

IMPACT OF BRAND KNOWLEDGE ON BRAND TRUST IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: HOW DO WORD OF MOUTH SOURCES INTERVENE?

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Abstract

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia are facing intensive competition that poses considerable challenges for them, especially the upcoming private universities. Many are struggling to maintain their presence or locate their positions in the market. Past studies suggest that this issue could be dealt with by increasing the enrolment of students. This is highly possible by the dissemination of positive word-of-mouth (WOM) sources that greatly enhance students' existing knowledge of a particular PHEI and the resulting trust. This study examines the moderation impact of WOM influences on the relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust of PHEIs. Person-administered survey was carried out among 230 randomly selected students of PHEIs in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Good Cronbach Alpha scores obtained and a stringent validity procedure adopted have demonstrated accuracy of the instrument used in this study. This study discovered that the inclusion of influences from WOM sources has significantly heightened the impact of brand knowledge towards brand trust of PHEIs. PHEIs are recommended to capitalize on the potential of effective branding and the management of WOM sources in order to improve student enrolment.

Keywords: brand knowledge, brand trust, word of mouth sources, private higher education institutions

Intersection of Brand Knowledge, Brand Trust and Role of WOM in PHEIs

The competition in Malaysia's higher education sector is very intense particularly among private operators due to the market saturation caused by the operation of about 500 private higher education institutions (PHEIs) where 52 of them are private universities, 34 are private college universities, 10 are foreign university branch campuses and about 400 are colleges (Therin, 2012; Lek, 2010; <http://www.mohe.gov.my>). Both private colleges and universities of PHEIs are included in the statistics presented in this research. In spite of their market saturation, the statistics indicate that PHEIs have failed to rule the Malaysia's higher education sector. In 2010,

the enrolment of students in Malaysia's higher education institution was 1.13 million comprising both foreign and local students. Of this figure of enrolment, only 48% was in PHEIs ("Malaysia's education sector well poised for further growth", 2011). The modest enrolment portrays the weaknesses of PHEIs in recruiting new students and a new challenge for PHEIs in ensuring their sustainability in the marketplace.

The widespread dominance of the Internet has greatly made more complex on students' decision-making processes in selecting a suitable institution for them to pursue their studies (Rieh, Young & Hilligoss, 2008). The Internet permits students to do wide-ranging online comparisons of all the options available in the marketplace, particularly in terms of choices of academic programs offered, tuition fees and accreditation of the programs within a short time duration. This certainly creates well-informed target customers of PHEIs who usually anticipate good value for the tuition paid to the PHEIs. Meeting such anticipation has been a great challenge for many of the PHEIs which are quite frequently brought to the limelight due to their sub-standard performance (Blessinger & Sengupta, 2012; Gooch, 2011; Hon, 2007).

It is a prevailing scenario in the higher education sector where branding of PHEIs provide the key stakeholders with a much easier way to identify and distinguish them from the other competing institutions (Lambo, 2011; Waerass & Solbakk, 2009). Subsequently, preservation of brand name has become a vital yet challenging task for the PHEIs. Preservation of the brand name is very important not only to appeal to the local students but also to foreign students in whom the aspirations of Malaysia's Government greatly rely on.

Preservation of the brand name is highly plausible through the effective formation of brand knowledge. Chandon (2003) stated that knowledge formed about the brand among the customers would be able to affect their emotional connection with the firm and its offerings; in addition, such knowledge also enables customers to assess a particular brand. Brand image and brand awareness are the two key components utilized in forming brand knowledge (Chandon, 2003). Past studies found a significant association between brand awareness and brand image where high levels of brand awareness would result in more positive images of the brand itself (Esch et al. 2006; Pappu et al, 2005). These interdependent components of brand knowledge are found to strongly affect consumers' memories and their subsequent purchase decision (Hsu & Cai, 2009).

A strong brand is essentially a mark of trust which is usually appreciated by consumers as it denotes high product quality, arouses consumers' perceived security and enhances their confidence that the brand will deliver as promised (Aaker, 1996). It is also found that improvement in brand trust would create a path for long-term relationships between customers and firms besides inducing the consumer's purchase intention (Mahmoudzadeh et al. 2013; Bouhlel et al. 2011). Any weaknesses in enhancing and preserving the brand trust of the institution would certainly produce adverse effects towards the success of the firm (Kabadayi & Kocak Alan, 2012; Shah Alam & Mohd Yasin, 2010). Similarly, PHEIs with poor brand trust would certainly struggle to secure a sizeable market share in the competitive higher education sector as students would usually avoid institution with poor performance as they believe it would not able to deliver its promises.

