Using Social Media in an Educational Context to Enhance Brand Loyalty:
An Exploratory Case Study

Abstract

Drawing on Urde’s (2003) business model of corporate brand value creation, this exploratory
study considers whether or not the use of social media for educational rather than marketing
purposes can enhance student perceptions of the University corporate brand and thus increase
brand loyalty. Based on focus groups with new students through to final year students at a
Business School in a Scottish University, the paper examines elements of the external
corporate brand building process, such as brand interest and sensitivity, brand awareness,
brand associations, and the extent to which social media creates added value in terms of
student perceptions. It also explores whether or not social media used in an educational
context enhances interactions and relationships, and whether it has the power to instil
stronger brand loyalty and affection in the student body. Ultimately the paper considers
whether the use of social media as an educational tool, rather than as a marketing tool,
enhances and enriches brand loyalty, or whether it has a purely functional, facilitating role.
Introduction

To date a number of research projects have aimed to assess internal corporate brand creation (see Urde 2003, Urde 2013). In this paper we follow Urde’s (2003) model of corporate branding building as a framework, specifically his argument that core values are the foundations for successful corporate brand development, and that this process has both an internal and external ‘face’.

Our study focuses on the way in which social media has been used by the University in its effort to enhance its external corporate brand building process. In particular, following Urde’s framework, we aim to evaluate whether or not social media used at the University for a purpose other than marketing can increase brand loyalty. Our particular interest is in how consumers (students) perceive a brand (university) through the lens of social media used as an educational tool and whether online methods of communication (such as Facebook and/or Twitter) between lecturer and student can improve students’ overall ‘brand experience’ (Schmitt et al 2009).

We begin by offering a short review of the literature on corporate brand building. We then go on to briefly review the literature on online brands and online brand communities. Next we discuss the use of social media in the context of education. We then present our methodology, analysis and interpretation of findings. Finally we present our discussion of initial findings, in which we suggest that although the use of social media for educational purposes can result in brand loyalty, required rather than voluntary engagement on social media platforms has some negative consequences.

Multidimensionality of Corporate Brand Building

The importance of corporate brand building is irrefutable (see, for example, Augustsson and Larsson 2012). However, building the corporate brand is not an easy task due to its multidimensionality (Urde, 2013). In recognising this multidimensionality researchers have therefore developed a number of frameworks in which to structure the process of corporate brand building (Hatch and Schultz 2001; Knox and Bickerton 2003; Urde 2013). Hatch and Schultz (2001) for example, identify three key elements or ‘strategic stars’ in corporate brand development: vision, culture and image. In relation to the latter they identify the importance of ‘building a sense of community among customers’. However, by and large, there has been a tendency in studies to assess corporate branding from an internal perspective, i.e. from within the organisation (Urde, 2013), ignoring the role that consumers play in its creation (external perspective). Moreover, existing studies aim to provide guidance for corporate brand building in a traditional environment, ignoring the growing importance of the virtual environment and the effects upon it of social media, which give a ‘voice’ to the consumer. In this current highly competitive and highly digitalised business environment, however, it is important to assess the role of the virtual environment on the external corporate brand building process, and this is thus the key emphasis and objective of our study.

Online Brand Communities in the Context of Education

Rapid advancements in digital technology have profoundly changed the nature of brand communities, traditionally defined as ‘a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand’ (Wirtz et al, 2013
The mass adoption of Internet, digital platforms, mobile technology, and social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and various blogging platforms have all assisted the development of virtual brand communities or so-called online brand communities (OBCs). Adjei et al. (2010) report that such OBCs are being increasingly accessed to gather consumer generated information regarding consumers’ overall brand perception (e.g. brand trust perception (Ha, 2004)). However, according to Gu and Ye (2013), there is still very little research being done ‘to understand how management should respond to consumer reviews in online social media’.

Social media is relatively new, although it is already recognised as a successful business tool, enabling organisations to engage with their customers interactively in their day-to-day business. Jussila et al. (2014) link the success of social media to the wider early popularity of Facebook and blogs. However, according to Glynn and Faulds (2009), it is social media’s dynamic nature that attracts businesses, and not its popularity. It is the natural shift of consumer focus from traditional offline media platforms towards online interactive media platforms. This shift results in a new communications paradigm which in turn facilitates online interactions among consumers themselves and between consumers and businesses alike. This signals a new age of democratisation of marketing communications (Kietzmann et al. 2011), as now consumers’ reviews posted online shape brand experiences and expectations, rather than marketing generated information. Consequently in the 21st century, online platforms become significant spaces for the external corporate brand building process, the importance of which cannot be underestimated by any business sector.

