A Proposed Study on Determinants of University Identification

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Abstract: The purpose of the current study is to propose a study on the determinants of university identification in Vietnam, an emerging country. In the study, determinants of university identification include university brand knowledge, university brand prestige, university brand distinctiveness, university memorable experiences. Target respondents are public university undergraduate students. Both online and offline survey are utilized to collect the necessary data. The collected data is then processed using Smart-PLS program to investigate the determinants of university identification.

Keywords: University Brand Knowledge, University Brand Prestige, Brand Distinctiveness, University Memorable Experiences, Suggestions for University Improvement, Affiliation with University, Positive WOM Behavior, Participation in Future University Activities, Self-Brand Connection.

I.   Introduction

To any organization, a brand is a precious asset that plays many critical roles in a company's success. A brand serves as a tangible means of identification to assure customers of the origin and quality of products and also conveys intangible meaning along with physical product attributes (Aaker, 1991). Not only does the brand promote distinctiveness, provoke customers' decision making, but it also entitles them a sense of belongingness through the longstanding membership (Curtis, Abratt& Minor, 2009). Such affirmative connection inspires the customer to identify themselves with the brand, use the brand for self-defining, and shape their self-concept based on this association (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). In another interpretation, Kuenzel & Halliday (2008) regards self-brand identification as the perception of an individual in relation to an organization or group. Consumer–brand identification is proved to be a prime construct of marketing success and it has received considerable attention from members in the field (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). In particular, this concept is significant for its sustainability, the long-standing influences on customer behavior (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012), and its ability to form committing relationships (Boenigk & Helmig, 2013). Consequently, marketers are increasingly focusing on building a strong brand and customer identification.

Education is a specific business sector, which also needs its own brand advertising strategy. Early university brand management research by Curtis et al. (2009) has reported that higher education institution with a strong brand has a competitive advantage in marketing strategy when compared to their competitors. A later study of education branding proposes that future brand theory and practice will center around the higher education domain. (Melewar & Nguyen, 2014). Accordingly, there had been an increase in the number of research on the subject of branding strategies in the higher education domain (Balaji, Roy &Sadeque, 2016; Palmer, Koenig-Lewis & Asaad, 2016; Trullas, Simo, Fusalba, Fito & Sallan 2018; Yao et al., 2019). Among the denoted researches, Palmer et al. (2016) stated that universities should generate university identification in an attempt to design a marketing plan for their brand as the university is the organization that people define their identity with. The author suggested that universities should promote the value of the school brand as both current and former students want to build their social status based on their association with the university brand name. A person's self-perception may be influenced by the college that they are attending or past university from which they graduate. It is commonly seen that students will strongly identify themselves with the university in which they completed either their undergraduate or postgraduate degree. This statement is proved by the enthusiastic advocacy, the strong defensive actions of these students for their university, and also their competitiveness against peers from other institutions. In Vietnam, the market for higher education is getting more competitive due to the appearance of new universities as well as the reputation of famous long-established institutions. The public universityis quite a long competitor in this field since its establishment date, however, the brand name is usually misinterpreted with other international universities. This case happens when relatives or acquaintances of the public universitystudents ask them about their higher study institution, and it is usually accompanied by several misconceptions of the school. In such cases, university identification is crucial because it motivates students to promote the brand name of the public university and defense against inappropriate information about the public university. Understanding the importance of university identification for the development of the public university branding, the researchers decided to undertakea study on thedeterminants of university identification, a case study of a public university in Vietnam.

II. Literature Review

1.1. University Brand Knowledge

Marketing research by Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010) stated that profound insights about a brand could lead to a strong sense of identification among customers. University brand knowledge is defined as the perception of how knowledgeable a student is about the university's communications, values, and benefits. There is a major body of branding studies dedicated to research about the antecedent role of university brand knowledge in the formation of university identification. For instance, the interference of Brewer & Zhao's (2010) paper is that university brand awareness, which is also regarded as university knowledge, is positively correlated with students' perception towards the brand and the institution's overall reputation. The findings of Lysonski & Durvasula, (2013) also present empirical support for the relation between brand identification and brand knowledge. The research proved that university brand communication activities such as the promotion of the school's mission and goals, main campus events, and internal communication form brand knowledge, and eventually creates shared understanding between members and institution. The findings of the mentioned paper present empirical support for the positive relation between university brand knowledge and university identification. Thus, in the higher education context, the more knowledgeable is a student about the values and beliefs of the university, the stronger his/ her university identification will be. As knowledge about a university brand has the power to influence how students identify themselves with school personalities and values, this study will mainly focus on brand knowledge as a cause of student-university identification. Moreover, it has been reviewed that there was quite a lack of university brand knowledge in the field of university branding (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014). In order to enrich researches studying about this factor and university identification, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: University Brand Knowledge has a positive impact on University Identification.