In the Malaysian context, many students would rather wait for the second or third attempt to enrol in public universities which used to be associated with superior quality instead of hurriedly enrolling into PHEIs (Md Salleh, 2007). This issue is not unique only to Malaysia but rather worldwide; according to a high ranking of official from one of the premier universities in Europe, "Universities for a very long time have been based on trust and the entire higher education system operates on trust, and the public has been finding more and more reasons to be mistrustful" (Lewis, 2014, pp.1). Such skeptical behavior towards PHEIs can be effectively curbed through dissemination of positive word-of-mouth (WOM) by trustworthy sources.

This is in line with a typical pattern of consumer behavior which claims that consumers not only seek information given by the firms but also from their close social circles or sometimes even from other consumers (Peter & Olson, 2002). Therefore, WOM is considered as a vital component in influencing student's decision on the selection of PHEI (Yahya et al. 2014; Jalilvand et al. 2012; Burmaster, 2008). Prospective students have greater trust in the information obtained through WOM than information from the institution's paid communications as their decision on the enrolment is very costly and significant for their future growth (Roberts, 2009; Burmaster, 2008). Therefore, WOM with constant communications of positive information would greatly enhance the student's confidence (Ju-Pak & Lee, 2009; Newman, 2003) and hence trust towards the brand of PHEIs (Yahya et al. 2014; Andreassen & Streukens, 2009).

Impact of WOM on the Relationship between Brand Knowledge and Brand Trust

Students look at the brand trust of PHEI from the quality of education provided by the brand and WOM image created about it (Beneker, 2011). It is proven that if PHEIs want to build their brand, they must closely observe their marketing activities and understand the target market (Chauhan and Pillai, 2013). Hsu and Cai (2009) had acknowledged that the importance of awareness and the image of brand are strongly correlated with the respective consumers' memories that had been taken into count. This is further strengthened by the studies of Aaker (1991) and Davis et al (2008) which showcased that brand awareness and brand image are used often to build stable foundations of substantial outlays in distribution of goods and services, promotions and advertising campaigns. Besides that, brand awareness and brand image were discovered to have significant associations with one another (Atilgan et al, 2005; Pappu, 2005). They both proposed that when the level of brand awareness is higher, the positive image of the brand itself would grow better and hence increase the brand trust (Esch et al, 2006).

Past researchers (Money, Gilly & Graham, 1998) found that WOM plays a vital role in enhancing the reliability and integrity of the particular institution. WOM increases the positive image and enhances awareness of the brand, thus there will be an improvement in the trust of consumers towards the brand. Also, Ye et al. (2011) discussed the moderating effect of WOM on relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust, whereby if negative WOM is spread among the students then it damages brand loyalty to a very large extent. Correspondingly, Li and Du (2011) noted that when people are loyal to the brand then they want to hear positive views from other people regarding that brand. If this does not happen then ultimately their trust on the brand starts shaking. In line with this idea, Berger and Schwartz (2011) noted that competitors of an organization usually spread negative WOM for that other organization so as to attract their clientele base. Such act is usually considered as a competitive move or competitive strategy. In order to cope up with such scenarios, defensive actions must be taken by the organization for the purpose of saving its brand image. Joseph et al (2012) implied the idea on higher educational institutions by stating that negative WOM decreases their market worth. It harms them from two dimensions. First by reducing the number of students enrolled within the institution every year and second by rendering the institution falls below in the preference list of management of large organizations. Accordingly, Figure 1 illustrates the interconnection of brand knowledge, brand trust and WOM sources.

