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Beyond Higher Ed Marketing: Unsanctioned User Generated Content

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ABSTRACT

The impact of User Generated Content (UGC) on higher-education marketing is an entirely untouched area of marketing research, therefore the current study aims to better understand how widely disseminated this content is among students, how they perceive this content and its impact upon their university, as well as what kinds of students are drawn to participate in and consume this content. A sample of 238 university students at a large public institution were surveyed regarding their engagement with UGC content associated with their school, the reasons for their interest in this content, and the ways in which it may effect their perception of the institution.

INTRODUCTION

UGC (User Generated Content) is “media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals, primarily distributed on the Internet” (Daugherty, Eastin, Bright, 2008, p.16). The millennial generation heavily practices this method of communication because of its ability to be personalized, entertaining, and informative. Instead of professionals posting censored and filtered information, these accounts undercut the system by posting information with much more excitement and personality. This makes accounts more entertaining and seemingly credible to followers because they feel like they are receiving genuine information (Krumm, Davies, Narayanaswami, 2008). Of particular interest to this paper are social media accounts created by students at any institution in an unofficial capacity, that might be followed or viewed by other students. These accounts may even represent themselves as parodies of University affiliates and post information that is unregulated by the institution, satirical or otherwise. These accounts may impact the way that students attending a University perceive the University brand, outside of the intended branding of University marketing. According to a recent study, “65% of consumers trust word of mouth on the Internet more than content produced by advertisers” (MacKinnon, 2012). According to a 2012 research study, UGC influenced consumer-purchasing behavior more heavily than did consumer marketing content (Goh, Heng, Lin, 2013). This means that the marketing done by various institutions may be less efficient than accounts made by their own students in swaying student and future-student opinions about a University or College.

A survey of students regarding their usage of, and beliefs about UGC from accounts associated with their own University examines possible correlations with perceptions of impact on the University brand. Firstly, the survey seeks to determine whether individual differences impact perceptions of these accounts, and whether those perceptions correlated with a student's involvement or interest in these accounts. Secondly, the survey would seek to investigate whether engaging with these accounts predicted perceptions of the potential impact the accounts have on the reputation of the University.

METHODS

A sample of 238 students at a large public University in the southeastern United States was obtained through an anonymous online survey offered for extra credit. A 'trap style' attention check (Maronick, 2009) resulted in the removal of 51 participants, leaving 187 for analysis. Participants were split nearly evenly in gender (47% male) and ranged in age from 18-24 years old.

Survey Instruments

Students were asked if they have ever seen social media accounts of this kind, which are unofficial but associated with their University. If they responded that they understood and were familiar with this phenomenon, the participant was moved on to the next set of questions, to include how often they view these accounts and how often they interact with these accounts through posts, comments or shares (both presented on a 6-point likert scale from 'never' to 'frequently'). Next, students completed several three-to-four item inventories that measured items related to their perceptions of UGC accounts associated with their University, such as opinions on the humorousness of these accounts (Duncan & Nelson, 1985) and their interest level in the accounts (Allen & Madden, 1985), as well as the degree to which they felt these UGC's impacted the reputation of their university and perception that the account content is reflective of and authentic to the participant's own experience of their school (a modified version of Sujan & Bettman's 1989 'brand similarity' scale). Participants then completed inventories to assess individual differences of their personality such as the need for humor (Allen and Madden, 1985).

RESULTS

Data Analysis

A full 100% of participants were aware that social media accounts such as these exist for their University. Only 7% of the sample said they never look at these accounts, while a larger percentage (21.4%) said they do not move beyond looking and actually interact with these accounts (by posting, commenting, or sharing them). Students are aware of, following, and interacting with these accounts to a degree that warrants investigation.

Results indicate that the need for humor was a significant predictor of interest in UGCs, $b = .272$, $SE = .096$, $p = .005$, and that interest in UGCs was a significant predictor of perceived authenticity

of UGCs, $b = .317$, $SE = .053$, $p = .000$. These results also suggest a mediational relationship, as need for humor was no longer a significant predictor of perceived authenticity after controlling for the mediator, interest in UGCs, $b = .127$, $SE = .07$, $p = .08$. The indirect effect was confirmed using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5000 samples, $CI = .0234, .1510$. In other words, the need for humor influences perceptions that the UGCs speak to the student's authentic college experience, because of need for humor's influence on interest in UGCs.

Next, ANOVA was conducted to determine whether this outcome (perceptions of authenticity) would predict other important variables. Analysis revealed a significant relationship between perceived authenticity of UGCs to one's own experience of the University and perceptions that these accounts are funny ($F(15, 171) = 3.08$, $p = .000$), how frequently the accounts are read by students ($F(15, 171) = 2.21$, $p = .008$), how frequently the accounts are interacted with by students either through commenting, posting or sharing ($F(15, 171) = 2.21$, $p = .008$) and beliefs about whether these accounts have a negative impact upon the school's reputation ($F(15, 171) = 7.63$, $p = .000$).

DISCUSSION

These initial results suggest first of all that those who find UGCs associated with their University to be an authentic reflection of their own University experience tend to be those who view them the most often, interact with them the most often, and find them funny. Mediation was shown such that the more a student enjoys humor, the more interested they are in UGC account content (which are typically designed to be entertaining and funny), and that interest influences how much they see these accounts as a reflection of their own experience at the University. Need for humor was fairly high within the sample (mean of 4.72 on a 6-point scale, $SD = .85$), with only 7% of the sample falling below the mid-point of this scale. This should come as no surprise, as the millennial generation greatly values humor (Tabaka, 2016).

Results also suggest that the more a student sees these UGCs as a legitimate reflection of their experience, the less they believe that the content (which is oftentimes unflattering) made public on these accounts impacts their University's reputation negatively. This would suggest that student interest in these accounts potentially blinds them to the impact that these accounts could have on their University's reputation.

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