Journal of Contemporary Social Science and Education Studies
E-ISSN: 2775-8774
Vol 3, Issue 2 (2023)

Social Media Impact on Based Brand Equity of Private Higher Education Institutions: A Conceptual Framework

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 5 June 2023
Revised: 8 July 2023
Accepted: 10 August 2023
Published: 1 Sept 2023

Keywords:

Brand equity, customer-based brand equity, brand, social media usage, marketing, PHEIs.

OPEN ACCESS

ABSTRACT

Social media marketing and brand management has become more significant due to the present changes in technology and intense competition of branding campaigns in the higher education industry especially at Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). Furthermore, the higher education industry is no longer a means to provide education, but it has become a very competitive business. Therefore, the social media usage is important to ensure the success of branding campaigns that will be expected to lead to more sustainable customer relationships and sales over a longer period of time. In addition, with great competition in the higher education industry, universities are challenged to improve their branding campaigns to recruit the best and brightest students, staff, and maintain their reputation. The literature shows that social media usage has become a remarkable tool in marketing strategies. However, research on the impact of social media marketing and toward brand equity is still in its infancy. Hence, this study will look into how social media usage play an important role that will enhance the brand equity in private HEIs. This study will adapt four variables of social media usage namely relationship development, information sharing, self-presentation and entertaining and four variables of brand equity such as brand awareness, brand association, perceive quality and brand loyalty. For the purposes of data gathering, this study will employ survey and interview methods. The overall findings are expected to serve as a basis for universities to enhance its brand by fostering a positive relationship and engaging potential students as customers.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1957, Malaysia has begun to develop human capital to replace expatriates and to help build the country. Therefore, higher education was seen as a very important and crucial national agenda. However, before 1970, access to local higher education was limited only to one, namely University Malaya, and most of these students were from elite families that have the resources and the opportunity to send their children to further their studies. However, profitability was never an issue and marketing activities were almost non-existent to attract students and minimal marketing efforts were done to attract students (Sivalingam, 2006).

Four decades later, the Malaysian higher education landscape has changed tremendously especially when the Malaysian Government in 1996 has liberalised the higher education sector by welcoming private participation (M. N. N. Lee, 2008). Malaysia is fast leading to become a centre of educational excellence in the region as well as at the international level. The door towards higher education was widely opened and the education sector has become a “commodity” while higher education providers become “private business entity” where profitability and survival were concerned (Naidoo, 2003). With the liberalization of Malaysian education policies, more PHEIs have sprung-up to provide more space and opportunities to potential students that create new and greater challenges among industry players. There are too many institutions offering the same courses and they are competing for the same limited number of students. Thus, in order to attract and retain students and running profitability, the PHEIs should build the corporate image or brand as well as improve the quality of the services. PHEIs have to put more effort to boost their brand equity in order to secure students’ enrolment and retention. Therefore, students as customers have become the main focus for PHEIs when strategizing their promotional activities (Ismail and Faridah, 2015). Recognizing and accepting education as an industry, higher education institution providers realize that under this current competitive global market, they have to compete for students in order to survive. They have to know and study what are the factors that can attract and retain students at their respective institutions.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), like any other business, are no exception. With increasing costs of education, students, parents and prospective employees have intensified their scrutiny of the value delivered by HEIs (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). Private Higher Education Institutions have come to terms with the fact that they must ensure that their primary customers (i.e. students) are attracted to register which will ultimately lead to the survival of the PHEIs. With the rapid increment of PHEIs in Malaysia competing for students who want quality education and value for the services rendered by these institutions, couple with the reduction of financial support from the government and other agencies, it is important for institutions to strategize in order to be able to compete and survive in the competitive world. In order to ensure students are attracted, the PHEIs should develop effective strategies in enhancing their brand equity. Furthermore, it is vital that antecedents of students’ perception on brand equity are realised as they are becoming important (Pinar, Trapp, Girard and Boyt, 2011). Empirical studies have shown that PHEIs with high students’ brand awareness, quality perception and brand loyalty will have better student enrolments. Thus, marketing strategies in enhancing brand equity are vital in maintaining the reputation and sustainability of PHEIs.

