Co-Creating Brand Meaning: How Much Is the University Sport Brand Impacting Students' Conversion Journey and Identity Construction in English Higher Education?

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Aim

Within the U.S.A., intercollegiate athletics represents a major economic source and an effective recruitment tool (Toma & Cross, 1998) for universities seeking to build a favourable brand image to generate additional revenues and exposure (Lee et al, 2008). Yet, beyond the American higher education (HE) market, more specifically the English HE sector, the impact of university sport branding on recruitment and retention is an underdeveloped area. In particular research surrounding how students in the contemporary environment interpret marketing strategies employed by higher education institutes (Rutter et al, 2017). The purpose of this study was to identify the interpretive strategies employed by students throughout their conversion journey and identity construction phases to explore how university brands are co-created in the English HE sector.

Theoretical Background

Competition in the English HE market has become more intense due to multiple economic and political pressures. English universities are under pressure to market themselves like never before to attract quality students. But, university brand meaning is problematic, since trying to differentiate institutions in an industry full of perceivably similar offerings has become increasingly challenging (Rutter et al, 2017). In order for universities to understand students, they must identify their student segments to ascertain the co-created brand meanings. Co-creation actively involves the consumer in the construction of brand meanings and therefore implies that consumers no longer occupy the end of the value chain of the purchasing journey. Rather consumers now assume central importance in the processes of value creation and co-constructing brand meaning (Pongsakornrungslip & Schroeder, 2011). Furthermore, consumers in the postmodern era are living in a consumer society where consumption is central to the meaningful practice of everyday life; consumers do not make consumption choices from products' utilities but also from their brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2010). Yet, arguably, the nature and structure of universities does not lend itself easily to constructing brand meaning in this way, provoking the question how and when does a university brand become a brand? To understand consumers' complex search for meaning in the HE market, this study focused on the brand pull of university sport.

Sport offers the student-consumer the opportunity to demonstrate clear affiliation with a team/group membership and use the brand to promote a desired identity. Previous evidence (Lock & Heere, 2017) suggests that sport can reinforce an identity and sports are an especially visible part of universities (Toma & Cross, 1998) that have cultural significance for groups/individuals within and outside the university (Beyer & Hannah, 2000). Exploring university sport as a branding tool, this study sought to understand consumer constructions of branding in English HE.

Methodology and Analysis

Anecdotal evidence reveals that not all sports students who study sport are interested in sport. Therefore, it was vital to include those voices in addition to the traditional sport students. The sample consisted of first-year student athletes currently playing for a university sport team and with students studying sport, who did not play sport. Data from 56 students was collected in nine focus groups, employing a semi-structured approach. The focus groups were conducted within the first four weeks of the students arriving at university, after this four-week period of transition the university receives the first tuition payment, making it costly to withdraw. Open coding was employed based on an inductive reasoning to identify patterns and categorise the identified themes rather than place the themes into the pre-existing categories. Open coding was followed by axial and then selective coding, to provide an analytical representation. Coder trustworthiness was tested by an independent researcher familiar with the topic to provide feedback on the categories identified and subsequent themes which emerged.

Findings and Contribution

Initial findings demonstrate the most important theme to emerge from the results was university sport apparel. This theme was dominant in all focus group (FG) discussions. Quotes such as "you're representing someone aren't you, you want to be part of the team" (FG6) and "it gives you like a group identity" (FG7), highlight that even at this early stage of the purchasing journey some of the students had started aligning themselves with a brand - the university sport brand. However, when asked if they would wear apparel, other participants responded with "I probably wouldn't, no, cause I'm not actually on a team" (FG7). On the one hand, findings demonstrate a group of participants with some awareness and affiliation with the university sport brand, otherwise there would have been no meaningful discussions on apparel. Conversely, there were groups of participants that did not play sport and had no intention of doing so, had not bought into the university sports brand, and had aligned themselves with other sub-brands. University brand meaning is complex, using university sport as a branding tool, this study attempted to address this issue by developing a greater understanding of when a university brand becomes a brand and what is the brand that is co-created by the student-consumer.

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