In the Higher Education sector, for example this kind of democratisation has introduced shifts in the status quo. A study (ECAR, 2010) of undergraduate students showed that students’ use of social media has progressively increased from 2007 to 2010, and that the gap between older and younger student users of social media is getting smaller (Smith & Caruso 2010). The study also shows that students in higher education are choosing to integrate social media into their academic activities, both formally and informally (ECAR, 2010). Consequently faculties are following this change of students’ preferences by integrating social media in their daily educational activities (Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2012). The above example reinforces the observation that online brand communities may develop their own momentum in an educational context and thus they need a ‘light, open touch’ (Fourner and Lee 2009 p.106) if they are to be effective in supporting a University’s effort to build and maintain strong corporate brands.

**Methodology**

Using a qualitative methodology, this exploratory study uses focus groups to ascertain the extent to which social media platforms used for educational purposes enhance student perceptions of the University brand and whether such engagement can create and build brand loyalty.

The focus groups used a semi-structured method to discuss the social media application for corporate brand building. During the discussion specific reference to a number of modules within the marketing suite of courses, which actively encouraged social media interaction between the module coordinator and students, were made. The focus groups were opened-ended; however, certain key concepts about corporate brand creation (Urde, 2003) helped frame the discussion, such as students’ interest in the University ‘brand’; their sensitivity or receptivity to the ‘brand’; the ‘brand’ associations; their relationship with the ‘brand’, and the
degree to which they felt any loyalty to the ‘brand’. Four focus groups were conducted, each containing between 8-10 students. Two of the authors were involved in the data collection and analysis processes. A key objective was to centre the discussion on social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging and ‘factoids’ used in several marketing modules, to ascertain whether social media enhanced brand perception and loyalty on the part of the students engaged in the study.

Analysis and Interpretation of Findings Based on Urde’s (2003) Framework of External Brand Building Process

During the data analysis process we followed Urde’s (2003) model of corporate branding building as a framework (see Figure 1.) with the main focus on the external brand building process. The data analysis and interpretation of findings, based on these headings, is provided below.

Figure 1. Internal and external core value-based brand building process (Urde, 2003)

Interest and Brand Sensitivity: There was the clear emergence in the focus groups that students arriving at the University were unfamiliar with the brand and either had no pre-conceived notions or had negative perceptions of the brand. The University is a post 1992 university committed to widening access and without a long tradition behind it to help build a strong brand image in the marketplace, students came to the University somewhat unimpressed, as this had typically not been their first choice of university. In terms of prior perceptions, then, the general consensus was that there was a lack of interest and indeed a perception that this was an ‘inferior’ institution. In due course, however, this sense of being ‘the underdog’, as one student termed it, came to be a key factor in developing a sense of pride and community.

Brand Awareness: The lack of interest in University brand was further confirmed by many of the students taking part in focus group discussions who said they hadn’t even heard of the
University until they came through its doors. They put this poor brand awareness down to a lack of advertising on the part of the University, both offline and online, no school visits, and aggressive marketing on the part of larger institutions. Phrases such as ‘Never heard of it’ were common in the discussions. In effect, students arrived here almost by accident or by default, and had low expectations about what University life and learning would be like.

Brand Associations: As previously mentioned, students believed themselves to be at an ‘underdog’ institution. One student said she felt like ‘a lone wolf’ and ‘isolated’, because most of her friends had gone to Universities with higher profiles. This sense of being at a University with a low brand profile had the effect, in time, of making them have a sense of loyalty and pride; in fact they were quite vocal in their defensive of it, as presumably to not be defensive would be to devalue the education they were receiving: ‘You have to defend yourself – it’s not that bad!’ said one informant. ‘We’re just as good as anybody else’, said another. And another student said: ‘students and staff all try harder to prove people wrong’, emphasising the negative associations of the brand, but also that this led to a defensive strategy and pointed to a developing sense of belonging to a community that needed to be supported.

It was noticeable that this sense of loyalty grew over time, with a significant difference in first year and final year students’ perceptions of the University brand. These responses emphasise the importance of external brand value creation (Urde, 2003) and brand image (Hatch & Schultz, 2001), as well as underlining that brand perceptions can change within a brand community if the right environment is created, both in terms of tangible factors and intangible, experiential factors.