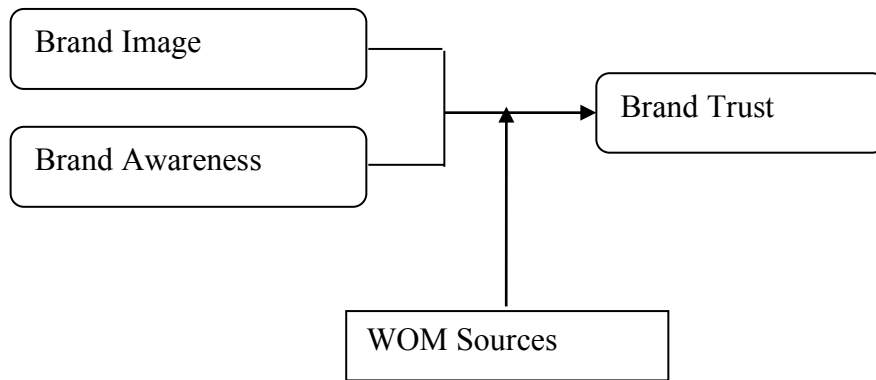


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

An extensive review on the existing literature indicates that there is a visible gap in terms of deficiency of research investigating the moderating impact of WOM on the relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust of PHEIs. Accordingly, this study intended to investigate the possible moderating influence of WOM on the relationship between students' brand knowledge of the PHEIs and the resulting brand trust.

Brand image and brand awareness of students of a particular PHEI would affect the level of brand trust built towards the PHEI. It is also proposed that the impact of the key components of brand knowledge (i.e. brand image and brand awareness) on brand trust greatly relies on the types of WOM sources used to disseminate the information pertaining to the PHEI. While the traditional WOM sources comprise of family members, friends, schoolteachers and academic advisor, technological WOM sources comprise of college website and social media. These WOM sources are measured based on their perceived credibility, relative influence and usage frequency.

Method

This study employs a quantitative approach where a survey was carried out to obtain structured responses from students of PHEIs located in Klang Valley, Malaysia. This study has solely focused on Klang Valley, Malaysia due to its popularity in housing more than 250 PHEIs (MOHE, 2012). It should be noted this number of PHEIs actually represent more than 50% of all PHEIs in Malaysia. Hence, an investigation carried within this vicinity would be very representative and inclusive.

Simple random sampling method was used to manually distribute 230 questionnaires to students studying at PHEI in Klang Valley Selangor. Researcher used questionnaire to collect data in order to tabulate demographic table of their gender, ethnicity, highest education qualification, their methods to spread information regarding their decision to enrol at the particular universities.

The universities covered for questionnaire survey are Sunway University, Taylor's University (Taylor's Lakeside), Monash University Malaysia, SEGi College Kuala Lumpur, SEGi

University, Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, INTI International College Subang, KDU University College, and HELP University.

Students of PHEIs were randomly approached at casual places i.e. cafe, shopping complexes, parks, and bus stand near their institutions. This was in order to ensure that the survey could be carried without interrupting both management and students' routine. Only students with candidature of at least six months with his/ her present institution were included in this survey. Such filtration is necessary to ensure that the student respondents were aware and familiar with the topics investigated. Besides, the sample size for this study was 200 elements (students) considering there are 4 key research variables in this study i.e. brand image, brand awareness, WOM sources and brand trust. This research used existing scale adapted from research of Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991) who used 5-point type of Likert-scale to research on moderating effect of WOM on relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust. The typology of Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991) also stated that 50 respondents per research variable would be ideal. The scales were not modified as 5-point type of Likert scale is ideal.

Pilot Test

In the first phase of the study, pilot study was conducted to ensure the research instrument built has appropriate content validity. In order to further enhance the intended validity of questionnaire, a rule of thumb proposed by Peat et al. (2002) IN Teijlingen and Hundley (2002) was incorporated in carrying out this preliminary investigation. The pilot study is a pre-actual fieldwork for the recruited respondents. It is important to reduce the possible unsuccessful responses which are inappropriate for further processing of the participation (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

The pilot study of this strand was conducted among 30 students in Petaling Jaya, the central education hub in Klang Valley. These students were randomly approached and had willingly agreed to participate in the survey. Respondents were filtered out based on their candidature with the present institution which are similar to actual the fieldwork. Respondents were given time to view the questionnaires before completing the survey forms. They were required to explain the questions and voice out their opinions which is a method known as debriefing (Malhotra, 2010).