The potential to provide customers with information about experience and credence qualities in advance of purchase has resulted in widespread recognition of the significance of brands in relation to consumer choice in the education service sector. Arguably, what is of particular significance in this process is brand equity. It is often suggested that marketing in the education service sector is relatively challenging due to the unique characteristics of the service and the dominance of experience and credence qualities. A particular consequence is that perceived risk is generally higher in a service selection decision because consumers find services more difficult to evaluate in advance of purchase (Haggis, 2003). In this situation, the brand can play an important role as a risk reliever, giving consumers greater confidence in their decision making and increasing trust (D. J. Kim, Ferrin and Rao, 2008). In essence, the brand provides a signal or a promise to consumers about the service that will be delivered, thus mitigating some of the problems associated with experience and credence qualities (Christodoulides, Chernatony, Furrer and Shiu, 2010). As well as a risk reliever, because the brand is a source of information, it can also serve as a tool for differentiation and ease the consumer choice process by creating distinctiveness (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998). Thus, the brand has been increasingly recognized as an important determinant of consumer choice in the education service sector.

Nowadays, social media technologies enable businesses to solve numerous consumer problems. Therefore there is a need to investigate on the effectiveness of application and uses of social media, how it affects and adds value to the customer's decision which later enhance the brand equity. Significantly, brand equity is the consumer's response to the brand, and this is reflected in the overall attitude towards the brand (Keller, 1993). Marketers have created their own social networks as a mechanism in their social media strategy to communicate with customers about their brand. Thus, the consumer's added values will lead to preferences for a particular brand. In a nutshell, it is extremely crucial to ensure success in building strong brand equity in PHEIs. The evidence is showed by Gretry, Horváth, Belei and van Riel, 2017) in their research by asserting that social networks is the most effective mechanism to communicate with customers about their brand in this digital age market. However, Goswami et al., (2013) in their study discover that social media participation was not sufficiently taken to enhance brand visibility. It only can be bettered with such practices of being agile and assertive to deploy the synergies of social media usage.

Although there are ubiquity of social media research has been carried out, yet there is a paucity of academic research and empirical evidence in the area (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy and Goodman, 2015). In the meantime Rutter, Roper and Lettice (2016) investigate that social media technologies is used by students to pose questions to the university. However, if no response is forthcoming, the students may experience dissatisfaction. This lack of response in turn can affect their decision to apply to that university. The results demonstrate a strong and positive effect on recruitment performance only when HEIs use an interactive social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

BRAND EQUITY DIMENSION

Customer based brand equity dimension theorized as being exhibited through the four dimensions of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty (Washburn and Plank, 2002).

Brand Awareness

According to Keller (1993) brand awareness is related to the strength of the brand node or trace in memory as reflected by consumer ability to identify them under different conditions. Brand awareness consists of brand recognition and brand recall. The recognition of the brand relates to a consumer's ability to discriminate the brand when given the brand as a cue such as seen or heard previously. Brand recall relates to the consumer's ability to retrieve the brand when given the product or service category, the needs fulfilled by the category or some other type of probe as a cue whereby the consumer correctly generates the brand from memory. Kabadayi and Price (2014) argued that the level of awareness becomes a critical factor when competitors offer a related product or service and direct comparability and other factors of selection are present. Brand awareness plays an important role in the consumer decision making because consumers think about the brand when they think about the products or services and in making repeated consideration of purchase. It also influences the formation and strength of brand associations of the brand equity.

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality is the customer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority that is different from objective quality (L. Su, Swanson and Chen, 2016). Perceived quality is viewed as a dimension of brand equity (Aaker, 1992) rather than as a part of the overall brand association (Keller, 1993). Consumers use the quality attributes to "infer" the quality of an unfamiliar product. It is therefore important to understand what the relevant quality attributes are with regard to brand equity. The concept of perceived quality can be classified into two groups of factors that are intrinsic attributes and extrinsic attributes (L. Su et al., 2016). Objective quality refers to the technical, measurable and verifiable nature of product or services, processes and quality controls. High objective quality does not necessarily contribute to brand equity (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin and Grohmann, 2014). Since it is impossible for consumers to make complete and correct judgment of the objective quality, they use quality attributes that they associate with quality.

Brand Association

A brand association is the most accepted aspect for brand equity (Aaker, 1992). Association represents the basis for purchase decision and for brand loyalty. Brand associations consist of all brand-related thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, attitudes (Kotler and Keller, 2008) and is anything linked in memory to a brand. Other researchers (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi and Algharabat, 2017; Farquhar, 1989) identify different types of association that contribute to the brand equity. According to Aaker (1992), consumers consider the organization as a representation of the people, value, and programs that lies behind the brand. Brand-as-organization can be particularly helpful when brands are similar with respect to attributes, when the organization is visible, or when a corporate brand is involved.