2.2. University Brand Prestige

Mael & Ashforth (1992) defined university brand prestige as the superior status of the school under student's perception. University brand prestige illustrates a cumulative process of past and present branding activities and successes (Balaji et al., 2016). The author also proved that university brand prestige is influenced by the development history of the school's brand communication, advertisement, and student's personal experiences. Many scholars in education branding have included prestige in their research as a determinant of brand identification, yet the findings appear to be inconsistent. While early researchers proved an inconsiderable relation between university prestige and school identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), these findings are repleted with opposing views by modern scholars (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Balaji et al., 2016). Despite the contradictory conclusions in the mentioned papers, this research contends that there is a strong connection between university prestige and university identification. In fact, there is a large body of literature indicating that people's identification is maintained and affirmed through their identification with prestigious social entities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). This notion is aligned with the extent of self in the realm of consumer behavior, which links the positive incorporation of products and services with the person's sense of self (Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993). In addition, many critics in branding researches have proved the significant correlation between brand prestige and identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Kim, Chang & Jae Ko, 2010; Porter, Hartman, & Johnson, 2011). Similarly, Tajfel (1978); Bhattacharya & Sen (2003); Elbedweihy & Jayawardhena (2014) also suggest that the reputable prestige of a university empowers students to boost their self-esteem and meet their self-enhancement needs. Thus, there are reasonable grounds to state that:

H2: University Brand Prestige has a positive impact on University Identification.

2.3. Brand Distinctiveness

Brand distinctiveness has long been a popular construct in customer behavior research. According to Tajfel & Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, people have long tried to differentiate themselves from others in social contexts. Later on, the Uniqueness Theory of Snyder and Fromkin (1977) recognizes this need as a critical component in motivating people to feel good about themselves (i.e., self-esteem). This topic is further expanded in Brewer's Theory of Optimal Differentiation (1991), which implies that an individual will try to resolve the underlying imbalance between their needs to be indifferent with peers and their needs to be self-exclusive by identifying with groups that satisfy both needs. The interpretation of the need for originality in the consumer sector is perhaps best defined in the structure labeled as the "need for uniqueness" of the consumer (Tepper Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). This attribute is construed as the pursuit of an individual's self-differentiation, which is achieved through the acquisition, use, and disposition of consumer goods for the purposes of development and personal identity enhancement. Further brand and customer research by Stokburger-Saueret et al. (2012) provide additional support for this causal relation by proving that brand

distinctiveness has a profound impact on brand differentiation. In short, when other things are equal, brands with distinguished images or identities in contrast to their competitors will be more likely to be recognized so long as the discrepancy is not considered to be completely undesirable or negative. Therefore, it is true to state that the uniqueness of a brand is an important premise for consumers to recognize it (Berger & Heath, 2007). Despite the rich history of development and the vital importance of distinctive attributes in brand identification, there has been no research about the correlation in the higher education context. In order to fill this gap, this paper will regard university identification as a driver of university identification, which represents the perceived uniqueness of a university brand name in relation to its rivals; and suggest the below hypothesis:

H3: University Brand Distinctiveness has a positive impact on University Identification.

2.4. University Memorable Experiences

Different brands provoke diverse memorable experiences from the customers. However, this sense of connection is not always formed between customer and brand despite their frequent consumption. For example, in the research of Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich & Iacobucci (2010), the group of authors addressed that some brands do not occupy a prominent position in customer's minds despite being used frequently. Other brands, despite infrequent usage, can leave a powerful impression on consumers' minds; and consequently, recall the customers' positive memory. Formally, Arnould & Price (1993) document the nature of remarkable and sentimental brand experiences deriving from unusual brand activities (e.g., river rafting) as well as mundane consumption or everyday brand-related activities. The modifying role of good brand experiences is further investigated by branding studies about autobiographical consciousness and narrative processing (Escalas, 2004; Sujan, Bettman, & Baumgartner, 1993). This branch of analysis shows that the consumption of specific brands is associated with self-referencing and the formation of brand-related narratives or memories. Such self-referencing, conversely, initiates more influential, and retrievable memories (Escalas, 2004). Over time, those memories can even become imbued with strong feelings of nostalgia (Holbrook, 1993; Holt, 2005; Moore &Wilkie, 2005; Muehling & Sprott, 2004). In the long run, memorable brand experiences will eventually instill a strong sense of nostalgia in the customer's mind. Such feelings are expected to play a defining role in a person's sense of self due to the increased association of a brand name with personal identification (Davis, 1979; Moore & Wilkie, 2005). Stokburger-Saueret et al. (2012) have later tested the correlation between memorable experiences and brand identification, and their findings yielded a positive result. The time at university, with fond friends, respectable teachers, and interesting extracurricular activities will certainly leave students with indispensable memories. This sense will even be strengthened during the 4 years at school and influence student's identification with the school. Despite these facts, the construct of memorable experiences is a rare antecedent when it comes to university identification. Based on these notions, this study asserts that the final antecedent of university branding is memorable brand experiences, which is the extent to which a student has positive and emotional memories of prior brand experiences, and suggest:

