BRANDING THROUGH FACEBOOK FOR INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

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Abstract

The intention of this study is to determine the perception of students towards the effectiveness of Facebook branding for institutions of higher learning through the use of social networking sites (SNS). It is also to explore the important role they play as a media in branding for institutions of higher learning. The findings of this research are intended to provide accurate and useful information so as to facilitate further research in similar fields of study. Permission was granted by the Directors of the IHLs to deliver and collect the questionnaires. Questionnaires were given to 200 students of ten selected institutions of higher learning in the Klang Valley. The respondents involved were students enrolled in the social science, technology and art and design courses as well as all the school administrators ranging from the Principals right down to the key personnel of these departments. The respondents were asked about their perception with regards to its current Facebook website and how does it play a role in branding the institutions of higher learning so as to gain their true interpretation and understanding of Internet branding. Responses from the respondents showed that, generally branding through Facebook was more important when compared to the use of other traditional mass media. Website was another medium that could be important for branding institutions of higher learning. Many student respondents agreed that branding through Facebook was more effective in finding information as compared to the use of the traditional mass media. From the traditional mass media, one might find it difficult to obtain the required information since many institutions of higher learning seldom employ any publicity using any traditional mass media. Educational institutions that posted good websites that could provide clearer and sufficient information to their potential students, would then have a more competitive advantage compare to those who did not. Besides that, the findings have also indicated that branding through a website was definitely more effective in influencing the students in making decisions to enroll in their courses when compared to the use of traditional mass media strategy.

Keywords: Facebook, Branding, Institution of Higher learning, social networking, Internet branding.

1. Introduction

Evaluating the effectiveness of Internet branding through social network site (SNS) for institutions of higher learning has been one of the hottest business topics over the past few years in Malaysian education system. The internet enabled various novel applications and forms of communication (Ellison et al., 2007; Shin, 2010), with the massive membership pool of social networking sites (SNSs) confirming that millions of individuals around the globe are open to such innovations (Pempek et al., 2009; Trusov et al., 2010); particularly teenagers and young adults, or the so-called "Generation M" (Vie, 2008). Prior to that the Internet's explosive growth, and begin to identify new business challenges. Many new opportunities to consider: from start-ups to pure dot-com plays, to B2C and B2B, to bricks and clicks. In order to determine the right role and strategy for institutions of higher learning Internet brand requires careful consideration.

Branding is a complex concept, and has been defined in a number of different ways, many of which have a variety of different emphases. A traditional, and widely quoted definition, is that offered by Kotler (1994, cited in Rowley, 1997, p. 244):

[. . .] a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of these, which is used to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from the competitors". However, in modern practice and especially in service industries it is important to dispel the misconception that branding is just about name, logos, strap-lines and colour schemes.

Definitions that explain the nature of branding more fully focus on the following attributes:

[. . .] a promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistently to the buyer (Kotler, 2003, p. 420, cited in Hood and Henderson, 2005, p. 20).

[. . .] expression of a relationship between the consumer and the product (Rowley, 2006, p. 105).

[. . .] consumer's perception of the offering – how it performs, how it looks, how it makes one feel, what message it sends (Rayport and Jaworski, 2001 cited in Walton, 2008, p. 771).

Institutions of higher learning are recognizing the value and importance of using their brands to improve performance and build deep relationships with their customers mainly students and parents. The reason for this rush to branding is due to the proliferation of private institutions of higher learning and courses these institutions offer are easily duplicated. Therefore, brands become an important means of simplifying the decision-making process for potential market. If managed properly, brands create strong, favourable and unique identity (Keller, 2008).

Use of the internet has escalated with massive growth of 245 per cent from 2000 to 2007, while penetration of internet users is projected to be 18.9 per cent of the world's population (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2007). In fact, most students and parents have learned that institution of higher learning brands is even more important in cyberspace than they are in most other channels or environments. Customers tend to choose and evaluate the institutions of higher learning that they are familiar with and the one that represents a set of values or attributes that are meaningful, clear, and trusted (a brand).

This article, offers some insights into how Internet branding through (SNS) can be used to make a difference to the identity and image of institutions of higher learning through a study of ten institutions of higher learning that have engaged with branding in different ways. The next section discusses literature review of Internet branding in institutions of higher learning. Then, the methodology of this study is outlined. A section on findings first gives a brief profile of each of the case study libraries and then identify factors that are key to successful branding. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered.