Brand Loyalty

Loyalty is a core dimension of brand equity. Aaker (1992) defines brand loyalty as the attachment that a customer has to a brand. Harris and Goode (2004) describe different levels of loyalty. Behavioural loyalty is linked to customer behaviour in the market that can be indicated by the number of repeated purchases (Keller, 1993) or commitment to rebuy the brand as a primary choice (Balakrishnan, Dahnil and Yi, 2014). Cognitive loyalty which means that a brand comes up first in the mind of consumers, when the need to make a purchase decision arises, that is the first choice of the customers. Cognitive loyalty is closely linked to the highest level of awareness, where the matter of interest is also the brand, in a given category, which the consumers recall first. Thus, a brand should be able to become the first choice of the respondents and is therefore purchased repeatedly (Keller,

1993). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) mentioned that brand loyalty is directly related to brand price. Aaker (1992) identified price premium as the basic indicator of loyalty. Price premium is defined as the amount a customer will pay for the brand in comparison with another brand offering similar benefits and it may be high or low and positive or negative depending on the two brands involved in the comparison.

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

According to Gu and Wang (2012) there are 5 categories of social media that is, SNS (Social Network Sites), blog, microblog, LBS (Location Based Service), and theme community. Blog is perhaps the best known form of social media; blogs are online journals, with entries appearing with the most recent first. Meanwhile, content community is a virtual community based on theme content sharing. In addition, Gu and Wang (2012) reveal that users are attracted by the theme, and then become the member of the community. Social Network Sites (SNS) on the other hand is the site where, the users can create their own pages and share information with friends. Moreover, Location Based Service (LBS) is a new form of social media where user can use mobile devices to check in by the specific application and interact with brands. Lastly, the microblog which is largely used nowadays where it is a new kind of blog based on Web2.0 technology, social networking combined with bite-sized blogging, where small amounts of content ('updates') are distributed online and through the mobile phone network. Microblog has become one of the most popular social media.

Social media is defined as any digital tool or venue that allows individuals to socialize on the web. According to Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010) social media is defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". Recent evidence suggests that social media are forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, idea, personal messages and other content (Kaur, 2016; Scholz and Smith, 2016; Soma et al., 2016).

Whereas social media marketing is the utilization of social media and social networks to market a product, company or brand. According to Kaur, (2016) "Social media is a form of internet marketing that implement various social media networks in order to achieve marketing communication and branding social goals." According to Felix, Rauschnabel, and Hinsch, (2017) social media marketing provides firms with an opportunity to use social media to build relationships with customers, employees, communities, and other stakeholders. Subsequently, Muchardie, Yudiana, and Gunawan, (2016) mentioned that social media can be utilised as a marketing tool to make and build strong relationships with customers, so that later they would be more loyal. Similarly, Kim and Ko, (2012) proposed that social media marketing (SMM) is a two-way communication seeking empathy with young users, and even enforcing the familiar emotions associated with existing luxury brands to a higher age group.

A review of the literature reveals several dimensions of social media usage that, collectively, constitute a comprehensive understanding of the social media concept, namely, relationship developing, information sharing, self-presenting and entertaining (Hu and Zhang, 2016).

Relationship Development

In attaining the economic goals of a relationship, marketers essentially need to appeal and build the bond with the customer (Christian Grönroos, 1994). Marketers have the chance to exploit on this strength and begin to build relationships through the daily usage of social media as a communication tool (Agozzino, 2010). Developing relationship in marketing has become the most essential influence as Ghani, (2012) contend that it is able to anticipate a firm's brand sales. Factors that boost or impede

consumer engagement in relationship marketing must be detected as it could affect the decision making process (Ashley, Noble, Donthu, and Lemon, 2011).

Furthermore, Ashley et al., (2011) suggest that in order to find and preserve the best customers and to maximize customer value, firms should acquire information and develop a good relationship with customers. Relationships denote the technology that permits customers to build networks with other users and allows the company to exploit the information. (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp and Agnihotri, 2013.) However, Kuo and Feng, (2013) mentioned that a closer relationship will exist between the brand and the community if the company can offer "support" and "resources" to brand community activities. In line with this J. Bowden (2009) has added that brand loyalty may be nurtured for customers in different consumption stages which depend on the magnitude of the customer-brand relationships and the processes of engagement with that brand.

