

A Systematic Literature Review on Key Elements of Branding Through Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Branding is defined as the process of which a company, an organisation a product or a service becomes identical with a set of values, aspirations or states. It promotes ubiquity, visibility, functions and emotional bond with customers. Branding can be communicated using a variety of media. Through Facebook, branding can be communicated across its visual and textual components. This study examines how Facebook components are used to communicate branding among selected universities. Prior to analysing the components, the key elements of branding that were apt needed to be identified. To identify these, a systematic review on academic articles was conducted. This review was adapted from the Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Synthesis (ROSES) protocol. To conduct this review, 256 articles were collected from two databases. Two strategies which were selection and analysis were employed in choosing the most suitable articles and extracting the key elements. Selection was conducted to identify, screen and review all academic articles that were selected from Scopus and Google databases. Once selection was done, analysis was then conducted. This was done to extract key elements of branding that became the unit of analysis in examining the ways of selected universities' Facebook postings were employed in communicating branding.

Keywords: Branding, Facebook, universities, systematic literature review protocol

INTRODUCTION

Branding involves a process of which a company, an organisation, a product or a service becomes alike with a set of values, aspirations or states. Branding campaigns for ubiquity, visibility and functions. It is also an emotional bond that a company, an organisation, a product or a service has with customers. Branding can be communicated through a variety media. With the prominence use of social media in business settings, branding can be communicated through these platforms. In today's stiff competition in all sectors, branding plays a crucial role in marketing or promoting a company, an organisation, a product or a service. Social media, which include online channels for sharing and participating in a variety of activities, represent an increasingly important way for brands to communicate with attractive audience segments (Lund, 2019).

Branding is vital for organisations, may them be government, non-government or business organisations. Branding will strategically place organisations among stakeholders or users. Besides,

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strategic placement of branding will put organisations ahead of their competitors. Like any other organisations, universities need to position their branding strategically so that they can cope with the stiff competition for students and staff. To stay ahead of its competitor, a university must find innovative ways to market itself and to promote its brand among its potential students and employees. Facebook is considered as an effective marketing tool. It has millions of users globally and organisations of all types can create accounts and profiles to reach the market segment that they want and place their brands effectively (Al Ghamdi, *et al.*, 2014). Facebook with its visual and textual components can provide organisations with the positioning of branding that they want.

Before analysing how the visual and textual components of Facebook can be used in effectively communicating branding, the key elements of branding that are suitable to the population of this study which is universities need to be identified first. In doing this, the researcher has employed a method adapted from the Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Synthesis (ROSES) protocol. ROSES was initially used as a systematic review method for the environmental management field (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). It aims to guide researchers to report information with an appropriate level of details. This protocol is applicable to be customised across other fields with similar levels of complexity of topics and methods (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). Thus, this review protocol is appropriate to be adapted in this study.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Social Media Marketing and Institution of Higher Education

A growing number of research have continued to document the significant ways social media platforms have impacted on businesses and other institutions. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook have become the most preferred medium to attract followers online and therefore acts as an efficient vehicle to bolster the relationship between clients and institutions (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeftang, 2012). In fact, a study by Voorveld *et al.* (2018) has shown that different social media platforms provide a unique form of engagement experience for clients and that social media engagement is highly context specific. More recently, social media networks have become an important part of universities marketing and promotion tool. Previous studies (e.g., Merrill, 2011; Jan, & Ammari, 2016; Hossain, & Sakib, 2016; Nazeer, 2017) have shown how universities have turned to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to promote their branding and programmes. This trend can be observed in both private as well as public universities. Additionally, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, online marketing effort to attract and eventually recruit new students continue to be the most important tool for institute of higher education to get hold of their new students from across the globe.

Facebook and Branding in Higher Education

Social media like Facebook has gained more importance in recent years to disseminate information on

organizations and to communicate and connect with the external public. Social media also creates communities, offers immediate feedback or assistance, and promotes organizations, products, and services. It is also quickly becoming an essential part of customer outreach for brands. Previous studies have shown that many local (e.g., Jan, & Ammari, 2016) and international universities (e.g., Vrontis *et al.*, 2018) have started to include Facebook in their channels of communication to promote their brand. An example of these universities is Harvard University, the birthplace of Facebook. This university is using Facebook as a part of its strategy to establish interaction and connection with potential students and simultaneously, strengthen its brand among them. In the local scene, both public and private universities are also using Facebook to promote their universities to potential students and reinforce their brand.

