



Social brand engagement: How orientation events engage students with the university

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement in the classroom is well recognised as crucial for student success; however, the importance of engaging students beyond the classroom, in the broader university context, is often overlooked. This study examines how students engage with the university through their interactions with other students, conceptualised as 'social brand engagement'. Orientation events provide opportunities for students to interact in a way that is facilitated by, and relevant to, the university. This study investigates the role of four experiential components (intellectual, affective, behavioural, and sensory experiences) in facilitating social brand engagement and the subsequent effect on word-of-mouth behaviour. We surveyed 223 students across 10 orientation events held at an Australian university. Path analysis indicates that intellectual, sensory and behavioural experiences have a significant impact on social brand engagement, which in turn positively impacts word-of-mouth behaviour. Thus, this study utilises the construct of social brand engagement, establishes its antecedents and outcomes, and demonstrates its relevance for higher education management.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

大家公认学生的课堂参与对学生的成功非常关键;可是,我们通常忽略了学生在课堂之外,在更广阔的大学环境下进行积极参与的重要性。本研究通过学生们与其他学生的互动来调查学生们如何参与大学生活,在概念上称为“社会品牌互动参与”。定向活动为学生们进行互动提供了机会,互动的方式是由大学提供促进帮助并且与大学相关。本研究探究了四大经历要素(智力、情感、行为和感官经历)在促进社会品牌互动参与以及随后对口碑行为的影响方面所产生的作用。在澳大利亚大学举办的10项定向活动中,我们调查了223名学生。路径分析显示,智力、感官和行为经历对社会品牌互动参与有重大影响,这反过来也会对口碑行为产生积极影响。因此,本研究利用社会品牌互动参与的构想,确定了其前因和结果,并证明了其与高等教育管理的相关性。

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1. Introduction

Higher education is a highly competitive global industry; in response, institutions have shifted their focus to branding, creating loyalty and reputation management to attract and retain student talent (Plewa et al., 2016). Paradoxically, many educational institutions are experiencing increasing dropout rates (Martin and Koob, 2017) with over 70% of students experiencing feelings of isolation at university (Beaudette, 2016). The importance of developing students' involvement in, and sense of belonging to their institu-

tion, faculty, or department is critical to student retention (Moodie, 2016). Interventions to increase social engagement among university students from the outset of their university experience have become crucial in improving learning experiences, student well-being, and graduation rates (Bresó et al., 2011; Li and Lerner, 2011). Orientation events are utilised in the higher education sector as a means of introducing students to the university and engaging with them in a social context. Orientation events cover a diverse suite of experiences, such as preliminary lectures, meet-and-greet sessions with faculty, university support seminars, and walking tours. The strength of orientation events lies in their diversity; a plethora of unique experiences can be hosted by the university, each in their own way designed to develop engagement between the student and the university. The primary qualifiers of an orientation event are that the event is designed and run by the university, as part

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of their broader engagement strategy to connect with their student cohort, and that the events are designed with commencing students in mind, as an initiation to university life.

Social identity theory highlights the need for individuals to belong to social groups and find meaningful connections that contribute to their identity (Wirtz et al. 2013), and that group membership constructed around a brand can generate strong relationships between group members and that brand (He et al., 2012). Directed and facilitated by the university, orientation events aim to provide the social context through which social engagement between students and the university is built for mutual benefit (McInnis et al., 2000). Such experiences are integral in developing a student's sense of belonging, social networks, and relationships with fellow students (Tinto, 1975; Glass et al., 2015). The university benefits from the orientation event because it creates a meaningful initial encounter where loyalty can begin to form (Plewa et al., 2016). However, despite the broad application of these events and potential benefit to student engagement and the university, the effect of orientation events has received little attention in higher education literature.

Student engagement is recognised as a predictor of educational success (Grier-Reed et al., 2012). The growing body of research demonstrates that student engagement acts as an antidote to low academic achievement, student burnout, lack of resilience, dissatisfaction, and drop-out (Wang and Eccles, 2012). Institutional support, interactions with staff, active learning, and academic challenge are key contributors to an engaged student. Recent student engagement literature has focused on within-classroom strategies to develop engagement and enhance learning; however, the critical influence of the wider university context in facilitating student engagement has received less attention (Kahu, 2013). In addition to student engagement in academic pursuits, social engagement has long been recognised as integral in developing a sense of belonging, social networks, and relationships with fellow students, facilitating persistence and degree attainment (Tinto, 1975).