Hudson, Huang, Roth, and Madden, (2016a) found that engaging customers via social media is allied with consumer-brand relationships when consumers invigorate the brand. In addition to that, relationship with the brand will lead to customer commitment to become loyal to the brand in the future when the customer's level of engagement with the brand increases (Wang, 2016). Therefore, when consumers are familiar with a brand, brand loyalty relationship toward that brand is more likely to cultivate (Su, 2016.) Gustaffsson, Johnson, and Roos, (2006) in their study added that the mutual benefit in the relationship with its customers will form an affective commitment.

Information Sharing

Information sharing about the product has become a primary element in social networking today. Bitter and Grabner-Kräuter,(2016) discover that customer engagement in information sharing has a tremendous impact on decision making. Meanwhile, Whiting and Williams (2013) as well as Khan (2017) agree that social media which is interactive in nature will motivate people to participate in information-giving motive via liking, commenting, sharing and uploading. Social media also allows consumers to communicate and share information via a two-way exchange of ideas. Furthermore, individuals and businesses that are increasingly interested to use social media to enhance involvement will therefore strive to encourage customers to become actively engaged with their brands.

Much of the available literature on social media usage deals with promotional marketing activities, but Smith (F. L. F. Lee, Chen, and Chan, 2017) is much more concerned with political awareness and criticism. Their research concludes that information is more actively shared in politics when the public felt dissatisfied with the government, and regarded the political system as irresponsive. It is this behaviour that marketers seek to understand and need to integrate the understanding of online information seeking and sharing habit. In their detailed study of social media, Jansen, Sobel, and Cook, (2011) identified teenagers and young adults as the main group users that are actively sharing economical information among them.

Some writers (Asaad, Melewar, Cohen, and Balmer, 2013) have attempted to explained the increasing liberalisation of higher education in seeking information, identifying global opportunities, and reacting to information globally. Others (Jung, Kim, and Kim, 2014) question the usefulness of monitoring viewer feedback such as 'likes' and 'comments' and to deliver the type of content that attracts highly positive feedback. The relevance of information sharing is clearly supported by the current findings. Marketers should therefore attempt to offer the communities plentiful and useful information in order to secure repeated visits but also social benefits as well.

Self-presentation

Schlenker and Pontari, (2000) define self-presentation as any activity of self-impression in the minds of others when we attempt to lead people to think of us in a particular manner. Self-presentation is not a new studied variable in a research. Goffman (1959) a Canadian sociologist wrote about the presentation of the self from a sociological perspective more than 50 years ago. According to Trub, (2016) self is more "real" and complex because the online personality is a "wished-for" self, which compensates for the perceived offline self. This can happen since anyone can submit their data to create their profile online sites set. Unlike the traditional situations, this kind of "interaction" allows other people to view and respond to the submitted information. (Hogan, 2010).

A number of studies such as those by Bazarova, Taft, Choi, and Cosley, (2013); and Vogel and Rose, (2016) have focused on emotions which are associated with self-presentation and uniquely created self-images of online communities. A survey such as that conducted by Chu and Choi, (2010) showed that young Chinese internet users gradually engage in social media and create their identity through the computer-mediated communication for relationship formation and self-presentation. Besides that, another study conducted by Gonzales and Hancock, (2011) found that self-presentation, afforded by digitally facilitated atmospheres can have an optimistic effect on self-esteem.

In 2014, Schwartz and Halegoua published a paper in which they described the spatial self as a further means through which people perform their online identity, and manage self-presentation on social networking sites which is subject to the norms of the audience. Moreover, J. Kim and Lee, (2011) highlighted in their study that a positive and honest self-presentation may enhance users' well-being and may also enhance happiness. On the other hand, Seidman (2013) contends that diligent individuals are cautious in their online self-presentations. Consequently this is due to individualistic and cultural values which influence behaviour and communication styles in an online social environment (Chu and Choi, 2010). Above all, a genuine sense of self by creating a profile that replicated the ''ideal self,'' and a validation of their identity claims is more important (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, (2006).