Accordingly, vague and overlying questions were discovered and revised based on the feedbacks of respondents. Most of the questions in the questionnaire were essentially remarked as relevant to the current investigation. Besides, this preliminary investigation was also advantageous in refining the usage of language, plainness of the technical terms utilized, as well as the flow of questions.

Responses and Demographic Analysis

In order to maximize the response rate, an additional of 30 questionnaires were distributed among the target respondents. The additional of 30 questionnaires was rather a smaller volume in order to capitalize on the nature of person-administered data collection method used, this method usually yields higher response rate (Stausberg and Engler, 2013). Nevertheless, thorough checking respondents' feedbacks from filled up columns of the collected 230 questionnaires, there were 21 incomplete questionnaires and 35 questionnaires with obvious ambiguous and/or

inconsistent pattern of responses. Therefore, 56 questionnaires were discarded and the remaining 174 were used for the further analysis.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Descriptors	Frequency	%=100
Gender		
Male	64	36.8
Female	110	63.2
Ethnicity		
Malay	15	8.6
Chinese	98	56.3
Indian	55	31.6
Others	6	3.4
Education Level		
Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/ O-level	12	6.9
Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia	64	36.8
A-Level	7	4
Pre-university programme/ Matriculation	3	1.7
Foundation courses	53	30.5
Diploma	19	10.9
Others	16	9.2

Table 2: Preliminary Responses of Respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	%=100
Dissemination of information on the PHEI has influenced his/her decision to study at current PHEI		
Yes	79	45.4
No/ Not applicable	95	54.6
Information spread through the following sources has influenced his/her decision to study at current PHEI		
Family members	48	60.8
Friends	62	78.5
Schoolteachers	12	15.2
Academic advisor	3	3.8

College website	22	27.8
Social media	32	41.8
His/ her willingness to disseminate information about current PHEI to others		
Yes	65	37.4
No/not sure/ not applicable	109	62.6

Table 1 analysed that the majority of respondents were females, Chinese and with *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Higher School Certificate) as the current highest education qualification prior to entering university. Table 2 showed that only 45.4% of respondents acknowledged that their enrolment decision was influenced by word-of-mouth information spread by others while 62.6% of respondents denied the possibility of spreading information about their PHEI to others. It is also noteworthy to learn that respondents' enrolment decisions resultant from word-of-mouth and intention to spread information to others were not due to their demographic (i.e. ethnicity, education level and gender) influences. Social media was found to be the most typical WOM source in affecting students' study decision. Meanwhile, role of schoolteachers varied with students' different social economic background.

Measurement of Accuracy

Principal Component Factor Analysis technique was used to assess the construct validity of the instrument used. Factor analyses were performed on the measures of Brand Knowledge, Brand Trust and WOM Sources. Briefly, items with more that 0.5 factor loading value only were considered for further analysis. The purpose is to ensure its soundness (Seyal & Rahim, 2006; Green & Salkind, 2003).

(i) Factor Analysis - Brand Knowledge

Table 3 showed that out of 12 items of Brand Knowledge, only two items named "My current PHEI will come to my mind first when I think about further studies" and "My current PHEI is a unique study destination for students to enjoy distinguished experiences" were withdrawn due to weak loading value and the remaining 10 items were categorized into two factors and named as (i) Factor 1: Brand Image; and (ii) Factor 2: Brand Superiority. Percentage of variance indicates that Brand Image (51.9%) is the most important dimension of Brand Knowledge as compared to Brand Superiority (8.81%). Both factors consist of 5 items each where the range of factor loading value is 0.539 - 0.736 and 0.564 - 0.714, respectively. Brand Image factor essentially centers on the items related the identification of and experience with the brand of current PHEI. Meanwhile, Brand Superiority factor has revolved around the distinguishing nature of the current PHEI's overall aspect. Therefore, the original components of brand knowledge namely brand image and brand awareness have been restructured as brand image and brand superiority respectively. This new classification will be used in the further analysis.

