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Co-Communication and Brand Reflection in Higher Education: Perceptions of Enrollment Intention and Recommending

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ABSTRACT

In this study, enrollment intention of international students was observed by testing university created communication (UCC), user generated content (UGC), brand image (BI) and brand attitude (BA). To examine higher education institution level and enrollment intentions, the model by Schivinski & Dabrowski (2016) firm created communication, brand equity, user generated content (UGC), brand attitude predicting purchase decision was extended. It is proved that BI and BA affects enrollment intention in the same level. It is not important for international students where the communication comes from when they go online and search different contents. Brand reflection (BI &BA) and Co-communication (UGC &UCC) have strong relationship with enrollment intentions.

Keywords: branding, marketing, higher education, international marketing, international education.

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1.INTRODUCTION

Nowadays social media is an attractive place for international students to communicate. Reaching students from other countries is getting much easier with social media. Universities have pages on social media to provide a good environment

for international students to get into communication with institution and peers. Higher education institutions focus both current and potential international students who have possibility to choose their universities or colleges. Social media could be helpful to bring students from all parts of the world together to share experiences with each other. International students can get informed easily by university or other students who are in the program. Messages given on social media and the content can shape international students' decisions before they get into any program. International student expectations might be different than students who study in their home country based on different country background and culture. Before getting into any program, international students needed to search campus life and academic programs which can satisfy their needs. Communities, student clubs and international student profiles can have influence on international students' intention to enroll in a university. Therefore, branding becomes vital for enrollment decision.

Branding is important for higher education institutions and social media channel is a good way to get attention of the students, who aim to study abroad. University image might be effective for global perspective through social media posts. How institutions represent their university and communities could have an impact on shaping ideas of each person from different countries. International students might be using social media to follow what other students do abroad and search for their needs if they go outside of their countries to study. The image which is created by university could be effective on international student perspective. There are many universities which have high amounts of international students and studying abroad becomes popular with globalization. Social media channels could be beneficial for universities to create brand attitude. Higher education institutions can position globally by reflecting the culture and identity of their brand.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

It seems social media has become more important with the increase of globalizations. Many firms and higher education institutions try to be more active on social media to reach people with their communications. On the other hand, 2017 Social Admissions Report, developed by Chegg, Target X, and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA) claimed that college websites are used by students for college research (Turner, 2011). There is a decline of visits to official company web sites due to increase in social media (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011). In their research process, students also go social media to discover colleges. Social media might help to shape students' decisions since students learn about the potential campus and current student profiles. They can learn about the school environment and get informed academically.

Social media is essential to build high quality relationships with students for universities (Clark, Fine and Scheuer, 2017). In the age of social media, firm created communication is important for developing brand image. Consumer perception of products might be influenced with loyal consumers engagement on social media. Social media marketing in higher education grows and increases relationship between students and universities (Clark, Fine & Scheuer, 2017). Students need to be fostered to follow different social media sites of the universities. This can help university to build closer relationship with students. Social media popularity impacted Canadian universities to position in social media marketing. (Belanger, Bali & Longden, 2014). Approximately one quarter of the universities in Canada do not engage much on social media, however the top 30% of Canadian universities engage on social media highly. These top universities foster social interaction by emphasizing high quality posts. And, to increase reach both nationally and internationally, student engagement in form of tweets take an important role. So, students need to be considered as advocate of the brands because they can share experiences and give suggestions to others.

UGC is more effective than traditional advertising as it builds trust with consumers (Christodoulides, 2012). Motivations of using UGC (user generated content) online is investigated by Knoll and Proksch (2014). UGC is used by internet users to inform, entertain themselves, form personal identity and interact with others. There might be some important implications of UGC (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016) such communication costs can be lowered as UGC is used to collect ideas of engaged consumers (Krishnamurthy & Dou, 2008). Consumers who are active on UGC can share their opinions about brands with others (Daughtery, Eastin & Bright, 2008).

Consumer engagement with brands or other consumers is an interactive and experiential process (Brodie, Juric, Illic & Hollebeek, 2013). One study indicated that behavior can effect UGC engagement experiences and consumers might be engaged with persuasive strategies which affect behaviors rather than rewarding their behaviors (Malthouse et al, 2016). According to Kim and Song (2018) experience based content being preferred brand attitude and more willingness to click links on UGC than content which is promotional on Twitter for unpaid UGC related to brand. And, content which is promotional brings more willingness to click links that experience based content for sponsored UGC related to brand on Twitter.

