The Effectiveness of Online Brand Communities for Admitted Undergraduate Students

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Prospective U.S. students fill out over ten million college applications each year, as they must make an important decision – which college or university to attend. While recruiting students is financially important for meeting enrollment goals, universities may provide online brand communities to guide and support potential students in this decision-making process. The purpose of the research is to understand the value that an online brand community for admitted students can provide in making and solidifying students' college decisions and fostering loyalty to the university. Two overarching research questions were investigated: Can the effectiveness of an online brand community for admitted students be examined based on factors used by students to evaluate perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness (TAM)? Can online engagement in an admitted student's online brand community affect admitted students' college decision and loyalty to the university? Previous research suggests that online brand communities can impact customers' sense of brand loyalty, influenced by community engagement, community identification, consumer satisfaction, and purchase intention.[1-15] Additionally, these factors can be evaluated based on "perceived usefulness" and "perceived ease of use" of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Qualitative research involving depth interviews with five prospective freshmen students at the University of Tampa allowed an analysis of interview recordings to discover the factors that students used to evaluate the effectiveness of the online brand community. TAM factors did emerge, on which to evaluate this effectiveness. Synthesizing interviews with previous findings allowed the emergence of a framework upon which to evaluate impact on college decision confidence and loyalty to the university through TAM, which may be used for future quantitative analyses. Findings suggest the following: Perceived ease of use can be impacted by functionality, organization and appearance of the online brand community, increased by integrating the platform with another commonly used social media platform. Findings showed that students had segregated onto other platforms instead, breaking up community connections. Integration would instead increase convenience and use, as well as longevity of the community, increasing overall student engagement. Students evaluate perceived usefulness based on their ability to form social connections with other students. As this can be improved through an integrated platform, perceived ease of use factors can consequently impact the ability to form student connections (perceived usefulness). Student engagement is impacted by increase in student connections, student use of the platform, and students' ability to identify with and feel satisfied with the community (also consequently impacted by an integrated platform).[1] Engagement can then positively impact college decision confidence through increase in connections, increasing comfort in the decision and at the start of the school year. Engagement and student satisfaction can increase loyalty to the university.[5,6,11,14] Meanwhile, purchase intention can be positively impacted by perceived usefulness (socially connecting).[3] This research adds to the managerial knowledge of providing value to admitted university students by fostering engagement through online brand communities on conveniently integrated platforms

based on the desire for students to interact and connect, and may provide a framework on which to guide future quantitative research.

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