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Understanding Student Perceptions of their Personal Branding in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Academic research on personal branding has recently gained momentum as various factors have gained importance in building personal branding in various contexts. One of these contexts is higher education where students build knowledge and skills to elevate their marketability for the marketplace. Universities play an important role in providing students with an environment in which students can participate in various curricular and extra-curricular activities to build their experience and skills that employers prefer as well as establish a personal brand image for personal life. The majority of the research to date on personal branding has focused on the use of social media, other online tools, and search engines to enhance one's brand image, job searching process, and findability and recruitment by employers. However, little empirical research exists examining personal branding management in the university environment and the universities' role in helping students build their personal branding. Even though the studies on student personal branding in a university setting are limited, the published empirical and qualitative studies provide a valuable foundation.

Identifying measurements relevant to personal branding from the published literature, this study examines the importance students place on various aspects that help them build their personal brand, to what degree they perceive ready with regard to their brand personality development, and to what degree they perceive their higher education institution help them develop their personal brand. The relationships between demographics (gender and class level) of students and their perceptions are also examined.

A survey instrument with student branding attributes was compiled from the relevant literature. The survey questions were first pretested with expert academicians about branding and survey development. Then, it was pretested with students who are the target population of the study. The two-stage pretests provided insights for improvement of the questions and face validity of the items. Data were collected online and in-class at two universities in the U.S. This data collection method produced 298 usable responses for analysis. The selected profiles of respondents show that 61.3% of respondents are male, 38.7% are female, 20.9% are freshmen, 32.5% are sophomore, 14.1% are junior and 32.5% are senior. The average age of the respondents is 20.22 years.

The results indicate that students perceive almost all attributes as important for creating a strong personal brand, and that they evaluate their performance on almost all attributes significantly better than average. The findings also confirm existence of differences or gaps (importance – performance) for perceived importance and performance in creating student personal brands. In addition, female students consistently attach significantly higher importance to these branding attributes than males and also perceive that they have significantly higher performance than male students on certain personal branding attributes. As to class level, freshmen students attach significantly higher importance than seniors to all of the branding attributes, and sophomore attach significantly higher importance than seniors to two branding attributes. Furthermore, juniors and seniors perceive their performance significantly higher than freshman and sophomore students on most the branding attributes. Managerial implications are discussed.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Musa Pinar (Ph.D., Mississippi State University) is a Professor of Marketing at Valparaiso University. His research interests include service quality, brand orientation, gender effect in sales field and tourism, gender-food stereotypes, brand ecosystem, and measuring brand equity in banking, higher education, sports league and political party. He has published in various academic journals and presented papers in national and international conferences and has received several best paper awards at several conferences.

Tulay Girard (Ph.D., Florida Atlantic University) is a Professor of Marketing at Penn State Altoona. Her research focuses on product classes, retailer attributes, perceived risk, brand equity in banking, higher education, and private-label branding. Her publications can be found at www.tulaygirard.com. She received several best paper awards.