2. Problem Statement

The problem of this research study is to determine if Facebook can be an alternative means of branding for institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. In the past the traditional mass media have been used by institutions of higher learning to market student enrolments. Until today, some institutions of higher learning are still been using the traditional mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television for their marketing strategy. Some institutions even organized road shows and participated in educational fairs and exhibitions.

This research study hopes to discover the effectiveness of branding through Facebook as a marketing tool for institutions of higher learning and how Facebook branding by institutions of higher learning can be realized. Through the researcher's empirical experience in the advertising industry, it is very expensive and time consuming to build brands through the traditional mass media. This is because many media companies charge a very high price for their advertisement columns. The charges for print advertisement will depend on the number of columns and colours used.

Besides this, many processes are involved to produce an effective advertisement. It is even more expensive for educational institutions to advertise via air time on television. Charges will depend on the various time slots selected. Due to the high cost involved, only large and financially rich private educational institutions are able to utilize this media. Many small-and-medium-size educational institutions will have to resort to more affordable advertising and marketing media such as participating in road shows and exhibitions.

By using the Internet, educational institutions would find the cost of advertising cheaper as compared to advertising through the traditional mass media. According to Catterall, M., Maclaran, P. and Stevens, L. (2002), time spent on preparation of a Internet advertisement is also shorter. Though many attempts have been made particularly to promote students on the unique qualities of the institutions, it has somehow failed to motivate them to make the decision in selecting the correct institution.

This is one of the aspects that the study wants analyse in this research study which deals strictly on the issues of the how effective Facebook branding for institutions of higher learning in this country.

3. Purpose of the Study

The objectives of this research study have been to highlight these issues:

1.   To determine whether Facebook can build an effective brand.

2.   To determine whether the utilisation of Facebook as a preferred medium to derive information.

4. Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:-

1.   Can social network site such as Facebook able to build effective branding among potential market for institutions of higher learning?

2.   Which is a favourable media for students to locate information about the institutions of higher learning?

5. Significance of Study

This research study will hopefully benefit people who are already in institutions of higher learning regardless of whether they are students, applicants, Web and multimedia designers, marketers or advertisers. Students would benefit from this study through gaining information that might help them make their academic decisions. Information has been until now, made easily available through the Facebook. Colleges, marketers and advertisers could have a competitive advantage if they could brand themselves appropriately. Web and multimedia designers could have a better understanding of how to further enhance their website or multimedia designs. This is due to the fact that this study will hopefully; help them in their efforts in developing an effective brand. There is, therefore, an increasing importance in providing continuity and customer commitment in a fast moving market place.

6. Literature Review

Education is closely associated with economic growth. There is extensive historical evidence demonstrating that none of the rich industrialized countries was able to achieve significant economic growth before attaining universal primary education. In less developed agricultural societies, the value of labor is determined by manpower—human physical strength multiplied by working hours. Human capital theory, as developed by Schultz, argues that education increases human productivity. Human resource theory (including intellectual capital, psychological capital, cultural capital, and social capital) further expands this framework into a broader and more complicated system (Theodore William Schultz, 1963). According to a recent report, the total number of internet users doubled from 1 billion in 2005 to 2 billion in 2010, and is anticipated to surpass 2.8 billion by 2015 (Almanac, 2010). The number of regular weekly users has been growing at an even faster rate. Such global increase in internet diffusion rates fundamentally changed our ways of communication (Weisbuch et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2006, 2007; Carter et al., 2008; Shin, 2010). As a result of the ease, simplicity and convenience of web-based interactions, we are presented with novel techniques to maintain contact with our friends, acquaintances and clients, conduct business, learn new skills, and in general, go about our everyday lives (Takemura and Umino, 2009).

With a shift to the knowledge-based economy in the mid-1990s and failure of public institutions to offer places to meet the rising demand for higher education, higher education in Malaysia have been divided into public and private systems (Wong and Hamali, 2006). Branding and brand management have been well-recognized management priorities and strategic aims for companies for many years (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008; Post, 2008). Branding of

institutions of higher education is moving toward student orientation. In response to the growth of students' enrolment in degree courses, public colleges and public university campus branches are being upgraded to university-colleges status beginning in 2000. As competition among universities intensifies, a need for thorough understanding of the student perception is becoming more vital with institutions with university status. Thus, the branding of institutions of higher education is gaining more prominence among university administrators. In order to survive, these administrators need to understand how various student segments differ in their decision-making behavior (Coccari and Javalgi 1995). StudyMalaysia (2005) explains that a university offers courses in all areas of knowledge.

