A Best-Practice Model of University-Students Relationship Development: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

A university-student relationship has been viewed as a key to the success and continuity of private universities. Although keeping students loyal is a critical objective of relationship marketing, there is a limited theoretical and practical knowledge on which antecedents could be used to achieve this aim. The essence of this research is the development of a more comprehensive model of university-student relationship that could reflect a best practice, on the basis of a review of the literature, and the empirical investigation of this model by using a mixed method of qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (surveys) approach. By sampling students in one private Jordanian university, results reveal that relationship strength and students’ satisfaction can impact students’ loyalty towards their universities. In addition, three relational bonds (financial, social and structural) can influence students’ satisfaction. Finally, the study indicates academic and in-practice implications within the education sector, and suggests some future research guidelines.

KEYWORDS
Relational Bonds, Relationship Strength, Students’ Loyalty, Students’ Satisfaction, University-Student Relationship

1. INTRODUCTION

Developing relationships between students and their universities is not an easy concept to formulate. The reason for this complexity arises as relationship marketing consists of range of activities that can mean different things to different students and universities (Peltier & Westfall, 2000). Indeed, in recent years, private universities have been challenged to create marketing programs that strengthen their relationship with students. According to Gummesson (1996), relationship marketing comprises of three key elements: relationships, networks, and interaction. Although many scholars identified the university-students relationship dimensions, there is a little understanding regarding the factors that influence this relationship, and what contributes to its development, especially for young and private universities. The subsequent sections review the relating literature and describe the dimensions of this relationship (relational bonds, satisfaction, loyalty and relationship strengths) and how they are related to each other.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Relational Bonds

Within the relationship marketing context, relational bonds are considered as important element (Arantola, 2002; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder, & Lacobucci, 2001; Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Liang & Wang, 2005; Lin, Weng, & Hsieh, 2003; Smith, 1998; Turnbull & Wilson, 1989; Wang, Liang, & Wu, 2006; Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Mummalaneni, 1986). That is, by building effective relational bonds with customers, companies can create, maintain and improve the relationships with customers (Arantola, 2002; Liljander & Strandvik, 1995; Smith, 1998). Taking this into account, bonds are widely viewed as the keystones for keeping students loyal to their university. Also, marketing activities should include investing in creating social, as well as structural, bonds with students. To create a superior bonding between students and their university, the university should employ any relationship that attempts to develop student value among partnering activities (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016a; Chory & Offstein, 2017; Huang, Fang, Huang, Chang, & Fang, 2014; Lima & Fernandes, 2015; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013).

In relationship marketing, social and structural bonds are more widely discussed than others (Holmlund & Kock, 1996). However, to fasten parties to a relationship, economic or financial bonds also serve (Smith, 1998). Thus, in Smith’s study, relational bonds were treated as a higher-order construct comprising the three types of financial, social and structural relational bonds.

2.1.1. Financial Bonds

To inspire customers to involve in a relationship with their service providers, researchers agree that financial rewards are one of the best tools (Berry, 1995; Hsieh, Chiu, & Chiang, 2005; Liang & Wang, 2005; Lin et al., 2003; Peterson, 1995; Wang et al., 2006). According to Kosch, Friedrich, & Breitner (2012, p.1), “customer relationship management (CRM) has become a key instrument in attracting paying students as retaining a long-lasting relationship provides financial and other benefits”. However, as there are limited researches study the enhancing of financial bonds on building relationships between the universities and their students, financial bonds will be considered in the current study as a main component in exploring the relationship between the students and the university. This type of bond is seen as positive as it aims to encourage students to continue their relationship with their university.

2.1.2. Social Bonds

This type of relational bonds is used to identify good personal relations between the two parties (e.g., Bolton, Smith & Wagner, 2003; De Wulf et al., 2001; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schro’der & Kenhove, 2003; Liang & Wang, 2005; Lin et al., 2003; Price & Arnould, 1999; Wang et al., 2006). That is, customers who are treated personally should have stronger reasons to stay as partners with their service providers (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). Because of these advantages, the social bonds have been considered as one of the vital elements that universities can be used to build efficient relations with their students (Chory & Offstein, 2017; Tan, Quoquab, Ahmad, Mohammad, 2017).

2.1.3. Structural Bonds

Structural bonds have been included in this research as they are significant factors in securing student loyalty (Peltier & Westfall, 2000; Huang et al., 2014). This type of bond includes offering incentive services, such as electronic registration, web-based educational tools and social clouds that meet student needs (Lin et al., 2003; Pham, Williamson, & Berry, 2018; Vulić, Petrović, Kovačević, & Živanović, 2014), or offering solutions for student’s problems (Lin et al., 2003; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000), or enabling students to get involved in creative academic and social activities (Fields & Atiku, 2017). According to Peltier and Westfall (2000) structural bonds build feelings of ‘empowerment’ for students. For this reason, this bond is considered within the current study because it covers essential aspects that universities may use to maintain loyal students. By implementing these services,
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