It has also been confirmed that the second major motivation for Facebook use is self-presentation (Seidman, 2013). Another motivating factor that determine self-presentation are (1) avatars which were used to accurately reflect their owners' offline self; (2) the variety of customisation used by the avatar's presence to incite and involve the avatar viewer and finally, (3) avatars were used as substitutions; users create their online self in order to express a message to others (Vasalou, Joinson, Bänziger, Goldie, and Pitt, 2008). Meanwhile the celebrities also adapt the self-presenting online which ultimately led to their capacity to effectively sell a wide variety of products (Marshall, 2010). This also concurs with Lyu,(2016) who demonstrated that female tourists' dissatisfaction with outward appearance positively affects their self-presentation online behaviours. Hence, Orsatti and Riemer, (2012) suggest that self-presentation which are tangled with information sharing is very important in the social media usage.

Entertaining

Entertainment denotes the way social media serves as a means for entertaining and stress avoidance (C. S. Lee and Ma, 2012). According to Allagui and Breslow (2015) social media campaign entertainment will lead to online engagement, promote online conversations and possibly create an immense media coverage. At present, entertainment and the information messages would be more numerous than transactions, but this indicate assurance in internet commerce enhancement (Gordon and Lima-Turner, (1997). Initially, consumers use social media mainly to socialize and gain information. As the consumers become used to it, entertainment becomes the primary motivation for

engagement. Subsequently, entertainment becomes less important and engagement depends on the consumer's requisite for facts about the brand and its products (Barger, Peltier, and Schultz, 2016b). As revealed by Quan-Haase and Young, (2010) the use of Instant Messaging is an example of entertainment and one of the fun activities on social media. Preferably free Online games and online content also offer a platform for engaging and entertaining activities to appeal to different multiplayer users (Heinonen, 2011; Mangold and Faulds, 2014).

In contrast to the study mentioned above, Thompson (2011) found that some overseas terrorist websites use cartoons and entertaining media to transmit their terrorist ideology to influence children. Hence, more research is needed to better prove that the social media usage relates to gratification and entertainment in order to give impact on brand efforts (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, and Füller (2013). Subsequently, Paris, Lee and Seery (2010) suggest that businesses should build trust with their consumers through straightforward and entertaining events using social media. Yet, different media use could affect different social media pleasures such as affection, convenience, coordination, entertainment, relaxation, escape, fashion, interpersonal utility, information seeking, sociability, and self-expression (Xu, Ryan, Prybutok and Victor (2012).

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON BRAND EQUITY

With the rise of social media, it appears that communication has been democratized (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). The power has been taken from those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, Facebook entries, movies, pictures, and so forth. Communication about brands happens, with or without permission of the firms in question. It is now up to firms to decide if they want to get serious about social media and participate in this communication or continue to ignore it. Both have a tremendous impact. Brands should no longer regard social media marketing as a way to reach consumers, but also as an important and cost-effective image-building tool (Godey et al., 2016).

Dehghani and Tumer (2015) in their study found that Facebook advertising significantly affected brand image and brand equity, both of which factors contributed to a significant change in purchasing intention. A strong brand can grant protection from equity dilution and resist the impact of negative publicity in the case of product failures and, thus, reduce potential volatility in future cash flow (Hsu and Lawrence, 2016). Similarly, Nguyen, Yu, Melewar and Chen (2015) in their study demonstrated that social media strategic capabilities may enhance a firm's ability to identify opportunities in the brand innovation process and help firms make adjustments accordingly. This adjustment is only possible in combination with continuous knowledge acquisition from social media and market orientation.

Understanding the principles of social media consumption can both assist marketing managers in developing strategies and provide insights into the potential role of culture in brand relationship development (Pentina, Zhang and Basmanova, 2013). Similarly, by deploying various social media marketing solutions, it will possibly increase the brand awareness by providing exclusive information to the audience (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2015). On the other hand, Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides (2011) found some barriers in implementing social media in business-to-business (B2B) organization. This is due to lack of technical skill among employees, and they also do not measure social media usage correctly. Yet, the increasing influence of social systems nowadays forces organizations to create more customer-centred activities.

Whereas the importance of social media for brand management and customer relationship management is widely recognized, it is unclear whether social media can also help companies market and sell products (Yadav, de Valck, Hennig-Thurau, Hoffman, & Spann, 2013). Likewise, positive relation has been detected on social media engagement level and personal branding efforts but the

relation between existence on social media and personal branding has not been confirmed (Karaduman, 2013). Significantly Godey et al., (2016) emphasize that social media should not only be thought of as a means of raising brand awareness and reaching new customers, but also as an increasingly important and serious brand image building tool.

