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FROM STUDENT TO BRAND AMBASSADOR: THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL BRANDING, SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT, AND TRUST IN DEVELOPING STUDENT BRAND ADVOCACY

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ABSTRACT

The higher education sector has become increasingly competitive, compelling universities to adopt innovative strategies to attract, engage, and retain students. In this environment, students are no longer viewed solely as recipients of educational services; they are increasingly recognized as influential stakeholders capable of shaping institutional reputation through positive word-of-mouth, peer recommendations, and social media interactions. Consequently, the concept of student brand advocacy has gained significant attention among higher education marketers and administrators.

This conceptual paper explores how institutional branding, social media engagement, and trust contribute to the development of student brand advocacy. Drawing on Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Identity Theory, the paper proposes that a strong institutional brand fosters students' emotional connection and identification with their university. Similarly, active engagement through social media platforms strengthens communication and community participation, while trust reinforces students' confidence in institutional values and performance. The paper further argues that student engagement acts as a central mechanism through which these factors encourage advocacy behaviour.

By integrating branding, trust, and digital engagement into a unified framework, this study contributes to the growing literature on higher education marketing and student relationship management. The proposed framework offers practical insights for university leaders seeking to transform students into authentic brand ambassadors who actively contribute to institutional reputation and competitiveness.

KEYWORDS: *Institutional Branding, Student Brand Advocacy, Social Media Engagement, Trust, Student Engagement, Higher Education Marketing.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has undergone significant transformation over the last two decades. The rapid expansion of universities, internationalization of education, technological advancement, and changing student expectations have intensified competition among institutions worldwide. Universities are increasingly required to differentiate themselves not only through academic excellence but also through their ability to create meaningful experiences and strong relationships with students.

In today's digital environment, students possess unprecedented power to influence institutional reputation. Through social media platforms, online communities, and personal networks, students continuously share their educational experiences with peers, prospective students, and the wider public. Positive experiences often translate into favourable recommendations, while negative experiences can quickly damage institutional image. As a result, universities are increasingly recognizing students as strategic partners in branding efforts.

The concept of student brand advocacy refers to voluntary behaviours through which students actively promote and support their institution. Such behaviours may include recommending the university to prospective students, sharing positive experiences on social media, participating in institutional events, and defending the institution against criticism. Unlike traditional marketing communications, student advocacy is perceived as authentic and trustworthy because it originates from direct experiences.

Although previous studies have examined student satisfaction, loyalty, institutional branding, and social media engagement independently, there remains limited understanding of how these factors interact to create student brand advocates. This paper seeks to address this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that explains the role of institutional branding, social media engagement, and trust in fostering student brand advocacy through student engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Institutional Branding in Higher Education

Institutional branding has emerged as an important strategic tool for universities seeking to establish a distinctive identity in an increasingly crowded educational marketplace. Unlike corporate branding, university branding extends beyond promotional activities and encompasses institutional culture, values, reputation, and stakeholder experiences.

According to Foroudi et al. (2020), effective institutional branding strengthens stakeholder perceptions and contributes to long-term reputation building. Students who perceive their university as reputable and distinctive are more likely to develop a sense of pride and belonging. This emotional

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attachment often encourages students to act as informal ambassadors for their institution.

Research also indicates that strong institutional brands contribute to student loyalty and commitment. When students identify with institutional values and achievements, they are more inclined to promote the institution within their social circles.

2.2 Social Media Engagement

Social media has fundamentally transformed communication within higher education. Universities increasingly utilize platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube to interact with students, disseminate information, and create online communities.

Student engagement through social media extends beyond passive consumption of information. It includes active participation through commenting, sharing, creating content, and interacting with institutional messages. Such engagement enhances students' sense of connection and involvement with their university.

Recent studies suggest that social media engagement positively influences institutional trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Universities that maintain active and meaningful social media interactions are better positioned to cultivate stronger relationships with students and encourage advocacy behaviours.

2.3 Trust and Student Relationships

Trust is widely recognized as a cornerstone of successful relationship marketing. Within higher education, trust reflects students' confidence in their institution's ability to deliver quality educational experiences, maintain transparency, and fulfill its commitments.

Trust develops through consistent institutional performance, effective communication, and positive student experiences. Students who trust their institution are more likely to remain loyal and recommend the institution to others.

Moreover, trust serves as an important psychological mechanism linking institutional actions to student behavioural outcomes. Without trust, even strong branding efforts may fail to generate meaningful advocacy.

2.4 Student Engagement

Student engagement represents the extent to which students invest their time, energy, and emotions in academic and extracurricular activities. It encompasses behavioural participation, emotional attachment, and cognitive involvement.

Engaged students tend to exhibit stronger connections with their institution and demonstrate greater commitment to institutional success. Previous research consistently identifies student engagement as a key predictor of positive outcomes, including academic achievement, satisfaction, retention, and loyalty.

Importantly, engaged students are more likely to engage in advocacy behaviours because they perceive themselves as active members of the institutional community.

2.5 Student Brand Advocacy

Student brand advocacy refers to voluntary actions through which students support and promote their institution. Advocacy may manifest through positive word-of-mouth communication, online recommendations, social media sharing, and participation in ambassador programs.

Student advocates are particularly valuable because their messages are often perceived as more credible than official institutional advertising. Their experiences provide authentic evidence of institutional quality and contribute significantly to reputation building.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This study draws upon Relationship Marketing Theory and Social Identity Theory.

Relationship Marketing Theory emphasizes the importance of building long-term relationships with stakeholders through trust, commitment, and engagement. In higher education, strong relationships between universities and students can encourage loyalty and advocacy.

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive part of their identity from membership in social groups. Students who strongly identify with their university are more likely to internalize institutional values and actively promote the institution to others.

Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding how institutional branding, social media engagement, and trust contribute to student brand advocacy.

4. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The paper proposes that institutional branding, social media engagement, and trust influence student engagement, which subsequently enhances student brand advocacy.

Research Propositions

P1: Institutional branding positively influences student engagement.
P2: Institutional branding positively influences student brand advocacy.
P3: Social media engagement positively influences student engagement.
P4: Social media engagement positively influences student brand advocacy.
P5: Trust positively influences student engagement.
P6: Trust positively influences student brand advocacy.
P7: Student engagement positively influences student brand advocacy.
P8: Student engagement serves as a linking mechanism between institutional branding, social media engagement, trust, and student brand advocacy.

5. CONCLUSION

As universities continue to compete for students and institutional recognition, student advocacy has become an increasingly valuable strategic resource. This paper argues that institutional branding, social media engagement, and trust collectively contribute to the development of student brand advocates by fostering meaningful engagement and emotional attachment. The proposed framework offers both theoretical

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and practical insights for universities seeking to strengthen their reputation through authentic student voices.

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