In a study of UK international students, it is explained that student generated content, such as TIWIS (this is where I study) can be helpful for higher education institutions, which want to reach their students (Bolat & Sullivan, 2017). Also, it is found that

higher education institutions need to increase psychological engagement based on experiences and cooperate with students who can share positive brand experiences. It is important how customers understand brand to connect with them more efficiently for companies. Products “social and psychological nature” connected with brands in 1955, by Gardner and Levy. In 1963, all consumers feelings and ideas based on different sources in brand image (Herzog). For Pohlman & Mudd (1973), if product is useful, it can relate to its prestige. According to Swartz (1983), messages given by products are important for customers. How customers experience and feelings based on functional and emotional utility of brand (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Keller defined brand image with four factors; judgements, feelings, performance, images based on his brand building model (2001). Previous findings (Roy & Raj, 2015) showed that positive brand image with clear information about high technology products had high influence on purchase decision. According to Chen (2016), brand image affects loyalty significantly and positively and loyalty affect recommending universities to others significantly and positively.

Branding helps higher education (HE) institutions to build identity and image on students and parents (Harvey, 1996). Chauhan and Pillai (2013) examined strategy of Indian HE institutions on social media content. While 55 percent of the content posts related to institution, most of other contents are updated for existing students. Ranking of schools between business schools, success of faculty and Dean’s messages included in content. Low percent of the content is related to special day wishes. Not just sending promotional messages are important but universities need to connect with users and, by this way ties between brand and consumers can built easily.

According to Hammick and Ju (2015) social media channels such as Facebook is used to make stronger brand and consumer relationships. And, while customers see that companies reaching them through *socialness* idea on social media, they can get better ideas about brands and products. *Socialness* idea derived from social theory (Hammick and Ju, 2015), which accepts computers as social actors (Nass & Moon, 2000). The way that consumers perceive products through socialness of brand communication can be helpful to build trustworthy relationships between company and customers (Hammick & Ju, 2015). This can help to increase brand attitude positively and consumer attitudes related to brands might be changed through feedback perceived.

Firms benefit from positive brand attitude to understand purchase behavior and brand choice (Priester & Nayakankuppam, 2004). Consumer evaluations for the brands might

be affected by brand attitude (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Low & Lamb, 2000). It is found that UGC and firm created communication impact brand attitude positively (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Brand awareness and attitude might be positively developed by active brand page participation (ABPP) (Langaro, Rita & Salgueiro, 2015). Attitudes differ for each country and for instance to become a fan of advertised brand of social network advertising (SNA), South Koreans are affected by their peers (Jung, Shim, Jin & Khang, 2016). Recommendation from others have importance to view SNA in South Korea. Brand strength (being well known, familiar and remarkable), which is based on brand familiarity, brand attitude and brand remarkability impacts (WoM) comments of students' positively (Wymer & Casidy, 2015).

Lin, Swarna and Bruning (2017) indicated that posts need to be vivid, practical, interesting, personalized and at the same time it is important to adapt cultural characteristics for targeted markets. While vividness is essential for different cultures, characteristics of interest, personalization and interactivity could be adapted to specific markets. Also, considering "I" in individualistic and "we" in collectivistic cultures could be helpful to increase popularities of brand posts.

Since many people use social media (SM) to perceive suggestions about brands, SM can affect their decisions about the brand. It is found that for three industries; clothing, non-alcoholic, and mobile network, consumers' brand purchase intentions are affected positively by brand attitude (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Consumers even pay a premium price if they have positive attitudes for the brands (Folse, Netemeyer & Burton, 2012). Universities use social media pages to communicate not with their current students, also communicating with their potential students. In their university decision process students can view social media pages of colleges and universities to get academic information and search about campus life and city. What is shared or liked in social media pages can be important to shape student's ideas in their admission process. Communicating with students efficiently through social media branding can provide better suggestions to students about university decision. Students first impressions and attitudes about schools can be shaped by effective branding. Reviews of others in social media and comments under school posts might be effective for a student to make decision about his or her future academic career. If students see positive comments of other students of a university about academic programs, campus life, this can be helpful to give a better image to them about that university.

3.PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY AND SURVEY DESIGN

Objective of this study is to examine the role of social media communications and branding on university enrollment intentions.

In this study, university created communication (UCC), user generated content (UGC), brand image (BI) and brand attitude (BA) were tested to determine enrollment intentions of international students. The model by Schivinski & Dabrowski (2016) firm created communication, brand equity, user generated content (UGC), brand attitude predicting purchase decision was extended to university level and enrollment intention. The survey included following questions;

University enrollment decision: International students are asked questions based on brand image, brand attitude, university created communication and user generated content (UGC) to understand the relationship between communications and branding of social media with university enrollment intentions.

University created communication: Satisfaction and attractiveness of university social media communications and comparison of social media between university of respondents and other universities are included for survey questionnaire.

User Generated Content: Performance, satisfaction and attractiveness of the content of the university, created by other users are evaluated by participants.