Table 3: Factor Analysis - Brand Knowledge

Descriptors	Factor 1	Factor 2
Brand Image		
Easily recognize current PHEI	0.736	
Understand brand of current PHEI	0.692	
Recognize PHEI because of its symbols	0.630	
Familiar with current PHEI	0.543	
Associate current PHEI as a great study destination	0.539	
Superiority		
Distinguish the advantages to study at current PHEI		0.714
My confidence on PHEI reduce perceived risks		0.760
Brand image of current PHEI is superior to others		0.623
Current PHEI has impressed me		0.621
Aware all the programs and services offered by current PHEI		0.564
Eigen Value	8.032	1.068
Percentage (%) of Variance	51.90	8.81

(ii) Factor Analysis - Brand Trust

Table 4 illustrates output of factor analysis conducted on the measure of Brand Trust. As all the 10 items had greater factor loading value (more than 0.5), all were retained for further analysis as it implies the soundness of the items measured. Briefly, all these 10 items were categorized into three factors and retained their original label as the following: (i) Factor 1 – Credibility; (ii) Factor 2 – Integrity; (iii) Factor 3 – Benevolence. The basis of assigning these items to the different categories is based on clustering of items presented by scale validity (item-whole correlations) and reliability values to indicate the credibility of the measures used.

Table 4: Factor Analysis - Brand Trust

Descriptors	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Credibility			
Current PHEI assesses and meets students' expectation	0.875		
Current PHEI enhances my expectation	0.852		
Current PHEI acts in a way as promised	0.736		
Well trained admin staff	0.714		
Integrity			

I perceive current PHEI offers programs at a reasonable fee		0.892	
I am loyal to current PHEI as it constantly deliver its promises		0.763	
I believe current PHEI has sufficient knowledge on current trend		0.653	
Benevolence			
Consistent information about PHEI			0.710
Well trained academic staff			0.660
Trustworthy academic programs			0.597
Eigen Value	5.268	1.315	1.139
Percentage (%) of Variance	47.88	11.95	10.33

(iii) Factor Analysis - WOM sources

Table 5 showed that factor analysis conducted on the WOM sources had withdrawn 4 items due to the factor loading value (lower than 0.5) and restructured the remaining 16 items into six factors. Such categorization is similar to the original context as in the construction of research variables of this study. The four withdrawn items are "I believe the information shared by my schoolteachers on the selection of PHEI", "Information displayed on the website of PHEI does not affect my decision to study at current PHEI ", "I consider personal experiences shared in social media e.g. Facebook and Twitter about PHEIs are reliable " and "Opinion of my friends on PHEI is considered reliable as they have adequate knowledge on the PHEIs in Malaysia ".

Table 5: Factor Analysis - WOM Sources

Descriptors	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Schoolteachers (ST)						
Frequently referred to ST before enrolling at current PHEI	0.899					
ST greatly influenced decision to study at current PHEI	0.895					
Social media (SM)						
Frequently referred to SM before enrolling at current PHEI		0.841				
Positive experiences shared over SM greatly influenced decision to study at current PHEI		0.591				

Academic Advisor (AA)						
Trust information provided by AA						
Believe information given by AA would be bias to the particular PHEI						0.871
Persuasion by AA does influence selection of current PHEI.						0.832
Frequently referred to AA during pre-enrollment stage at current PHEI						0.813
						0.575
Friends						
Friends greatly influenced decision to study at current PHEI						0.804
My friends always share information about current PHEI						0.752
Website						
PHEI provides vital information on its website						0.808
PHEI places visitor's comments on its website						0.739
Referred to website during initial stage of PHEI selection						0.674
Family Members (FM)						
FM have frequently provided information about my current PHEI						0.831
My decision is greatly influenced by opinions and advices by my FM						0.758
Information spread by FM reduced perceived risks						0.685
Eigen Value	5.326	2.262	1.729	1.447	1.348	1.175
Percentage (%) of Variance	26.631	11.308	10.645	8.234	7.741	6.021

On one hand, the findings resulted from these factor analyses are considerably used to facilitate the remaining data analysis and discussions. On the other hand, it has also validated the constructs used in this quantitative strand of this study. It is justified with the withdrawal of items which low factor loading value (below than 0.5) from the further analysis, sameness of the items to the factors generated and consistency of the factors generated with the original construction of research variables of this study.

