



## Role of social media community in strengthening trust and loyalty for a university



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### ABSTRACT

As the increasing internationalization of higher education creates competition among the universities, many institutions are making use of social media communities to attract and retain students. We surveyed 206 users of a university Facebook page to investigate how it may be related to their identification with the university community and the university brand. We further investigate how this identification is associated with the trust and loyalty to the institution and is likely to be linked to positive behaviors such as promoting the university to their peers as an active member of the university community. Our results show that the perceived strength of the Facebook community is related to the identification with the university community and the university brand which in turn are related to trust and loyalty. Higher loyalty is linked to citizenship behaviors such as increased contribution to the educational process labeled in-role behaviors and providing positive word of mouth about the university labeled extra-role behaviors. With the challenges of a diverse and global student body which is expected to continue increasing, universities can benefit from use of social media in developing identity, loyalty and trust.

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### 1. Introduction

The number of students enrolled in universities outside their home country has shown a considerable increase from 2 million in the year 2000 to 4.1 million in 2013 according to UNESCO (UNESCO, 2016). The increasing trend in the international student mobility continues with an increasing acceleration. The number of international students is predicted to be 8 Million in 2025 according to OECD projections which takes demographic changes into consideration (Benson, 2015). To adjust to the growing needs for higher education, some countries invest on opening new institutions while others send their students abroad. Following this growth in the number of students, the number of universities also increased to 23,729 at the beginning of 2016 (“Webometrics: Ranking Web of Universities,” 2016). The increasing internationalization and rapid growth of the higher education institutions require these institutions to find ways to differentiate themselves from the others and to communicate their unique traits to their stakeholders such as students, alumni, employers, and the academic community.

Branding in higher education can help the institution to become more memorable and distinguishable from the others. McAlexander, Koenig, and Schouten (2005a) argue that the university can be considered a brand community where the stakeholders interact with each other and also with the university which is the owner and steward of the brand. University administrations are in a place to shape the brand community with their involvement and their decisions. The social media can serve as a critical tool in enforcing the university brand (Alkhas, 2011).

In addition to internationalization, another significant change in higher education is the entry of the digital natives. The group of 18–29-year-old internet users who were born into the internet world is referred to as digital natives (Jones, Ramanau, Cross, & Healing, 2010) whereas the previous generations are considered to be digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Prensky (2005) indicates that these consumers will require to be connected in all aspects throughout their lives. Discussion of digital natives is not limited to the age group since there can be a diversity in terms of how much those that may be in the same age group may differ in their attitudes towards and the use of technology. A more precise classification may refer to digital natives as those who not only grew up with technology, but are also comfortable with multitasking, prefer graphics in communication, and crave instant gratification and rewards (Teo, 2015).

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In 2008, these digital natives were reported to spend more than eight hours of the day engaged with digital technology whereas this number has increased to twelve in 2015 (J. J. Arnett, 2015; Lin, 2008). Digital natives are finding that the use of technology related to education is not in pace with how they use the technology in their daily lives. Some authors argue that the present mindsets of the educators and the infrastructure are the barriers for the failure of the technology to be implemented effectively in education (Thang, Nambiar, Wong, Mohd Jaafar, & Amir, 2015). Since current and prospective university students are considered to be digital natives, it is crucial to see how they form brand trust and brand loyalty towards higher education institutions.

As internationalization of higher education continues, the increasing competitive pressures on the universities and other higher education institutions forces them not only to develop more effective promotional methods but also to employ more efficient integrated marketing strategies for building and maintaining a coordinated and customer oriented marketing strategy which addresses larger geographical areas (Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, & Gordon, 2008). Building a strong university brand community in social media is necessary not only for attracting the target people to the university but also for retaining them and maintaining their loyalty and positive word of mouth after they complete their education. Social media in higher education institutions can enhance the student experience, alumni communication, and brand development. It is also a tool that can enhance identification with the university and can assist in increasing student engagement. When we take the needs and expectations of the digital natives who are the new entrants to higher education institutions, we can further appreciate the relevance of social media for higher education.