Brand Image: Uniqueness, positive and strong image of the brand for university are analyzed to understand the relationship of brand image and international student intentions to enroll.

Brand Attitude: Reputation and associating positive characteristics with university are focused to examine how international student think and feel about university.

4.DATA COLLECTION

Survey questionnaire was sent to around 200 international students through social media and 145 students completed all questions. Active users of social media sites were surveyed and observed for this research. Survey questions were taken from constructs and measurements model for social media effect on brand perception of consumers. Firm created communication, brand equity and user generated content (UGC) were replaced with university created communication, brand image and UGC for higher education institutions in order (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Brand equity was replaced with brand image for institutions since brand image conveys the

value of the brand to the consumers, being an integral component of brand equity (Malik, Naeem & Munawar 2012). Questions related to brand image were taken from main study measurements of Heinberg, Ozkaya & Taube (2017), which is based on Keller's Brand image 1993 and brand was replaced with university.

The majority of the students in this sample, went to United States or countries in Europe to earn either a Bachelor or Master degree. Age of the participants was in the range of 18 to 30 years. The regions that were included in this study were East & South Asia & Pacific (28.9%), Europe and Central Asia (49.7%), South and North America (14.5%), Middle East and North Africa (6.9%). Students from the countries in Europe, America and Asia answered Survey questions. Some countries included in the sample were; US, Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, Turkey, Russia, Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Sweden, Lebanon, Iran and, Morocco.

5.METHODOLOGY

The analysis was done in two phases first a principal component analysis, second a simple regression. The principal component analysis was used to group together the survey questions with little variance and discover the factors from the survey questions. Once the factors were discovered, a simple regression was run to explore the strength of the factors on enrollment intention.

Principal component analysis

Based on scree plot, two factors were extracted from the data. In the extraction method principal component analysis, the first eleven components had eigenvalues greater than "1" which was around 15 components. There was a huge drop between eigenvalue of component 1 and component 2. The first two components explained 60.77% and 13.46% of total variance in order and third component explained 5.49%. The first two components yielded as 74.24% as the cumulative value. Eigenvalues of first, second and third components were 9.12, 2.02 and 0.82 in order, therefore, the first two components were retained for the study.

After rotation, in rotation sums of squared loadings, first two components together equaled to $((5.72 + 5.42)/15) = 74\%$ of the total variance. In rotated component matrix, in factor loadings, it is found that university created communication (UCC) and user generated content (UGC) with overall eight independent variables loaded to one factor (Table 1). UCC and UGC came together as one factor, which we called them Co-communication (collaborative communication). Brand image (BI) and brand

attitude (BA) formed the other factor with overall seven independent variables, and we named this factor Brand reflection (Table 1).

In the first factor (co-communication), it is found that the principal component analysis highly correlated with user generated content compared to all independent variables. The highest loading was meeting expectations from word of mouth content about the university on social media. Comparing the university with other universities based on the performance through word of mouth marketing on social media loaded the second highest, while satisfaction about the university with the content of other users loaded third highest. Among the university created communication independent variables, comparing social media communication performance of the university over others loaded the highest and attractiveness of social media communication of the university loaded second highest. It is surprising that satisfaction with social media communications of the university (UCC) loaded least for the first factor.

In the second factor, (brand reflection) university as a strong brand (BI) loaded as highest among the second factor independent variables. University as a favorable brand (BI) loaded second and associating positive characteristics with university (BA) loaded third. Overall between all independent variables, having a positive image for university loaded as the lowest and principal component is least correlated with positive image of the university.

Table 1: Correlations with principal components

	Co-Communication	Brand Reflection
UCC1	.70	.45
UCC2	.73	.43
UCC3	.80	.35
UCC4	.80	.34
UGC1	.84	.29
UGC2	.87	.15
UGC3	.81	.24
UGC4	.85	.23
BI1	.41	.76
BI2	.32	.83
BI3	.24	.77
BI4	.23	.86
BA1	.26	.80
BA2	.24	.86
BA3	.31	.78

In the second phase, two multiple linear regressions were conducted to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Co-communication has a positive impact on choosing a university over others

H2: Brand reflection has a positive impact on choosing a university over others

H3: Co-communication has a positive impact on recommending a university

H4: Brand reflection has a positive impact on recommending a university

Regression Analysis

Two multiple linear regressions were analyzed to explore if co-communication and Brand reflection predict university enrollment decision and recommending the university. The first multiple linear regression was conducted to examine if brand reflection and co-collaboration predicted university enrollment decision. Table 2 reflects that the adjusted R square is significant at .59 which moderately explains the model. It was discovered that Co-communication was highly significant on choosing a university over another (p value = 0.00). Brand reflection was also highly significant on choosing a university over another (p value = 0.00).