Berry (2000) produced a service-branding model in an attempt to cultivate service brand equity at the customer level. He suggested nurturing a service brand by launching managerial efforts to enhance brand awareness and create brand meanings for customers (Berry, 2000). For Berry, a company's presentation of a service brand is assumed to be the primary source of brand name awareness, whereas brand meanings are derived from a customer's direct contact with the services associated with the brand. For service marketers, it is critical to understand which cues or attributes of the service offering are most valued in the decision-making process of current and potential customers. Students were found to select those colleges that match their selection criteria academically, socially, and financially (Brown 1991). Plank and Chiagouris (1998) reported that the choice of college to enroll depends on five components:

i) academic programs offered, ii) leadership opportunities in college, iii) perceived good job after graduation, iv) financial aid, and v) value for money.

7. Methodology

A survey was conducted through questionnaire, with students from both public and private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The questions asked comprised a) respondent's personal characteristics and b) institutions of higher learning choice decision factors. The investigated variables include source of information/promotion customers promise and trust via Facebook.

A total of 200 respondents, all of them full-time students enrolled in Malaysian public and private institutions of higher learning were used in this study. The sample came mostly from ten institutions of higher learning (Table 1).

General Facebook usage patterns were assessed using a subset of the Facebook questionnaire (Ross et al., 2009). The full scale consisted of 10 items along two categories; including basic usage assessment, factors associated institutions of higher learning brand with Facebook, and finally reports of personal behavioural tendencies and frequencies associated with Facebook applications. Response was rated on a five-point Likert scale. On the basis of the questions related to behavioural tendencies and Facebook usage, two main constructs emerged. The first one concerned "sense of community/emotional connection", including questions such as: being proud to tell people he/she is on Facebook and part of the community. Also, could not resist and tend to log on to Facebook first when connected to the Internet. The second part concerned "everyday usage", including questions such as: Facebook is part of their everyday activity to keep updated on any current activities, and Facebook provides a good way to keep in touch with people and getting first hand information besides any other media. In addition to the basic demographic questions, a few questions related to general computer and internet availability and usage patterns were included. Table 2 shows the respondents profile.

Table 1 List of higher educational institutions and number of students involved in the research.

NO	Names of institutions of higher learning involved in the research	Number of studentS involved
1	INTI International University	20
2	Universiti Tunku Abd. Rahman (UTAR)	20
3	Limkokwing University	20
4	New Era College	20
5	KDU University College	20
6	Monash University	20
7	KBU International College	20
8	SEGI University	20
9	Sunway University	20
10	Taylor's University	20
	Total number of respondents	200

Table 2 RESPONDENTS PROFILE

Age	Frequency (N=200)	Percentage (%)
Above 18 and 19	101	50.5%
20 and 21	70	35%
22 and 23	18	9%
24 and above	11	5.5%
Monthly Family Income		
RM 1000 or less	1	0.5
RM 1001 - 2500	11	5.5
RM 2501 - 4000	20	10
RM 4001 - 6000	38	19
RM 6001 or More	130	65
Academic Qualification		
SPM	118	59
STPM/A-Level	12	6
Diploma	40	20
Bachelors degree	28	14
Others	2	1

A confirmatory factor analysis and comparison of means was conducted to examine the good-of-fitness of the measurement model. These were carried out to establish the factors for respondents in selecting a particular institution of higher learning.

8. Results

8.1 The Facebook "Like" Button

Facebook offers institutions of higher learning to place a Like button on their web site. This button is a tool which allows Facebook members to indicate that they like a certain web site or item on a web site. By clicking the button, a link to the item is placed on their Facebook profile page. In addition, the number of respondents who 'liked' something is indicated next to the button. For institutions of higher learning, the Like-button can, thus, function as an important business tool. Visitors contribute to attracting more visitors to a web site. This makes the tool valuable for content providers, which is also reflected by the fast increase in web coverage of the Like button. The study shows that Limkokwing University has the most number of like as compared to the other institutions of higher learning with 53,676 numbers of like. This is followed by Taylor's University with 17,773 and KBU International College with 14,247. According to Facebook, " the Like button lets a user share your content with friends on Facebook. According to a study by Roosendaal A. (2011), when the user clicks the Like button on your site, a story appears in the user's friends' News Feed with a link back to your website." Anyone can implement the button on his website by simply adding the code which is available for free. The button can, thus, be used by content providers to have web users promote content and create links on their Facebook profile pages. While the Like button can help institutions of higher learning to generate traffic to their websites, it is also a tool for Facebook members to add information about their interests to their personal profile page. Therewith, it fits perfectly in the ongoing trend of social networking sites like Facebook to share personal information. Obviously, for sharing items from the Internet it is a very useful tool, for it allows direct linking without having to copy and paste complete URLs and the content is made up in a readable manner automatically.