In this study, we draw upon customer engagement, customer experience and marketing events literature to inform understandings of how universities engage with students. Specifically, we use social brand engagement to develop a greater understanding of how universities can utilise social interaction among students to foster a deeper connection with the university brand. Thus, this study follows a service system perspective of engagement and highlights the importance of student-to-student interaction. Further, we examine how event experiences facilitate social brand engagement of students, and investigate the role of four experiential components (i.e. intellectual, affective, behavioural, and sensory experiences) (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010) in facilitating social brand engagement. To provide further validity for the notion of social brand engagement, we examine its outcome on word-of-mouth intentions among students. Thus, this study contributes not only theoretically to our understanding of student engagement, but provides practical insight regarding the management of orientation event experiences in the higher education sector.

2. Literature review

2.1. Student engagement

Student engagement has received growing attention in higher education and is increasingly researched, theorised and debated with evidence of its role in student achievement and learning (Quaye and Harper, 2014; Kahu and Nelson, 2018). Student engagement has been cited as the most crucial factor in predicting educational success, with a wealth of research aimed at determining how best to foster this in higher education (Grier-Reed et al., 2012). The importance of engagement is well documented, with clear as-

sociations often made between engagement and academic consequences such as learning, grades, or grade point averages (Kuh et al., 2008). However, the focus of student engagement literature is primarily on enhancing academic performance (e.g. Taylor et al., 2011), and there remains little understanding of student engagement with the broader university context, and how the student-to-student interactions facilitate a connection with the university brand.

Attempts to better understand student engagement from a variety of perspectives have resulted in multiple definitions of engagement, which in turn have led to varied interpretations and a dispersed body of work. Chapman (2003) describes engagement as a student's cognitive investment in, active participation in, and emotional commitment, related specifically to their learning. Similarly, the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) describes engagement as students' involvement with activities and conditions, likely to generate high quality learning (Radloff, 2010). While conceptualisations have primarily focused on learning as a key component of engagement, Astin (1984) considers engagement from the perspective of the amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to their academic experience. More recently, other authors have proposed a broader conceptualisation of student engagement; for example, Linnenbrink-Garcia et al. (2011) include a social-behavioural dimension of engagement, relating to students' affect and behaviour during collaborative experiences.

In line with these conceptualisations, three distinct approaches to understanding student engagement have emerged in the literature: the behavioural perspective, the psychological perspective, and the socio-cultural perspective. The behavioural perspective focuses on effective teaching practice and sees student engagement as an evolving construct that captures a range of institutional practices and student behaviours specifically related to student satisfaction and achievement. The psychological perspective views engagement as an internal, individual process that evolves over time and varies in intensity. The socio-cultural perspective considers the broader role of the social context on the student experience. This perspective is particularly relevant for students who are starting university, which is often described as a culture shock (Christie et al., 2008). The challenges of 'fitting in' to a new culture has been examined with groups on non-traditional students, such as mature students (Askham, 2008), working class women (Christie et al., 2005), and ethnic minorities (Johnson et al., 2007). Often these groups do not have the social, cultural, or academic capital to easily fit into the university culture and become engaged (Lawrence, 2006). The socio-cultural perspective demonstrates the need for institutions to consider not just the student, but also the social and cultural impacts on student engagement and offers important ideas on why students become engaged at university (Kahu, 2013). This study adopts a socio-cultural perspective of student engagement to examine how the student-to-student interaction facilitates social engagement among peers to enhance their connection with the university brand. We draw on social identity theory to understand how individuals seek connection and belonging to various social groups, and how brands can generate relationships within individuals through the construction of relevant social groups around their brand (Wirtz et al., 2013; He et al., 2012).

Previous studies have identified the important role of social engagement, with the seminal work of Tinto (1975) demonstrating that academic and social engagement are linked to student success. Socially engaged students are said to actively engage with university or college affiliated clubs or sports, and participate in or attend campus arts, drama, or theatrical productions (Tinto, 1993). This social engagement is integral in developing a sense of belonging, social networks, and relationships with fellow students, facilitating persistence and degree attainment (Kahu and Nelson, 2018). More

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