Well *et al.* (2007) state that branding is an expression of essential truth or value of an organization, product, or service. It is a communication of characteristics, values, and attributes that clarify what or who a brand is. Hence, it can be generally said that branding tells what a business entity, an organisation or a university means. This can be reflected through the activities and the people involved in that business entity, organization or university.

The dwindling financial support from governments and the prospect of declining recruitment have caused immense pressure on Institutions of Higher Learning. Branding as a strategy has become more popular as a way of differentiating an institution from its competition, but the complexity of higher education makes branding an even more difficult task than in traditional, commercial contexts. The study by Dholakia and Acciardo (2014) have shown how universities need to define its brand position through creative implementations that will be appreciated by the diverse stakeholders, recommending that for a successful branding campaign, the branding activity must consider several key factors such as the receptiveness of the followers to the communicated messages.

Additionally, current economic pressures and the COVID-19 pandemic have driven higher education institutions to respond with even stronger, authentic brand promises. Pringle & Fritz (2019) examined three Canadian Universities through Twitter and Facebook postings from February to April 2016. The study explored authenticity issues of similar brand promises and findings suggest that social media strategies used by universities are neglecting opportunities to consolidate their brand and neutralize negative messaging by focusing on efforts to create genuine engagement and content that would strengthen investments. Instead, strategies used by universities are generally limited to push notification.

In recent years, Facebook has developed into large hyper-textual complexes, rich in written and visual materials in which make it a rich data source. So, in this study, Facebook can provide ample information on communicating branding through the visual and textual analysis.

Key Elements of Branding

It is interesting to note that there are several key elements of branding given by scholars and industrial players. An industrial player who is a renowned advertising and marketing guru, Ogilvy mentions that key elements of branding include attributes like name, packaging and price, history, reputation, and the way it is advertised (Miller, 2014). A scholar, Aaker (2012) describes key element of branding as having brand equity which creates values for an organization or a company. He

further describes brand equity as a set of assets that is linked to a brand's name and adds values of a product, or a service provided by a company or an organization. According to Miller (2014), one of the essential key elements of branding is product attributes which can be categorized into tangible and intangible elements, and they are generated based on stakeholders' experiences in doing business with a company or an organization.

When it comes to marketing or advertising, key elements of branding consist of creating a special meaning for a product which makes it distinctive in the market and its category. This special meaning is created or formed from customers' communication and experience with the product (Wells *et al.*, 2015). The communication that takes place and the process of gaining experience provide values or essential truths to the customers about organizations, business entities, services, or products. In other words, these key elements transform these into something that carry certain qualities or essential truths. For example, Harley Davidson carried an "outlaw" image from its early association as the motorcycle of choice for Hell's Angels in the USA. However, with global marketing of Harley Davidson's superbikes and motorcycles and due to worldwide riders, who come from different social and professional background, now the meaning has been shaded into a "slightly less dangerous" kind of image. Another example would be receiving a gift in a Tiffany box and receiving one in an ordinary plastic bag. There is a big difference; the Tiffany box and logo indicates an expensive, high-quality, and high-status product meanwhile the ordinary plastic bag is usually associated with a cheaper product and of more inferior quality. It is like a scenario where you are going for a job interview in Malaysia, and you are a graduate from Harvard University and your competitor is from an unknown university in a remote part of Asia; you will almost secure the job while your competitor may have to apply for another job because you are a Harvard graduate. In this context, being a Harvard graduate means that you are perceived as of having better quality and more competent in doing your job tasks.

Value is also another key element of branding, the study by Pringle & Fritz (2019) have shown that although brand promises on social media platforms are generally considered trustworthy, these messages remained shadowed by negativity with brand promises sometimes used against the university. This is true of promises that may be perceived as insincere or which threatened institutional values, particularly in relation to social equality and justice.