Table 6 analysed the Mean and Std. Deviation value between all variables used in the study. The computation of Mean and STD value is based on the factors generated from factor analysis (Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5). This is to recognize the key dimension of each variable. As shown in Table 6, Brand Image is the greater dimension of Brand Knowledge than Brand Superiority due to is higher Mean value. Meanwhile, Integrity is discovered to be the greatest dimension of

Brand Trust, followed by Credibility and Benevolence. On the other hand, of six WOM sources, College Website is found to be the greatest WOM source followed by Family Members, Academic Advisor, Social Media, Friends and Schoolteacher.

Table 6: Computation of Mean and STD Value

Descriptors	Mean	STD
Brand Image	3.5793	0.5844
Brand Superiority	3.4494	0.5233
Brand Knowledge	3.5144	0.5207
Credibility	3.3549	0.6677
Integrity	3.5086	0.6778
Benevolence	3.3544	0.7381
Brand Trust	3.4060	0.6039
Family Members	3.3879	0.6606
Friends	3.0029	0.8457
Schoolteachers	2.6724	1.0557
Academic Advisor	3.3471	0.6648
College Website	3.5077	0.7093
Social Media	3.3247	0.9056
WOM Source	3.2071	0.5017

It is also worth to note that the responses towards these dimensions are somewhat scattered and departed from the average responses. This could be seen from the quite huge standard deviation value with the range of 0.5233 to 1.0557. In addition, except for the disagreement with the influence of "Schoolteachers" source, generally respondents had unbiased (neutral) and/ or agreed with the importance of the remaining WOM sources, dimensions of Brand Trust and Brand Knowledge.

Besides demonstrating construct validity of the instruments used, reliability analysis is vital to ensure the terms used to measure each proposed variable are highly consistent and representative. This study measures the consistency of measurement used by examining its reliability. Table 4 tabulates the Cronbach's Alpha value for each key variable in the instrument used. Instruments used in this study are deemed to be substantially reliable with the Cronbach's Alpha value for each of its dimensions exceeding 0.8.

Table 7: Reliability Analysis of Research Instrument Used

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach value of Pilot test/ pre-test with 30 respondents	Cronbach value of Final test/ post-test with 174 respondents
Overall	43	.768	.884
Brand image		.815	
Brand superiority	6	.801	.878
Brand Knowledge	6	.813	.873
	12		.874
Credibility	4	.798	.872
Integrity	4	.772	.874
Benevolence	3	.734	.867
Brand Trust	11	.797	.872
Schoolteachers		.842	
Social media	3	.839	.875
Academic advisor	3	.811	.884
Friends	4	.859	.880
Website	3	.846	.882
Family members	4	.858	.873
	3	.834	.889
WOM sources	20		.867

As shown in Table 7, the quantitative instrument of final test used in this study is deemed to be substantially reliable with the Cronbach's Alpha value for each of its dimensions exceeding 0.8. This is in line with the research of George & Mallery (2001) which claims that Alpha value which is closer to 1.00 signifies a great amount of consistency in the variables measured. This table also furnishes the Alpha value obtained for the instrument used in the pilot study. It should be noted that though the Alpha value for both pilot study and actual fieldworks differ slightly, their values are still within the desirable range and hence it demonstrates the good consistency of the instrument used in this strand.

Table 8: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis – Regression indicates the amount of variance explained by each independent variables factor in the dependent variables

Model	Adjusted R Square	Change Statistics		ANOVA	
		R Square Change	Sig. F Change	F	Sign
1	.423	.439	.000	53.998	0.000
2	.562	.125	.000	37.485	0.000
Model		Unstandardized coefficient	Standardized coefficient	t	Sig.
1	BK	.567	.489	7.348	.000
2	BK	.449	.387	5.648	.000
	WOM	.332	.276	4.025	.000

Dependent Variable: Brand trust

Model 1 Predictors: Brand Knowledge

Model 2 Predictors: Brand Knowledge, WOM Sources

Table 9: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis – Regression indicates the amount of variance explained by each statement item as sub-sub independent variable factor in the dependent variables

Model	Adjusted R Square	Change Statistics		ANOVA	
		R Square Change	Sig. F Change	F	Sign
1	.448	.451	.000	27.342	0.0001
2	.667	.247	.000	15.367	0.0001
Model		Unstandardized coefficient	Standardized coefficient	T	Sig.
1	BS	.373	.359	3.398	.001
	BI	.182	.158	1.495	.137
2	BS	.247	.238	2.345	.020
	BI	.166	.144	1.491	.138
	SM	.221	.243	3.649	.000
	AA	-.106	-.186	-2.705	.008
	FR	.131	.196	3.038	.013
	ST	-.012	-.016	-.241	.811