Hudson, Huang, Roth and Madden (2016) reveal that social media use was positively related with brand relationship quality and the effect was more pronounced with high anthropomorphism perceptions. Connecting the brand to a larger ecological context, providing more related knowledge or inspirational usage, and associating the brand with trending topics may add to the users' values of following brand pages on social media (Gao and Feng, 2016).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on a comprehensive literature review, social media usage (SMU) effort has an influence on brand equity (BE). It would be appropriate in this study and suitable for the education sector. Thus, based on literature review and the research framework, to understand the relationship of social media (SM) and BE in the Malaysian private education industry, a hypothesis was set up to be tested.

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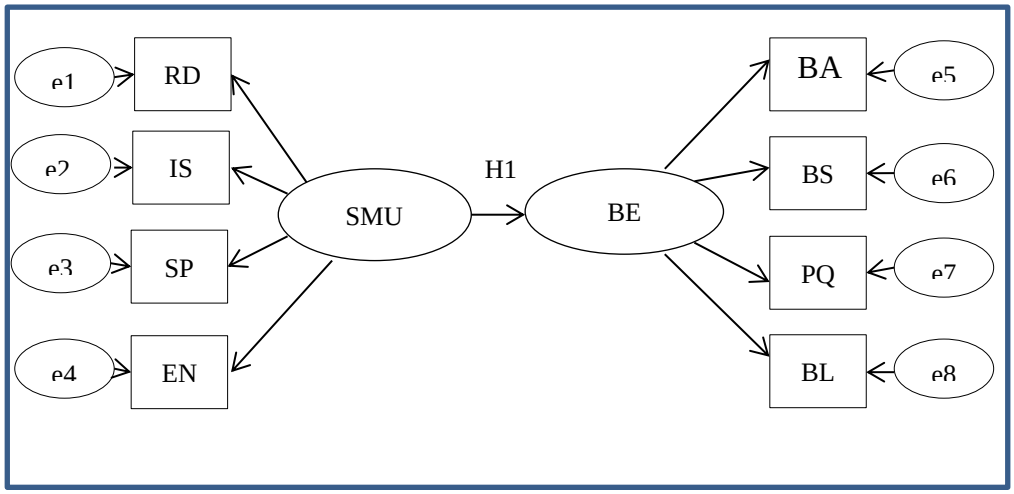

Figure 1: Social Media Usage Impact on Brand Equity

Notes: SMU = social media usage; BE= brand equity; RD: relationship development; information sharing; self-presentation; EN-entertaining; BA=brand awareness; brand association; perceive quality; BL=brand loyalty.
H1: There is a significant relationship between SMU (relationship developing, information sharing, self-presenting and entertaining) and BA (brand awareness, brand association, perceive quality and brand loyalty) in the Malaysian private education industry.

CONCLUSION

Much of the previous study of SMU and BE practices are available, but unfortunately there is a dearth of research on the integration of the two elements. Thus, this paper has made an empirical attempt to identify the relationship between SMU and BE efforts in Malaysian PHEIs. Based on the observation and literature reviewed, it is found that the applicability of social media can promote the effectiveness of BE. Moreover, by exploring the relationship on SMU such as relationship development, information sharing, self-presentation and entertaining it is found to have the capability of ensuring

the successful implementation of BE. Therefore, this study supports the positive argument concerning the ability of the SMU in the private higher education industry and their potential effects on BE performance. Other than that, the authors are interested to conduct future research on the structural relationship between SMU practice, BE and private higher education performance in the Selangor private higher education industry. The private higher education industry should learn and consider the implementation of social media and BE strategies in order to improve and maintain its student enrolment and ensure its ultimate survival in the higher education industry. However, based on the review of the academic and practitioner literature there is a lack of information pertaining to the relationship of SMU and BE. Therefore, this study applied the customer-based brand equity model instead of firm-based brand equity to assist private university marketing managers and also policy makers to find the best brand strategy to ultimately attain success for the PHEIs. Besides that, this study hopes to contribute to other academic researchers and practitioners by providing essential guidelines for the private higher education industry to implement SMU and BE strategies to improve their brand performance.

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