Table 2: The unstandardised and standardised regression coefficients for brand reflection and co-communication entered into enrollment decision model

Variable	B	SE B	B
Brand Reflection score	1.28	.09	.74
Co-Communication score	.39	.09	.23

p < 0.01

Regression 1:

$$\widehat{y}_1 = 4.862 + 0.390 CC + 1.275BR$$

Std. error	(0.09)	(0.09)
t stat	4.18	13.69

The results indicate that co-communication is significant at the 0.01 level. Therefore, co-communication has a positive impact on choosing a university over others.

Brand reflection is also significant at the 0.01 level. Therefore, brand reflection has a positive impact on choosing a university over others.

The second multiple linear regression was analyzed to examine if co-communication and Brand reflection predicted recommending the university. Table 3 reflects that the adjusted R square is significant at .62 which moderately explains the model. It was discovered that Co-communication was highly significant on recommending a university to others (p value = 0.00). Brand reflection was also highly significant on recommending a university to other (p value = 0.00).

Table 3: The unstandardised and standardised regression coefficients for brand reflection and co-communication entered into recommending university model

Variable	B	SE B	B
Brand Reflection score	1.08	.08	.74
Co-Communication score	.41	.08	.29

p < 0.01

Regression 2:

$$\widehat{y}_2 = 5.269 + 0.410 CC + 1.075BR$$

Std. error	(0.08)	(0.08)
t stat	5.50	14.40

The results indicate co-communication is significant at the 0.01 level. Therefore, Co-communication has a positive impact on recommending a university.

Brand reflection is also significant at the 0.01 level. Therefore, brand reflection has a positive impact on recommending a university.

6.DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Research suggests that WOM marketing can be a strong factor to develop brand image and brand attitude (Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Kozinets et al. 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Our research explored WOM as a combination of UGC and UCC to develop Co-collaboration. Moreover, brand image and brand attitude were factored to develop brand reflection. Our research findings indicate that when tested separately, Co-collaboration and Brand reflection were predictors of enrollment intention and recommending the university.

Co collaboration and predicting enrollment decision is in line with previous WOM research. Senecal and Nantel (2004) found that products are selected more often than previous cases and customer's decisions are affected by online recommendation sources when someone recommends a product. The source of the recommendation in this research is a new phenomenon to our knowledge and has not yet been tested. Previous research typically differentiates user generated content from brand communicated content, or in this case university created content. However, with the increased noise on social media and brand's paying brand ambassadors, brand advocates, and influencers to create content on social media could account for one of the reasons that there is a change on the emphasis of differentiating UGC and UCC. Perceived trustworthiness of consumers could also play a role in the non-differentiation of UGC and UCC. Today, only 41% of people globally trust social media (Edelman, 2019). In the network co-production model marketers included product reviews and information to the consumers as they encouraged people to talk about products (Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki & Vilner, 2010). Naturally formed conversations can be created by WOM as individuals share experience about a product, however, today the trust towards social media has changed.

University created communication and user generated content have the same effect on international students' enrollment intention. International students pay attention to the content shared on social media about the university and their ideas are shaped by that information. As a result, whether the international student enrolls in the specific university is dependent on the content on social media. Previous literature supported our findings that eWOM affects purchase intention (See-to & Ho, 2013). Once content is shared on social media, the source of the information, whether UGC or UCC, is not as important, however the content itself could be effective in enrollment intention.

Based on our findings, people's brand attitude towards a brand is not differentiated by the brand image. Brand attitude and brand image both have a strong relationship with international student enrollment intentions. The perception of the brand attitude might be created by different social media posts or comments by a combination of university content and other user content. Keller (1993) defined brand attitude as overall perceptions of consumers about the product. As previously mentioned, brand image could be judgements, feelings, performance, images (Keller, 2001). Today, overall perceptions of consumers and feelings, play into the role of brand image with the increase usage of user generated content on social media. As a result, the brand image is as powerful as brand attitude to influence international students' intentions before they enter university.

One method that is commonly used to determine whether the target audience will recommend a product is Net Promotor Score (NPS) (Reichheld, 2003). Moreover, NPS has been found to increase brand loyalty (Schultz and Block, 2012). In this study, the measure of NPS was not used, however, students' recommending the university to others was analyzed. Therefore, it would be important to note and to explore further whether NPS has a same impact in the university setting in terms of brand loyalty.

Future research should explore the type of communication that impacts enrollment decision from UGC and UCC. Our research focused on enrollment intention and recommending the university, through co-collaboration and brand reflection, but did not look at specific content. It would be interesting to explore the actual content that follows the journey.

Moreover, this research only focused on international students and a university setting. It would be important to extend this research to international consumers as a whole. Since students are more familiar with social media, the information may change with different generations as well as with different product categories.

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