	WS	.058	.060	.966	.336
	FM	.214	.234	3.265	.001

Dependent Variable: Brand trust

Model 1 Predictors: Brand superiority (BS), brand image (BI)

Model 2 Predictors: BS, BI, social media (SM), academic advisor (AA), friends (FR), schoolteachers (ST), websites (WS) and family (FM)

Hierarchical regression analysis (HRA) was conducted to examine the relationship between PHEI's brand knowledge and brand trust with the moderating influences of WOM sources. Two stages of HRAs were subsequently conducted to understand the overall and individual influences (Table 8 and Table 9). As shown in Table 8, both models were found to have a significant value of 0.000 which implies that there is a significant relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust of PHEI with and without the control from the influences of WOM sources. The adjusted R-square for the association between brand knowledge and brand trust is 42.3% while the adjusted R-square for the same link with the inclusion of WOM is 56.2%. This evidences that with inclusion of WOM as a moderator, it increases the impact of brand knowledge on brand trust of PHEIs.

Subsequently, the R Square change signifies that the said inclusion is quite noticeable (about 12.5%). Despite the presence of WOM influences, the impact of brand knowledge towards brand trust of PHEIs is observed to be greater than the impact of WOM influences. Here, the brand knowledge continues to have significant impact on the brand trust of PHEI. Customers' knowledge on the brand is indeed very vital in building a great amount of trust towards the brand (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). This also highlights that influences of WOM sources are workable only when brand knowledge of customers significantly affects their trust towards a particular brand.

In order to further evaluate the moderation impact of individual WOM sources on brand knowledge and trust, Table 9 was referred. Similar to the output of Table 8, it also demonstrates significance between the individual subsets of brand knowledge (i.e. brand image and superiority) brand trust with or without the presence of individual WOM sources. WOM sources have fairly enhanced the impact of brand knowledge on the brand trust of PHEIs.

Model 1 (Table 9) reveals that brand superiority is a greater predictor of the brand trust than brand image without the presence of individual WOM sources. Nevertheless, the presence of individual WOM sources has somehow restructured the order of entire (as shown in Model 2, Table 9). Influences of social media (0.243) were found to be the greatest predictor for building brand trust, followed by PHEI's brand superiority (0.238), influences of family members (0.234), influences of friends (0.196) and influences of academic advisor (-.186). All these predictors were found to have significant influence in building brand trust of PHEIs. It is worthwhile to note that the influences of academic advisor would negatively affected the relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust. On the other hand, PHEI's brand image, influences of college's website and influences of schoolteachers were found to be the least predictors of building trust in the PHEIs.

Key Findings and Discussions

This result segment provides the key findings and discussion of this study. As tabulated in Table 9, social media indeed plays vital role in creating brand trust about PHEIs among students in this modern age. It further reveals that the influences of social media's has outweighed the impact of students' knowledge on the PHEI's brand and its superiority in building the brand trust towards PHEIs (Model 2, Table 9). This signals that PHEIs with superior brand probably will fail to enhance its brand trust if they are not having a reasonable presence over the social networking sites (Ahmad et al. 2014; Smink, 2012).

This is in line with the validation of Parr (2015) which highlighted that about 35% of the surveyed tertiary students had acknowledged the importance of social media technologies on their choice of study destination. Parr had further added nearly all the tertiary students had been using some kind social media to communicate among their peers and lecturers. Similarly, recent empirical studies also cited that "communicating with peers and family members" has been the main drive for university students in utilizing the social media (Helen, Obiora & Nneka, 2014; Hamade, 2013). Hence, social media is seen as a tool mostly used among students to freely share their insights, experiences and feedbacks about their decision to pursue further studies.

