A consumer driven approach to brand personality development in higher education

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1. Introduction

This research aims to establish a consumer-driven brand personality framework for use in higher education, using self-congruity theory and the construct of brand affect to inform brand personality development and support student recruitment. Over the past two decades marketing principles have increasingly been adopted in the higher education sector, as universities look for ways to differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace (Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017). Branding has received particular interest as part of this 'marketisation', with many universities adopting brand management practice (Plewa et al., 2016).

Branding within higher education is complex (Chapleo, 2015) as there are many difficulties in applying traditional brand models to the sector (Jevons, 2006). Brand proliferation, increased consumer expectations and internal resistance to marketing concepts provide unique challenges to applying branding in higher education (Argenti, 2000). Universities can address these challenges by developing a clearly defined brand personality (Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017), something more likely to be effective if it is consumer focused (Moogan, 2020). This research therefore seeks to produce a sector specific framework that can be used to develop a consumer driven, rather than corporately imposed, brand personality.

2. Overview of literature

2.1 Brand personality

Brand personality is part of a wider construct of brand identity within brand literature. It is defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand that can be used as a means to differentiate, encourage purchase and provide continuity (Aaker, 1997). In a higher education context, brand personality is found to relate positively to brand love, word of mouth and loyalty (Rauschnabel et al., 2016) as well as helping to create distinctiveness between institutions (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013).

2.2 Self-congruity theory

Self-concept is defined as the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg 1979, p. 7). In accordance with self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985), consumers compare brand image with their actual or ideal self-concept in order to establish how they identify with a particular brand. Consumers then purchase from brands that they perceive as congruent with their self-concept, in order to maintain or enhance their perception of themselves (Lee, 2009).
Consumers respond differently to certain brand personality dimensions depending on their own self-concept (Phau and Lau, 2000), making it important for organisations to shape their brand personality around their consumers. In a Higher Education context, there is limited understanding of how self-congruity might influence consumer behaviour at the recruitment stage (Banahene, 2017), though previous research has found it to improve retention and engagement (Kaushal and Ali, 2020).

2.3 Self-congruity and brand affect

Emotional response to brand communications is found to be a powerful influencer of purchase and decision-making behaviour (Pansari and Kumar, 2017) and is more likely to occur when there is self-congruity between the consumer and brand personality (Salimi and Khanlari, 2018). Brands can utilise

this by creating materials that aim to appeal to the consumer self-concept and trigger a positive emotional response in a construct referred to as 'brand affect' (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002).

3. Research design

Consistent with pragmatic approaches, the research uses a mixed method design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex behaviour being studied (Shah and Corley, 2006), confidence in findings by avoiding common method bias (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012) and allow for both subjectivity and objectivity (Shannon-Baker, 2016). The case study approach adopted enables the researcher to gain detailed information (Kohlbacher, 2006), something recognised as helpful in consumer decision making research (Riege, 2003). The qualitative stage consisted of participants producing written accounts of their emotional response to various marketing exhibits and in-depth interviews and was analysed through content analysis of interviews and written emotional responses. The quantitative stage will test the conceptual framework and hypotheses using results from a survey of undergraduate students. Structural Equation Modelling will be used to analyse relationships between variables.

4. Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis identified that the sector specific brand personality framework developed by Rauschnabel et al. (2016) was found to be the most suitable framework for this case study and provides further support for using sector specific models. The majority of students appeared to look for a sense of fit between themselves and the university during university selection, suggesting self-congruity was influential in decision making. The dimensions of sincerity, cosmopolitan and conscientiousness were found to be dominant dimensions in the perceived brand personality of the case study institution; these dimensions also appeared to produce the strongest brand affect, suggesting a potential relationship between brand personality, self-congruity and brand affect.

A new finding that emerged from thematic analysis was the identification of brand personality cues that appear to shape the formation of university brand personality through brand meaning associations; these were identified as corporate communications, location, status and people. Given that universities are typically named after places, the associations between location and university personality are likely to be sector-specific and appeared to be significant in shaping perceptions.

5. Contribution to theory and practice

This research aims to contribute to knowledge and practice by developing a sector specific brand personality development framework. It seeks to address gaps in the literature, such as exploring the relationships between brand personality, brand affect and self-congruity. Additionally, new findings from the qualitative stage of this research relating to associations between place and brand personality do not appear to have been identified or explored prior to this research. Previous higher education studies have recommended practitioners use dimensions they have found to be received positively, assuming all consumers respond to dimensions in the same way and somewhat missing the point of using brand personality as a tool to differentiate. This research proposes instead that universities define and co-create their personality based on an understanding of their particular consumer.

6. References

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