Hence, it can be said that branding makes a company or an organization worth or otherwise. All in all, these key elements were carefully deliberated and selected so that these key elements are employed in doing the analysis of the visual and textual components of Facebook postings of the selected universities.

METHODOLOGY

To identify the suitable key elements of branding which is also the first research question of this study, a systematic review on academic articles was conducted. This systematic review protocol is adapted from the Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Synthesis (ROSES). ROSES was

initially used as a systematic review method for the environmental management field (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). ROSES aims to guide researchers to report information with an appropriate level of details. Gusenbauer and Haddaway stated that ROSES is applicable to be customised across other fields with similar levels of complexity of topics and methods. Thus, this review protocol is appropriate to be adapted in this study as there is no further specific requirement needed when applying it.

In conducting this review procedure, two strategies were employed. They were selection and analysis. The first strategy is selection and is illustrated in Table 1.

Selection

Table 1 Selection

Stage	Action
Identifying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articles in database searched using key words and relevant synonyms • A total of 256 articles were collected • 33 duplicate articles were extracted
Screening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 223 articles were screened based on their abstracts. • Out of 223 articles, 165 articles were retained
Reviewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 165 full-text articles were scanned using SCImago to ensure all articles were published in indexed journals • 65 articles were selected & reviewed by two experts in branding • They ranked the articles into three categories: high, moderate, and low. • Only 44 in moderate and high categories were selected for the next strategy

Based on Table 1, there are three stages involved in selection. These are identifying, screening, and reviewing. In identifying academic articles, searches were conducted on two databases, Scopus, and Google Scholar. These two databases were selected as they are comparable to the Web of Science database in which they were also created primarily citation and bibliographic search. In addition, these two databases are comprehensive and provided substantial information to conduct the selected protocol review including the number of records and lists of indexed journals.

The key words determined for this search were *branding, elements of branding, universities, and branding, branding entities in education, branding elements in education, branding strategies in education*. In the search string, all possible synonyms were also searched for. These were *brand, brand, characteristics of brand, attributes of brand, higher institutes of leaning and brand, brand positioning in*

education, higher education and brand, brand positioning and colleges. All in all, a total of 256 articles were collected from two databases, Scopus and. Out of this, 33 duplicate articles were extracted. The remain articles were ready to be processed in the second stage which was screening. In this stage, the collected articles were screened via their abstracts to exclude the ones which were written in other languages than English, published before the year 2015, not related to the study such as the two articles written on branding attributes of elementary schools and also published in non-indexed journal or conference articles. Out of these 223 articles, 165 articles were retained for the next stage which was reviewing. In reviewing, 165 full-text articles were scanned using SCImago, a portal that is used to rank journals which provided indicators to measure the scientific influence of scholarly journals. This step was conducted to ensure that all articles were published in indexed journals. The number of articles selected after they were scanned was 65.

These 65 articles were then reviewed by two independent experts in branding, one was an academician, and another was from the industry. These experts ranked the articles into three categories which were high, moderate and low. According to Rodgers *et al.*, (2009) only high and moderate ranked articles should be reviewed to ensure the quality of analysis and discussion on outcomes. These categorisations or rankings enabled the researcher to have a set of articles that were reliable and valid to be reviewed for this study. In this process, 21 academic articles in the low category were excluded. The final number of academic articles that were retained was 44 and these were in the moderate and high categories. Based on these two categories, the elements of branding that were found in the articles were then deliberated and this brought the researcher to the next strategy which was analysis. Table 2 depicts the examples of articles that have been selected finally and themes derived from these articles.