8.2 General tendencies and patterns

All respondents reported to have at least one computer and Internet access in their homes. Besides, majority of respondents agreed that the home was the place where most of the daily usage took place. All the participants spent more than 2.5 hours on the internet each day. In addition to their Facebook membership, the majority of participants reported memberships in various additional sites, such as Twitter and MySpace, however the study discovered that Facebook is one of their favourite. The study showed that 85 percent reported to visit Facebook on more than three occasions per day, and 50 percent of the participants admitted to have at least over 300 Facebook friends. Table 4 provides the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for basic usage patterns.

Table 3 List of higher educational institutions and official facebook page like.

NO	Names of institutions of higher learning involved in the research	Number of Like involved
1	INTI International University	5376
2	Universiti Tunku Abd. Rahman (UTAR)	10310
3	Limkokwing University	53676
4	New Era College	6189
5	KDU University College	9612
6	Monash University, Malaysia	3080
7	KBU International College	14247
8	SEGI University	3313
9	Sunway University	8099
10	Taylor's University	17773

8.3 Variables Influencing Institutions of Higher Learning Choice via Facebook

A comparison of means was performed to statistically analyze the responses from students to evaluate the order of importance of the criteria when selecting institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Table 5 lists only the variables that influence students' decision making. Generally, respondents were found to favor clear communication, relevant customer promise and build trust by delivering on that promise with mean values of 4.55, 4.51 and 4.3, respectively. The lowest ranked was location with a mean value of 3.9 was the location. This supposedly did not concern the respondents, as they were willing to move anywhere where they can pursue a preferred course.

The factors affecting students' decision making are indicated in Table 6. Based on chi-square results, the study showed that eight items were significant at 0.1 significant level. The eight items are academic integrity, foreign and home grown university qualification, institution's establishment, future employability, quality education, education's fees and duration to complete.

Table 4 Facebook Respondents Usage Pattern

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1	Peer attitudes	3.86	0.59	(0.76)				
2	Friendship	3.41	0.77	0.62 *	(0.83)			
3	Information seeking	3.48	0.55	0.45* *	0.58 * *	(0.80)		
4	Academic	3.53	0.75	0.65 * *	0.63	0.58 * *	(0.85)	
5	Romance	2.29	0.73	20.09	0.03	20.08	20.12	(0.88)

Notes: Significant value at $*p$ less than or equal to 0.05, $* *p$ less than or equal to 0.01;   n ¼ 52; internal reliabilities (a coefficients) for the overall dimensions

Table 5 List of variables influencing respondents perception towards facebook branding

NO	Variables influencing the choice decision	Mean Value
1	Clear information	4.55
2	Relevant Customer promise	4.51
3	Building Trust	4.3
4	Quality of teaching	4.28
5	Education Fees	4.25
6	Duration to complete	4.16
7	Facilities	4.12
8	Availability of the course	4.1
9	Entry requirement	4
10	Location	3.9

Table 6 CHI-SQUARE RESULTS OF INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING CHOICE DECISION BY

VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristics	Chi-square	Significance
Academic Integrity	1.968	0.045*
Foreign university qualification	1.833	0.043*
Home grown university qualification	1.813	0.041*
Institution's Establishment	1.802	0.040*
Future employability	1.765	0.038*
Quality Education	1.743	0.036*
Education Fees	1.728	0.033*
Duration to complete	1.721	0.032*
Facilities	9.032	0.212
Availability of the course	9.136	0.223
Entry requirement	9.256	0.236
Institution's Location	9.345	0.252
Library	9.498	0.263
Scholarship/financial aid	9.642	0.283
Institutions location	12.235	0.301
Institutions size and layout	12.339	0.321
Institutions attractions	12.347	0.337
Students Populations	12.452	0.348
Extra-curricular activities	12.463	0.356
Opportunity to expose new social environment	12.588	0.035*

Statistically significant factors

9. Discussion & Conclusion

The purpose of the paper was to explore various aspects associated with the influence of Facebook branding among the target market to enroll into the institutions of higher learning. The study found more excessive internet usage, more frequent daily Facebook visits; in line with certain previous studies by Nielsen survey, Italy has the highest number per capita use of Facebook of any nation. Psychologists there report that addicts are ignoring the real world as they choose to stay connected to their virtual worlds day and night. Facebook users spend on average 6 hours 27 minutes on the site per month.

