The Effect of Online Communication on Corporate Brand Image

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ABSTRACT

This study assists Higher Education Institutions to gain a better understanding of the online communication strategies that influence students in developing a brand image of their universities. First, the concept of online communication strategies in HE was defined and supported by the literature review. Then, a conceptual framework that links brand equity of the university with its online strategy was developed and empirically tested through a survey questionnaire. The survey was distributed to a sample of 200 students in two different types of universities representing the foreign and private universities in Egypt. Results support the idea that the website is a simple reflection of the university’s image and activities. Results also indicate that there is a strong correlation between the website strategy and the corporate brand image of the university. Brand loyalty was found to be positive among the sample. The overall corporate image of the university was highly dependent on students’ evaluation of the university website. Research results can be used as a useful tool to enhance brand image and to improve interactivity within the online communication strategies adopted by the Egyptian Higher Education Institutions.

Keywords: Brand Equity, Brand Image, Corporate Branding, Higher Education in Egypt, Higher Education Marketing, Online Communication, Online Marketing, Website Image

INTRODUCTION

Today’s students differ a lot from past students. They are always connected, if it is not through the Internet, then it is through their mobile phones, PDAs, tablet PCs. Apples and Blackberries are not just fruits for them, they are considered as tools to make them connected with their friends or universities. The online community is becoming important to the extent that it is starting to slowly replace the traditional social networks for many students. In this study the effect of online communication strategies on the Higher Education market is investigated. The purpose of this study is to explore whether Egyptian universities communicate distinctive corporate brand image in efforts to position themselves and enhance their brand reputation in the competitive education market. This paper will start with an overview of relevant literature and then outline the adopted conceptual framework. The methodology used to guide the
research is briefly reviewed before presenting the results and managerial implications.

Corporate Branding

Within time brand role changed from only designating the ownership of any product or service to becoming a valuable source of information (Goodyear, 1993; Farquhar, 1990). Brand had also evolved into one of the main assets to the organization in today’s competitive environment. Generally, Aaker (1991) mentioned that brand could be a logo, name or even a package that differentiates the product or the service of different producers. However, Marconi (1993) stressed that the brand is not just a name because the name is created to identify the product but the brand is created to add value to the product and give it a personality. A number of researchers mentioned the same definition and added that the buyer must perceive a unique image and added value to the brand (De Chernatony, 1993; McWilliam & Dumas, 1997; Ambler & Styles, 1996). Finally, based on Keller’s (2003) analysis of branding, the brand is perceived as an identification of the source of the product or the service, risk reducer, a signal of quality, a promise to the consumer, and a symbolic image.

Corporate brand is beyond a logo associated with a company for identification purpose, as it reflects the unique added value of the product as well (De Chernatony & McDonald, 1998). This definition indicates that the characteristics of a successful brand are based on the perceived added value that adds to the product or service. As such, corporate brands are seen as guarantee of quality, as an insurance against risk of poor performance or financial risk (Balmer & Grey, 2003). Corporate image could be seen as emotional elements and values and is associated with one’s experience with the company. From a different prospective, David Aaker (1991), defined the value added to the brand as a brand equity that represents set of assets linked to the brand.

Generally, there is a shift in the branding literature from a focus on the concept of brand image, which relates to the consumers’ perceptions of brand differentiation, to brand identity which focuses on the distinctiveness of the brand (Kapferer, 1997).

Perception of Branding in Higher Education Service

Higher Education service as any other professional service is characterized by high experience qualities hence it is difficult to evaluate except after consumption (Mourad, 2010). As a result to minimize the perceived risk associated with selecting the service, marketers focus on branding as a source of reassurance to students about the quality of the education service (Byron, 1995; Mourad, 2010; Davies & Ellison, 1997).

Being market oriented is extremely important in today’s education environment. This opinion is supported by Shattock (1995), as he mentioned “nearly all countries’ universities are suffering something of an identity crisis under the pressures of rapid increases in students’ numbers, falling unit costs, increasing governmental control, and some evidences of rising public disenchanted” (p. 157).

The context of this study is based on investigating Higher Education corporate brand image. Based on the literature review, most of the education institutions are becoming more marketing oriented (Nicholls et al., 1995). As a result, some Higher Education Institutions are investing on branding activities to enhance their brand image in the Higher Education Market (Ali-choudhury et al., 2009; Chapleo, 2008). It should be noted that in the last few years there have been more studies published on branding in the context of Higher Education marketing (Alessandri, 2007; Blanton, 2007; Waeraas & Solbak, 2009; Mourad et al., 2011; Mourad, 2010).

Brand name reflects the identity of the university (Davies et al., 2003). The university brand is what differentiate the university from other institutions as it is a sign of how the university satisfy students’ needs through delivering high quality education, unique identity in the market, employability of its graduates, social
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