H4: University Memorable Experiences has a positive impact on University Identification.

III. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Sampling Method

The qualified interviewees have to be the public university students who are pursuing their bachelor's program at this school. As EFA is used in data analysis, the number of respondents should make up the proportion 5 - 1 (Hatcher, 1994), which means that there should be at least 5 replies to 1 variable in the question.

This study is a quantitative research, which uses data from surveys to prove the proposed relation between the variables in the context of university identification of a higher education institution in Vietnam. Undergraduate students from different departments at IU will be invited to join this research using convenience sampling. The reason for the author to choose convenience sampling is because this method has been proved to be suitable for studies with the objective to test the correlation among the variables (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981). Moreover, later research by Sternthal, Tubott, A.M., Calder & Richard (1994) has proved that convenience sampling will produce more reliable results for theoretical explanation rather than theoretical generalization.

When collecting data, both online and offline surveys would be pursued in order to provide the best convenience for interviewees. Hard copy versions of the questionnaire will be printed and handed out to the students in classes during break time with the allowance and support from school professors. On the other hand, online research with the aid of Google form will be prepared to reach more respondents.

3.2. MeasurementScale

Measurement scales will be measured using items adopted from previous studies, with slight adjustments to ensure the scales suit with the context of the study.

The response will be evaluated by interviewees according to the 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 represents total disagreement and 5 stands for total agreement

3.3. Data Processing and Analysis

After collecting the data, the respondents will be rechecked manually to eliminate the unqualified candidates. Then, the filtered data will be processed by the Smart-PLS program to code, examine, and polish the dataset before analysis. Smart-PLS is a new program with a modern algorithm, and it comprises both the function of AMOS and SPSS, so it is likely that the data analysis with this software would be more convenient and accurate. The progress will start with data input and coding. Then, the content will go through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) testing to analyze the hidden connections between the set of variables. Eventually, the processed information will go through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to measure the reliability as well as the validity of the measurements.

As for data analysis, the researchers employ the PLS-SEM method with the assistance of the Smart PLS 3.0 software (Ringle, Wende & Will, 2015). Theoretically, Gerbing & Anderson (1988) indicates that PLS-SEM offers a methodical and comprehensive investigation into the framing of the relationships between the reliant and independent factors of multi-group analysis. PLS-SEM is also proved to be suitable for studies that have a complex structural model with experimental nature (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014a). Furthermore, PLS-SEM has been reported to be a helpful and popular method in marketing researches (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). Additionally, there are prior studies in the field of university identification with exploratory nature have applied this technique in their studies (Balaji et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2019). When adopting this method, the researchers have to satisfy the '10 times rule' Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt (2015), i.e. the sample size should be larger than 10 times of the largest structural paths directed at a particular construct in the structural model. In this research model, University Identification is the variable with the highest structured path of 4, so the minimum sample size should be greater than 40. Therefore, there are legitimate reasons to use the PLS-SEM method in this study, regarding the research nature and the sample size.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the theory and findings in the field of university branding to the higher education context in an emerging country, Vietnam. In the study, university identification is proposed to be affected byuniversity brand knowledge, brand prestige, brand distinctiveness, and memorable experiences. Public university undergraduate students are target respondents.Although the measurement scalesare adopted from previous studies, some are newly introduced and some are antique, each construct still has its own meaning in the research. Not only offline survey but also online survey is employed to gather data on public university students' opinion about the influence of university brand knowledge, brand prestige, brand distinctiveness, and memorable experiences on university identification. Smart-PLS program is used to process the collected data and test the suggested hypotheses.The current study only concentrates on investigating the undergraduate's behavioral intentiondue to time limitation.

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