Though the **Facebook** usage has seen explosive growth, research has explored returns on advertising revenue marketers invest in this emerging medium. The study of 18 to 25-year-old college students suggests that many of the advertising dollars institutions of higher learning spend on branding through **Facebook** are likely beneficial. According to HC Sashittal, R Sriramachandramurthy, M Hodis (2012), in addition to staying in touch with friends and relatives, **Facebook** users are primarily motivated by three desires: (1) to voyeuristically peer into others' lives, (2) to create a distinctive identity for themselves, and (3) to act on their inner narcissistic tendencies. These motivations also make them poor prospects for advertisers for product and services but definitely not institutions of higher learning, as users seem disinterested in **Facebook** advertisements and disengaged from marketers' attempts to build **brands**. These are the challenges for marketers, as well as opportunities for building **brands** and driving sales via **Facebook**. Due to the fact that tertiary education is arguably a high involvement product (Kotler 1976), many students and their parents, it represents a substantial investment in monetary and temporal terms. Hence, prospective students and their sponsors would look carefully into the options available in the market via their website and official Facebook page to gain clear information, relevant activities available and comments by various members based on the promise and trusts by the institutions of higher learning.

Analysis of the strategies and performance of a diverse range of institutions of higher learning suggests that Facebook brands share two fundamental qualities such as clear communication, relevant customer promise and build trust by delivering on that promise. This is in line with the study by Barwise P, Meehan S. (2010). Facebook branding for institutions of higher learning can be used to reinforce these factors.

The respondents for institution of higher learning expect relevant customer promise such as honesty, value, and a reliable attitude from institutions. This promise is reinforced at every customer touch point, especially through the institution's websites. Institution of higher learning needs to scans these sites to learn what people are commenting. Where there is misinformation, the institutions of higher learning rarely has to provide a correction, because site visitors usually do so themselves. Institutions of higher learning need to check that the brand promise is both understood and relevant through their Facebook site. It also works to keep its entire Facebook activities relevant to and in support of the brand values. For instance, the most-read section of its Facebook page includes courses available and education fees communication that comes across as honest, value, and caring.

Trust is a particularly critical factor in stimulating purchases over the internet (Chau et al., 2007; Mukherjee and Nath, 2007) and it is therefore important for internet vendors to win and build consumer trust so as to survive in a very competitive marketplace to realise financial success (Chen and Dhillon, 2003). For trust to exist, the consumer must believe that the seller has both the ability and the motivation to reliably deliver goods and services at the expected quality. Trust is mainly about operational execution—service delivery. Customers expect institutions of higher learning websites to be accurate and up-to-date.   Facebook is used to communicate with customers. This was well received by the respondents. This is in line with the finding that stated trust in the internet marketplace is also very important because it helps consumers overcome perceptions of uncertainty and risk, and engage in trust-related behaviours such as sharing personal information or making purchases (McKnight et al., 2002). Trust can be broken if the vendor engages in illegitimate business or if they are perceived to have a general disregard for consumer's privacy and security (Chen and Dhillon, 2003). The perceived size and reputation of an internet merchant were found by Jarvenpaa et al. (2000) to be important contributors to gaining consumer trust.

Facebook branding is usually unstructured or semi-structured and moderated by the participants themselves, using unwritten rules. People join in freely because they enjoy and learn from the discussion. Institution of higher learning can also join, and to some extent influence, the conversation. However, this is only possible if they are accepted by

the other members in the Facebook group. Those in the company who execute its Facebook branding strategy should naturally fit into the culture and rules of each social network. But they must also be deeply knowledgeable about the institution's products and most important steeped in its brand and values.

Facebook could be the next alternative business model for institutions of higher learning that allows them to track and trace users and to process their data. It appears that non-Facebook members can also be traced via the Like button. Today, Facebook's are able to reach their members and even non members via the Like button. Due to the extensive web coverage with Like buttons, Facebook has a potential connection with all web users.

10. Limitation of Study

An obvious limitation in this study would be the respondents' insincerity in responding to the study's questionnaire, which in turn, might affect the overall accuracy of its findings. A larger sample size could be used in future research on the same subject matter to overcome this possibility. The institution of higher learning and the respondents selected for this study come from one geographical location. A broader and a more balanced perception can obtained if selection of the institution of higher learning and respondents come from different locations.

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