



The Role of University Identification on Students' Perceptions and University Branding Activities

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/AJESS/2021/v22i430537

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. E. Seda Koc, Namik Kemal University, Turkey.

Reviewers:

(1) Shorouk Mohamed Farag Mohamed Aboudahr, Universiteit Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

(2) Dejene Girma Denbel, Dilla University, Ethiopia.

Complete Peer review History: <https://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/75340>

Received 05 August 2021

Accepted 10 October 2021

Published 13 October 2021

Review Article

ABSTRACT

University brand is becoming a topic of interest to most universities worldwide. This paper used the systematic review methodology to examine peer-reviewed journal articles. Practically, the study used a descriptive analysis and material evaluation to assess the different aspects of the university identification, students' perceptions and university branding activities. Base on the social identity theory and social exchange theory, the paper focuses on the role of university identification from students' perceptions in university branding activities. This may shed light upon clearer strategic university brand positioning in this highly competitive environment. Finally, apart from focusing the role of university identification, the study not only stimulates future research but provides a reference point for those being lecturers and students who are interested in the topics of university brand.

Keywords: University brand; university identification; students' perceptions; university branding activities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the developing demand for higher education has brought changes in student

demand and behavior as well as university identification and branding activities. Especially, the performance evaluation for the higher education institutions (HEIs) has led to

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competitive pressure among universities to be perceived [1]. As such, university brand management has become a hot topic because of its practical importance. Several authors have proposed that university identification plays a crucial role in bolstering students' university supportive behaviors, as well as a good predictor of alumni brand loyalty [2]. By improving students' perceptions of the university, a university can enhance university rankings, attract excellent students and supportive behaviors of alumni, etc [3].

Although previous works paid attention to issues relevant to brand management, but most research into brand identification has been focused in product-based industries [4,5]. There are few studies on university brand [6,7], brand love and brand loyalty [8], and brand reputation [9]. Hence, to the best of our knowledge, the research of branding in the higher education sector was limited. This study employs the social identity theory and social exchange theory to get a better understanding of the important of university identification. Specifically, The social identity theory describe identification as a person's sense of belongingness or oneness with an organization to such an extent that he or she perceives the organization's achievements and failures as his or her own [10]. And the social exchange theory holds, an organization must show an obligation to provide personal and professional fulfillment while its employees reciprocate in the form of retention, performance, and a higher level of commitment [11,12]. Base on the social identity theory and social exchange theory, the paper focuses on the role of university identification from students' perceptions in university branding activities. In doing so, we will integrate attitudinal components about university brand and university identification. This may shed light upon clearer strategic university brand positioning in this highly competitive environment.

The structure of this study is organized as follows. In the next section, university identification is provided. After that, the role of university identification on university branding activities and students' perceptions are analyzed. Finally, the conclusions and future research directions are presented.

2. UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION

Identification is defined as a cognitive state in which the individual perceives himself as a

member of a social unit [13]. The level of brand identification is the factor helping to determine the extent to which a brand shows and boosts consumers' identity [14]. Brand identification mainly happens in the process of interactions between a person and a product or an organization. In other word, "brand identification as the degree to which consumers see their self-image superimposed on the brand's image" [15]. This notion takes responsibility for the cognitive aspects of the relationship between the brand-consumer along and brand love. Brand identification can enlarge customer loyalty [16] and word-of-mouth advertising [17]. Its significance has therefore prompted studies to consider its precursors. Stokburger-Sauer (2011) considers prestige, memorable experiences, and social benefits as precursors of brand identification [18]. In addition, Tuškej et al. reported similarity in value and similarity in brand personality respectively as the antecedents of brand identification [19].

With regard to university context, various scholars argue that branding cuts through the clutter in effectively communicating the value proposition of HEIs to students. Specifically, this is signals of belief and quality [20]. Successful brand can ability to turn students into university ambassadors [21]. Because students perceive that the distinguishing and unique features of the university are self-defining and enhancing their own identification [22]. Therefore, identification is a self-defining process that occurs after the association between the identity of the university and the student.

The research by Balaji et al. has recognized that social identity theory will provide valuable knowledge about university identification that can be used for predicting students' attitudes and behaviors [23]. University identification greatly affects students' self-esteem [22]. Halbesleben and Wheeler conducted to validate a scale of student identification with business schools and empirically supported the nexus between that college identity and student performance, the ability to contribution and satisfaction [24]. Therefore, university identification is a very important factor in promoting pro-college behaviors of students.

3. THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

A university identity is a specific form of social identity characterized by a student's attachment

or belonging to a university [21]. Base on social identity theory university identity allows students to exalt self-image by affiliation with the institution [25]. Students who identify with the HEI are more likely to commit and perform better in the requirements of their role. Firstly, identifying a university brings an occasion for students to develop a long-term nexus with organization.