As shown in Model 2 (Table 9), the influences of family members are the next most important contributors for building trust on the PHEI's brand. The influence of family members in building trust towards PHEIs could be more relevant among students from good social economic background (Wilkins, 2013). Trust can be easily instilled among students by their parents or other family members who are deemed to be more knowledgeable and trustworthy (Pimpa, 2004). As the decision on pursuing further studies is an important milestone of life, students are expected to be influenced by close family members instead of relying information from friends, teachers, academic advisor or other external social contacts ("in China, father and mother knows best: 65% of study abroad decisions made by parents", 2012).

It is also worthwhile to note that influences of academic advisors have a negative impact towards the brand knowledge of PHEIs and the resulting brand trust. It is justifiable as academic advisors are technically representing the institution where it is typical for them to propagate the credential of the institution among the potential students. Though academic advisors are spreading information about the institution at no cost but they are essentially paid by the institution. It results in a negative impact ($t = -2.705$; $p = 0.008$) towards the association between brand knowledge of the PHEIs and hence the brand trust. It implies the greater the positive information of PHEIs spread by the academic advisor, the weaker will be the association between brand knowledge and its resulting brand trust. This is plausible as the credibility of information originated from the firm itself will be lower as compared to the information from the external environment.

Similar to the role of academic advisor, college website is usually seen as the firm's platform used for the external communication. As such, the website would not be a significant stimulus in creating the brand knowledge of PHEI and the resulting brand trust. On the contrary, the college website is seen as the greatest tool used during the initial stage of searching information on the choices of study destinations that students are keen about.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that the inclusion of influences from WOM sources has significantly moderated the impact of brand knowledge towards brand trust of PHEIs. Nevertheless, that influences of WOM sources are workable only when brand knowledge of customers significantly affects their trust towards a particular brand. Therefore, this study implies that the influences of WOM sources, brand knowledge and brand trust are inter-reliant dimensions where failure of PHEIs in capitalizing any one of these dimensions would negatively affect the students' enrolment at their institution.

This research has made a substantial theoretical contribution in the marketing communication field. It supplements the existing knowledge void regarding the moderation impact of WOM sources towards the relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust of PHEIs. Existing studies have focused solely on the determinants of brand equity and brand loyalty, impact of brand equity on the students' satisfaction, determinants of WOM, issues and challenges in branding higher educations or impact of electronic WOM on brand image and purchase intention in non-education sector. We lack knowledge of the moderating effect of WOM sources on relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust. This research has fulfilled the gap by dividing the WOM sources into two categories ie traditional sources and technological sources. Meanwhile, this research has extended the measure of WOM communication by applying three key dimensions namely perceived credibility, relative influence and usage frequency in assessing the moderating effects of WOM communication on relationship between brand knowledge and brand trust. Thus, this study has enhanced the WOM communication literature by contributing new insights about the measurement of WOM communication.

Brand image is known as the crucial determinant of decision making among the consumers (Keller, 1993). The study has discovered that brand image is driven by brand superiority which positively impacts brand trust. Existing superiority brand image have shown to have the better outreach in PHEIs compared to have less superiority brand. This clearly shows that the tilt in the balance based on marketability rather than just quality.

In the defense of this, this study proposes that there should be a centralized information portal for all PHEIs to publish their services and this to be governed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The centralized information portal will serve as a legitimate information portal which are constantly monitored and approved for the best quality education in the country. This creates a sort of a confidence portal and allows a healthy competition, which can only benefit the Malaysian education standards in view of quality education.

The PHEI can use hybrid opinion column or recommendation based heuristics through college website to get the students' opinion. The hybrid opinion column can be divided into positive and negative column. When a student poses negative opinion in negative column, it will be expected by other students that he or she is an unhappy customer who is under the other students' expectation. Thus, the bad effect towards brand trust will be reduced. If the unhappy customer still posing at recommendation- based heuristics, it means he or she is still willing to accept the PHEI, otherwise, he or she will spread bad words to others through social media which will tarnish the brand trust of PHEI.

Limitation and Suggestion for Future Research

This study utilized quantitative phase in gathering the data. This means that the responses of respondents i.e. students were investigated and gathered once only. Therefore, this study would not be able to trace any variability in the respondents' responses towards PHEI's branding and management of WOM sources that would incur after respondents were made aware on the topic

of investigation. Future research should employ qualitative method i.e. in-depth interviews with the administrators from PHEI in order to triangulate the information gathered from students.

Endnotes

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