and this link makes it a valuable social platform for brand communication measurement. Twitter generally represents an honest and at times brutal feedback system, with offline word of mouth becoming online word of mouse, where brands engage with consumers and consumers actively question, challenge and promote brands. Asur and Huberman (2010) postulate that the social media buzz on Twitter can predict future performance outcomes. Such predictive and causal models still need testing within the higher education sector. Students today are more brand-savvy than previous generations (Whisman, 2009). Students are among a demographic that openly affiliates with a variety of consumer brands, showing their support by following organizations and their brands on social media or by becoming members of brand communities. Kurre, Ladd, Foster, Monahan, and Romano (2012) consider how social media impacts on the look and feel of higher education and for “creating communities of learners where education and contemporary culture intersect.” (p.237). Kurre et al. (2012) also report that difficult times lie ahead for many institutions, as they have very similar services delivered in very similar ways. Can universities mitigate the threat of increased competition and engender liking and loyalty from the student body (and therefore improve institutional performance) with branding activity?

2. HEIs as corporate brands

Within the higher education sector, studies examine the brand architecture of universities (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007) as well as the rebranding of universities to better position themselves in the marketplace (Brown & Geddes, 2006). The recent attempt to rebrand Kings College, London demonstrates the controversy and opposition that still surrounds these types of activities (Dearden, 2014). Research details the similarities between HE and the operations of commercial business (Bunzel, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Melewar & Akeel, 2005). As with commercial brand management, the development of a distinctive brand helps to create a sustainable competitive advantage in the HE sector (Aaker, 2004; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007).

Lowrie (2007) indicates that the service orientation of higher education, particularly the intangibility and inseparability of education, make branding even more important than for organizations that make physical products. Roper and Davies (2007) argue that universities are corporate brands due to the multiple stakeholders that they need to engage with and, again, their service industry orientation. Corporate branding is the most appropriate branding orientation for HEIs to establish differentiation and preference at the level of the organization rather than at the level of individual products or services (Curtis et al., 2009), many of which have similar or identical titles (consider degree programs or individual modules). The corporate brand operates across borders and Kurre et al. (2012) discuss how higher education disassociates with geographic limitations. As well as recruiting students globally and delivering courses through multiple channels (such as face-to-face, online, and distance learning) to students in disparate geographies, institutions are also opening sites and offices overseas. For example, a walk through the Knowledge Village in Dubai involves passing buildings belonging to American, British, Indian and Australasian universities.

Corporate branding suits increased social media activity, as the corporate brand should encourage permanent activity and interaction, not the one-off promotions or specific marketing programs of a transaction based approach. The idea of belonging aligns with the corporate branding approach (Curtis et al., 2009). Unlike other purchase decisions, a student signing up for a degree is effectively signing up for a lifelong

relationship with the university, as they will always have that university's name linked with their own. Like other corporate brands, universities are now more accountable to their publics. Key income providers, such as the Higher Education Funding Council (UK), measure and report university performance, and newspapers provide league tables of performance data and rankings for their readers.

3. Hypothesis development

Twitter provides real-time feedback from customers to the brand, particularly regarding their experiences, thoughts and questions. Asur and Huberman (2010) conclude that Twitter can predict future performance outcomes, providing a model to measure the rate of social media buzz. Davis and Khazanchi (2008) seek to confirm a link between DWOM and performance, by examining the effect of DWOM on product sales. They conclude that a positive, statistically significant relationship exists. In contrast, Cheung and Thadani (2010) see the literature as fragmented and inconclusive; suggesting the need for further empirical research, aligning with Weinberg and Pehlivan's (2011) call for more research to show a return on investment for social media activity. An intriguing question for the university brand is to ask whether a relationship exists between social media use and brand performance.

Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) suggest that social media is a particularly important higher education recruitment tool to reach and attract future students. Penetration of social media is extremely high among potential students, typically between 15 and 19 years old; members of the Millennial generation (Liang, Commins, & Duffy, 2010); extremely technologically savvy and immersed within social media. Barnes and Mattson (2009) find that a high proportion of HEIs use social media, and particularly Twitter and Facebook, albeit with varying degrees of proactivity, in their recruitment activities. Twitter and Facebook represent the largest portion of social media use in the UK with approximately 5 million (eMarketer, 2014) and 8.2 million (eMarketer, 2013) active Millennial users respectively. Given that previous research (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011) indicates that prospective students are predominantly seeking information when using social media, how does the level of proactive use of social media affect performance? This question leads to the first hypothesis:

H1. The level of HEI initiated social media activity (on H1(a) Twitter and H1(b) Facebook) positively and significantly relates to student recruitment performance.

The level of positive attention and endorsement measures the popularity of a brand on social media (Romero et al., 2011). Rapacz, Reilly, and Schultz (2008) explain that consumers wish to validate a brand preference with rational support (for example, by following a brand's Twitter feed or viewing and liking a brand's Facebook page) as they require further exposure to brand information to increase confidence in an initial decision. Previous research also suggests that validating a brand on social media affects consumers' purchase intentions (Muk, 2013). Therefore, the second hypothesis (see Fig. 1) is:

H2. The level of HEI social media validation (on H1(a) Twitter and H1(b) Facebook) positively and significantly relates to student recruitment performance.

Social media is useful to reveal how consumers connect to those brands that they have an interest in (Davis, Piven, & Breazeale, 2014). These associations attempt to satisfy a need (Yan, 2011) and lead to varying degrees of future engagement with brands. Thus a brand can strengthen its relationship by providing interaction and participation; allowing external audiences to identify, engage with (Ind & Bjerke, 2007) and advocate brands (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008). As well as building a connection with users, brands must also foster a sense of belonging through interaction and engagement, where engagement can take the form of content which tailors to specific groups of users

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