Secondly, according to Bhattacharya and Sen brand identity can lead to brand loyalty [26]. It was also found that consumer brand recognition has a favorable effect on brand commitment [19]. Then, Palmer et al. found that university brand identity is the driving force behind student loyalty to the university [2]. However, the expression of loyalty can be understood differently because acquisition does not happen in the same way as it does in most industries. The research of Hysi and Shyle concluded that students who found their identity more consistent with the university brand ended up showing more loyalty to their university [27]. The marketing literature show that brand identity is associated with favorable brand attitudes [28]. Prior research has figured out that respect for identity leads to advertisements such as recommending the HEI to people they know, actively promoting the university in meetings. Specifically, these studies show that students who strongly identify with a HEI is more likely to enjoy talking about their experiences at the school with others and recommending the institution to others. In addition, Stephenson and Yerger indicate that university identification greatly affects the strategy of promoting uniforms with school logos [29]. Similarly, Oja et al. propose that after the game is successful, students tend to wear college clothes to show their identification with the university [30]. Student voices can contribute to an improvement in a student's learning experience. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the research proposes that if students have a close relationship with a university they will provide a high level of feedback to that university [31]. This is because identifying a college helps students gain self-esteem and they respond by offering recommendation for improvement.

Finally, research by Stephenson & Yerger has shown that brand identity is a mechanism to elicit pro-brand behaviors of alumni such as promotion, competition, and association with the organization [29]. Cialdini et al. explain that these students were “basking in the reflected glory” by

publicly announcing their association with another successful person [32]. Alumni have promoted the organization through active word of mouth, recruiting efforts, and wearing school-related attire. These alumni thus benefit from the self-esteem boost provided by showing membership to a group deemed to have a positive overall rating. Furthermore, the study also revealed that brand interpretation as a construct has a strong influence on promotion and competition. Finally, when an individual defines himself in terms of affiliation with an organization, he or she is more likely to promote the organization as a means of self-expression, comparing the focal organization with others associated with it as a way to gain status and find contact with the organization through the website and social media. Thus, brand identity is a mechanism to elicit pro-brand behaviors from alumni.

To sum up, university identification is positively or negatively associated students' behavioral intentions and overall attitude and support towards the university. In addition, it as a mechanism for eliciting alumni brand-supportive behaviors with the HEI.

4. THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION ON UNIVERSITY BRANDING ACTIVITIES

It became clear that the universities were spending very large amounts of money on branding activities. However, its effectiveness is still limited, because the general use of branding concept, and even the scholastic controversy about it, seems to be broad and dubious. Previously, Melewar and Akel explore the corporate brand identity of universities in the UK [1]; Curtis et al. analyze corporate brand management at Riddle Aeronautical University in USA [33]; Bennett and Ali-Choudhury examine educational services and brand covenants of HEIs at new universities in UK [34]; Judson et al. have found that the brand message conveyed to the organization's employees is just as important as the one sent to the customers [35]; and Nguyen et al. conduct to check the brand ambidexterity concept across several major universities in China [36]. However, university branding is more complex than product branding, as “corporate branding is intangible” and includes “attitudes, beliefs, and values that are can change consistently” [37].

With regard to the higher education, a brand can be defined as “a name, an image, a compelling

description of an organization that grasps the core values that your college provides" [38]. Universities have put a lot of effort into building a brand identity since a differentiated brands help simplify the consumer selection process, according to Lawlor (1998), brand identity can be defined as "the essence of how you want your alumni, perspective students, legislators and the public to perceive and understand your organization" [39]. But consumers will judge university through not only the visual image of the brand, but also the people who convey this image. The paper of Berger and Wallingford (1997) have indicated that "reputation" and "academics" are the most important factors in choosing the university [40]. With this scenario, brand identification makes a significant role in a stronger predictive of alumni brand loyalty and brand support [2]. Developing a university brand image becomes an integral part of the higher education context as it enhances a student brand's experience and understanding of what an institution's values and stances are. Importantly, leading to brand differentiation [41].

5. CONCLUSION

The study provides more insights and understanding of the role of university identification from students' perceptions in university branding activities. The results show that students identifying strongly with the university are more likely to participate in activities that support university brandings such as affiliation and implications for improvement. These findings give an essential in advancing university branding. Concerning the theoretical perspective, this study employs the social identity theory and social exchange theory to get a deeper understanding of the nexus between university identification on students' perceptions and university branding activities. From a regulatory perspective, this finding suggests that HEIs need to enhance strong identification between students and the university to promote student pro-college behaviors. More importantly, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of defining college as a fundamental psychological process that allows students to participate in pro-college behaviors at variously different levels. The findings of the paper contribute to the knowledge of university branding and to shed light upon clearer strategic university brand positioning in this highly competitive environment. Ultimately, research has implications for how university branding will help to the form of word of mouth for marketing

and building brand positioning and communication campaigns in the future. We hope that the paper will stimulate future research and will represent a reference point for people interested in the topics of university brand.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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