Added Values: During focus group discussions it became apparent that key ways in which students developed a greater fondness for their University brand was in terms of ‘added value’ factors such as campus facilities – cafes and good sports facilities as well as interactions with other students and University staff. Furthermore, students also welcomed the use of Youtube, Facebook, blogging, discussion boards, etc., but this was primarily used as a practical means to an end. For example, Facebook was used for groupwork: ‘We create little, Facebook groups, that are closed, and we can share ideas, coursework, attachments – it means everyone in the whole group can see it’. Another informant said that Facebook was particularly useful as it was ‘more convenient. It’s immediate. You can check right away wherever you are’. However, too much use of social media could be counter-productive: ‘There’s that many – I don’t know which one to follow’, said one informant in relation to Twitter. Others also felt that if it was built into assessment it became onerous and ‘too complicated’. They also didn’t like the penalties that were in place if they didn’t use it. Clearly a softly softly approach was needed on the part of University hoping to use new forms of communication to build a sense of community in the student body, as such mediums are strongly associated with leisure time and entertainment, rather than education.

Self-Image: As indicated above, students’ selfimage were initially negative and only improved as they adapted to their new environment and gained positive experiences. Whilst the stance described by some of the students was that they felt isolated and, as one put it, ‘defensive’ about being at a University that was not as prestigious as others, a defensive stance gave way to a growing sense of pride in being in an underdog community and having to defend it as well as oneself for being a part of it. By the final year, then, the students who took part in the study reported that they had a sense of belonging to a ‘caring’ University environment that was personal and ‘friendly’.
Relationship: Once students adapted to the University environment they seemed to have a positive brand experience and saw the University in a positive light. When asked to describe the brand they used adjectives such as ‘friendly’, ‘improving’, ‘caring’ and ‘changing’, as well as less positive ones such as ‘disorganised’. These responses indicated a degree of loyalty and affection towards the brand, and indeed a sense of belonging, which is key to developing a strong brand. This sense of belonging came about through group activities, and a shared identity, and social media appeared to have a key role in this process, contributing to their sense of belonging: ‘The twitter thing is a good idea – it makes you look for one and makes you more aware of what’s going on’, said one informant in response to an initiative to actively build tweets into student assessment. ‘I found it really helpful’, said another. Others felt that the requirement to use Twitter was more of a ‘nuisance’, as they had to learn it and create an account. Another informant said that Facebook was particularly useful as it was ‘more convenient. It’s immediate. You can check right away wherever you are’.

Brand Loyalty: In sum, it was clear from the focus groups that brand loyalty did develop over time and seemed to hinge on supportive teaching staff and a positive learning environment. Negative perceptions gave way to a perception that this was a ‘caring’ and ‘supportive’ environment, and it was clear that the use of social media, used sparingly and voluntarily without building it into assessment, had a positive effect on how students felt about the ‘brand’. The data also showed that starting from a negative position in terms of brand image was not necessarily a bad thing, as this seemed to create a defensive approach. As one student put it: ‘Lots only come here because they’ve no other choice, but they leave having enjoyed their time’.

Discussion

On the basis of the data analysis it is clear that although many students enter the University with no interest in its corporate brand and with weak overall brand awareness and perhaps negative perceptions, over time they develop strong brand associations and recognise added values while becoming members of online communities. At the same time they develop a positive self image and a strong sense of belonging while actively participating in online community activities. This results in a positive University experience and thus seems to lead to brand loyalty towards the University. It is only true however in relation to voluntarily created online communities and not online communities incorporated into the module assessment, since such non-voluntary communities seem to take out the ‘fun’ aspect of using social media platforms. Required or module-related participation is perceived as onerous. It affects the ‘brand experience’ and thus does not facilitate the University’s corporate brand build building process.

In conclusion therefore, it is apparent that online platforms are important spaces for the external corporate brand building process because of the power they have to change students’ initial perception regarding the University brand and to further enhance overall ‘brand experience’. Incorporation of virtual platforms into the educational context is therefore strongly encouraged. At the same time however, it has to be remembered that required rather than voluntary engagement on social media platforms may be counter-productive, as students may find it onerous and overcomplicated and thus drop out from the online brand community. Consequently, online communities should be co-created with student involvement, and voluntary participation encouraged, as this will result in a greater sense of belonging and ultimately will lead to sustained brand loyalty.
References