Members of an effective university brand community could be expected to develop more positive attitudes and behaviors towards the university. These behaviors could include alumni and other stakeholders donating to the university and purchase of university branded merchandise (McAlexander, Koenig, & Padilla, 2006) and also enrolling in the academic programs of the university, providing positive word of mouth, developing positive view of the graduates of the university. Brand community embrace all individuals that the brand is relevant for and also includes the relationships among them in their use of the brand (McAlexander, Koenig, & Schouten, 2005b).

Recent research has concentrated on the impact of social media on brand trust and brand loyalty. Laroche, Habibi, and Richard (2013) has utilized brand community, brand trust and loyalty literatures to show how social media influences the customer centric model elements such as relationship among main customers and brand, brand loyalty, product, company and other customers. Ho (2015) has demonstrated that the strength of a company's Facebook community increases the customer identification with the brand community and the brand itself in a study of service oriented firms and their customers in Taiwan. However, the role of social media community on the brand trust and brand loyalty and citizenship behaviors in higher education institutions have not been thoroughly investigated.

In this study, we measure how the strength of the Facebook community of the university is associated with the students' identification with the university community which in turn is connected to the students' identification with the university. The identification with the university and the university community will be related to improved university brand trust and loyalty which will result in citizenship behaviors of the students which are classified as in role and extra role behaviors. The in-role behaviors help to improve the educational experience and engagement whereas extra-role behaviors assist in recruiting new students through positive word of mouth. Fig. 1 shows the proposed

relationships between our constructs.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

We use the attitude theory as described by Bagozzi, Fazio, and Williams (1992) which states that there is a distinct sequence that begins with an appraisal process that results in an emotional reaction leading to the behavioral response. In Bagozzi et al. (1992) reformulation of the attitude theory, in the first stage the individual evaluates or appraises the past, present and future outcomes (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). In other words, they make an evaluative judgment about an event or an incident that they are involved in or some object, person or entity that has personal meaning for them. The focus is the subjective interpretation not the objective event or the circumstance because different individuals may appraise the same outcome differently. Based on the appraisal, the next stage is the emotional reaction. Particular emotions result from the appraisal. For example, an individual may be pleased with the performance of a product or the experience of a service or conversely may get angry due to a promise that is not kept. A fan may feel pride in their team's achievement.

As shown in Fig. 1, we believe that the members of the Facebook community for the university will appraise the emotional and rational benefits that they receive from being associated with the community and the university. This assessment will result in an emotional reaction which will determine to what extent the user will identify with the university community and the university brand. This will also influence the feelings of trust. The loyalty as well as in-role and extra-role behaviors will result from this emotional or affective response.

Our proposed model is also supported by the social exchange relationship between the university and the stakeholders. According to the Social Exchange Theory people seek to reciprocate the positive benefits that they perceive to receive (Bateman & Organ, 1983). The theory argues that the individual will feel obliged to give back when they receive. Bateman and Organ (1983) have used this theoretical argument to develop the concept of Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB) and argued that as job satisfaction of employees increase, they reciprocate by demonstrating more "citizenship behaviors" such as altruistic, helping, and compliance even when there is no direct supervision.

The exchanges are not just on an economic basis, but the social exchange refers to the building of lasting relationships over time instead of focusing on quick transactions which maintain the balance. The individuals may reciprocate through citizenship behaviors such as going out of their way to help others, providing positive word of mouth or performing additional tasks without the expectation of direct rewards.

Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007a) extend the notion of "citizenship behaviors" to include customers. When customers feel that the organization is providing care and attention to their needs, they will reciprocate by voluntarily providing support for the organization. Furthermore, customers who are supported socially or emotionally by other customers will feel obliged to help out other customers without expecting to be rewarded for their efforts. This voluntary support is not only directed to the specific customers who provided help but will include others.

### 2.1. The relationship between Facebook community membership and identification with the university community and the university brand

Social identity theory refers to identification as a perception of unity with a group of persons (Ashforth & Mael, 1989a). People go beyond their personal identity or their sense of self and develop a

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