Table 2 Examples of final selected articles and derived themes

Author	Area of study	Key elements of branding	Definition	Theme derived
Akerberg, H. (2019)	Marketing	Brand promise	Commitment made by an organisation, an institute, or a name in delivering the best to the clients/customers through its mission and vision statements	Promise This theme is crucial in communicating branding because it entails what a university has to offer and what makes it different from another university.
Dollinger <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Higher Education & Branding	Employer Promise	The contract that is made between an employer and employees in ensuring that the best is being delivered and achieved.	
Kumar, A. & Anand, G. (2019)	Marketing & Academic	Brand Identity	Tangible elements such as name, corporate colour, logo, mascot,	Identity

Author	Area of study	Key elements of branding	Definition	Theme derived
	Management		etc that gives an organisation or an institute a sense of uniqueness.	This theme provides a sense of who and what an organisation does, it differentiates one name from another.
Sharma, E. (2019)	Digital Marketing	Identity in Branding	Identity is associated with a name, the type of service or product offered, and it gives a business a sense of who or what it is.	
Lomer, S.; Papatsiba, V. & Naidoo, R. (2018)	Higher education & University Branding	Brand experience	What stakeholders experience in dealing with a university, and the experience can be either positive or negative.	Experience This theme is important because how a person feels toward a university can determine the level of loyalty, respect and belonging the person has toward the university.
Lockwood, R.C. & Hadd, J. (2017)	Education Management	Stakeholders' experience	The feelings that stakeholders feel in communicating with education provider	Experience This theme is important because how a person feels toward a university can determine the level of loyalty, respect and belonging the person has toward the university.
Knox, S, & Bickerton, D (2016)	Corporate Communication	Brand Experience	The sum of all the sensations, thoughts, feelings, and reactions that individuals have in response to a brand	
Chapleoa, <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Branding & Universities	Co-Value creation	What universities believe in terms of qualities and characteristics that influence them, as well as how they are perceived by stakeholders through these qualities and characteristics.	Values This theme refers to the intangible elements that influence universities' actions, behaviours and decision- making processes that affect stakeholders' views or opinions on them.
Whisman, R. (2015)	Branding & University	Internal Branding	Universities need to engage themselves with the audience or stakeholders by getting involved in "conversations" with them, they need to communicate the values or beliefs to the audience or	Values This theme refers to the intangible elements that influence universities' actions, behaviours and decision- making processes that affect stakeholders' views or opinions on them.

Author	Area of study	Key elements of branding	Definition	Theme derived
			stakeholders so that they can sustain their brand longer among these two groups.	
Spry, <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Branding and universities	Developing a model for universities that focuses on sub-cultures and specialism that enhance brand strategies	Sub-cultures of universities are important to be highlighted so that stakeholders see universities as “providers of knowledge” rather than corporate bodies. These sub-cultures can be values, norms or practices that universities have or embrace.	

Analysis

In this strategy, all 44 academic articles were read and analysed. Particular attention was given to the objectives, results and discussions of these articles. Careful reading of these articles was carried out to extract data on key elements of branding that were suitable within the context of this study and was eventually able to answer the first RQ addressed by this study. The data was recorded and placed in a meta table. Next, themes that were derived from the data placed in the meta table were identified. The identification of themes involved observing patterns, clustering words, counting repeated terms, and noting similarities, differences and relationships within the data (Yin, 2017). Throughout the development of themes, codes under each theme were discussed among the researcher and the two experts to detect any inconsistencies. Possible and potential concepts associated with the research topic and other relevant fields such as marketing, integrated marketing communication and social media and marketing were also discussed.

After the development of the themes, the similarities and differences of each themes were examined. Codes and terminologies under each theme were analysed, and any associations with the fundamental theories were synthesised. The themes were then aligned, and the use of its codes or information was examined. Finally, the themes’ definitions and explanations and their alignment within the context of this study were confirmed through a mutual agreement between the researcher and the experts. The themes together with their definitions and explanations were ready to be used. They are the key elements that are employed in analysing the components of Facebook postings in communicating branding effectively among the universities studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis conducted, four key elements were derived and formed the units of analysis and were later applied in this study. These were Identity, Promise, Values and Experience. All these four elements will be used in examining how the Facebook postings of the selected universities communicate branding. Table 3 presents the key elements and their descriptions.

Table 3 Themes Derived

Theme	Description
Identity	Tangible elements like name, colour, motto, logo, mascot, tagline, or other associated visuals that convey the distinctiveness of studied universities.
Promise	The commitment to deliver made between a university and its stakeholders.
Values	The intangible elements such standards, organisational cultures, principles, beliefs, unique selling propositions which shape universities' actions, behaviours, and decision- making processes.
Experience	The feelings that are felt by stakeholders and non-stakeholders in dealing with a university.

Identity

Akerberg (2019) states that identity is an important feature in presenting a business or an organisation to a mass audience. It presents a business or an organisation with a sense of who or what they are. Identity is the way people recognise a name or a brand that immediately tells them about a certain organisation that manufactures certain products or provides certain services. Identity is conveyed through tangible elements like logos, corporate colours, taglines, mascots or other forms of visuals. According to Bahtiar (2009), logo is a graphic representation of a product or an organization. For example, in the local context of banking and finance, the Malayan Banking Berhad or Maybank has always been identified with its logo – the head of a tiger. This logo gives the idea that the bank has the steadiness and strength of a tiger to survive in a demanding economy (Bahtiar, 2009). We immediately identify Maybank when we see the logo. Colours, on the other hand, gives a company or an organization the attraction that it needs to make it more appealing among its competitors.

Usually, people are more attracted to colors than the logo (Argenti, 2013). Apart from colours, the name of a company or an organization is an essential element in giving the company or the organization an individuality quality. For example, when we say the names like “Oxford, Harvard, Cambridge” we quickly associate these names with universities. In short, in the context of this study, an identity defines who or what a university is through the use of visible elements like logos, corporate colours, taglines, mascots or other forms of visuals.

Promise

Promise is crucial in differentiating one university from its competitors and it is an element that help improve its image and reputation among stakeholders. In the context of this study, a promise is the commitment made by a university to its stakeholders or potential students. This commitment can be reflected in their vision and mission statements or through their belief systems that guide them in achieving the best for their stakeholders. From the perspective of potential students and stakeholders, promise is the expectation in interacting with a university. The more universities can deliver their promises, the stronger their name can be in the mind of potential students and stakeholders. In a broader sense, this key element establishes a familiar image and expectation level based on familiarity, consistency and predictability (Fitzgibbons, 2018). For example, if we walk into a McDonald’s restaurant, we know what to expect; we can have fast food at a reasonable price, and have great time with families and friends because that is what McDonald’s has promised us.

Values

Values are intangible elements that universities stand for. They serve as the compass that guides universities in their actions, behaviours and decision making process. Values can be the norms, beliefs, and practices that provide universities with the direction in achieving their missions and visions and making the right decisions. They would assist universities in maximising the capacity of individuals to think for themselves and make meaningful, creative contributions to their own lives as well as to the lives of other people. Values also enable universities to contribute the necessary skills, expertise and knowledge to society. From the perspective of stakeholders, values are important because they influence how they view universities and they would continuously support universities that share the same values with them. Several studies conducted have proven that shared values have significant impact on stakeholders’ engagement (Winter, 2021). In this study, each selected university has a set of values that are incorporated and reflected in their academic programmes, staff, students and research activities and these will be studied through the visual and textual components of Facebook postings of these universities.

Experience

This unit of analysis refers to the feelings that are felt by stakeholders and non-stakeholders in dealing with a university. Through a combination of various modes universities use to communicate

with stakeholders, they attempt to create general atmosphere of goodwill, trust and loyalty in creating the bond between them and their stakeholders. Experience is about creating a sensory stakeholders' experience in making the interactions that they have with universities memorable (Fitzgibbons, 2018). When stakeholders have good experiences in dealing with universities or in matters related to them, loyalty and continuous support given to universities can be gained and maintained. Many of these experiences are captured in Facebook postings, thus they can be investigated in order to know how branding can be effectively communicated through the social media.

CONCLUSION

All in all, in order to identify the key elements of branding that are suitable within the context of this study, a systematic review on academic articles was conducted. In this systematic review protocol, two strategies were employed. They were selection and analysis. Selection involved the process of identifying, selecting, and reviewing articles while analysis involved the extraction of themes or units of analysis based on the reviewed articles. This systematic procedure is important so that the elements of branding derived are compelling and trustworthy to be used in analysing the visual and textual components of Facebook postings of selected universities in communicating branding. In addition to this, the four elements of branding derived from this systematic review may also be applicable for other research examining branding elements on other social media contexts such as in Instagram and Tweeter.

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