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The Influence of Social Networks on the Choice of a University Brand by Generation Y

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Abstract

Social networks are actively penetrating into all spheres of our society. The influence of social media is strongly affected by the younger generation, who spends a lot of time in the virtual social space.

The purpose of this study was to study the effect of social networks on the choice of a university brand by representatives of generation Y. The data was collected through an online survey using the Google forms service.

The results obtained indicate that social media engagement has a positive effect on brand image. FCSMC and UGSMC have a positive effect on brand equity in Higher Education Institutions. Brand equity positively influences Brand choice intention.

The value of this study lies in the fact that it considered the influence of various factors on the formation of the intention of representatives of generation Y to choose brands of universities, taking into account the moderate effect of electronic word of mouth.

The results obtained complement the scientific literature on the effect of social media on consumer behavior. The results of this study can help in understanding the choice of students of educational organizations, taking into account the influence of social networks and electronic word of mouth, which can help university marketing departments to promote brands more effectively in the social media space.

5

Keywords: social media, electronic word of mouth, customer engagement, brand image, higher education

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has confronted business with a new reality. In a situation when there were strict restrictive measures all over the world, offline stores did not work and people were forced to isolate themselves at home, an increasing number of people became active in the online space, joined social media. Thus, according to a global survey conducted in 13 countries around the world, about 44% of respondents said that during the coronavirus they began to spend more time on social networks (Statista, 2020)

Now, more users are actively joining social networks, brands are actively involved in interactions with their current and potential customers in the space of social platforms. Many companies are increasing their presence in social networks because they realize the importance of existing in the online space to promote their brands, increase online sales and improve customer interaction, increase engagement (Keegan and Rowley, 2017)

Active participants in social media are educators of generation Y. Age data for generation Y vary according to different sources. The dates of the beginning of the millennial generation (another name for generation Y) range from 1977 to 1982, and the dates of the end of the generation vary from 1994 to 2003. Representatives of Generation Y use computers and mobile devices not just as a means of communication, they use them to interact with the world (Sternberg, 2012). The younger generation spends a lot of time on social networks communicating with peers, finding information about brands they are interested in, reading reviews and reviews, sharing their experiences. Previous studies have revealed that word of mouth plays an important role in shaping consumer attitudes and stimulating the intention to choose goods or services. Also, modern consumers are becoming less susceptible to traditional methods of promotion, for example, such as advertising, and most of them trust word of mouth because the information from other

consumers is perceived as more reliable and real (Perera et al, 2020). With the development of information and communication technologies, more consumers share their knowledge, experience, and opinions on social networks, thereby increasing the possibility of contacting a large audience of people, regardless of their physical location (Siddiqui et al, 2021). It is also worth noting that the importance and influence of electronic word of mouth on consumer intentions have increased in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic time (Puriwat and Tripopsakul, 2021). It is worth noting that the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic also updated online education in 2020. Contemporaries have more opportunities and access to educational platforms, discounts for online education at many leading and well-known universities in various specializations remain around the world. In the context of the pandemic, new opportunities for studying at any university online have appeared, without reference to the physical location of the educational organization and the student (Kanieva and Ashenova, 2020). These conditions have led to increased competition among educational organizations both domestically and internationally.

The increasing role of social networks in the selection of brands for further interaction, the fierce struggle for customers in the field of higher education has led to the importance of studying the impact of social networks on consumer choice of universities, taking into account electronic word of mouth.

Literature Review

In modern society, where a large number of different brands prevail, which everywhere are trying to influence consumers, the issue of customers choosing a particular brand is becoming more relevant. The particular interest is the process and factors that influence the choice of applicants and students of educational organizations. In this study, the following factors were considered that may influence the choice of a brand of a higher education organization, taking into account the rapid development of social networks and their impact on consumer

7

behavior: social media engagement, brand image, FCSMC and UGSMC, brand equity, electronic word-of-mouth, brand choice intention.

Social media engagement

The authors of Nguyen et al (2020) consider social media engagement as the dynamics of an individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioral efforts to interact with target platforms. Future and current students can get involved in university brands on social platforms by communicating with other students, discussing educational organizations on forums, reading expert reviews, etc. In this study, the social platform Instagram was chosen as one of the platforms used in the process of social media engagement. According to research, Instagram is one of the most popular networks in Kazakhstan (Kapital, 2021), about 75% of generation Y representatives are active users of this social network (Search engine journal, 2021). If the brands of universities are represented in the social networks of their target audience, users can find information about these brands from other students of these universities, follow the pages of the brands themselves and track their activity on social networks. Thus, the image of the university brand is built in the minds of applicants. In this study, we assume the first hypothesis.

H1: Social media engagement has a significant positive effect on brand image

Brand image

The attributes and advantages of the brand that favorably distinguish it from other competitors make up the brand image. According to previous research, the brand image helps consumers answer the question: "what can a brand do for them" (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018). The brand image also correlates with what consumers think about the brand, what feelings and associations it causes them. A good brand image allows companies to stand out favorably from competitors, stand out in the market with their distinctive features (Ansary and Hashim, 2017). Previously, some studies suggested that brand image is one of the important components of brand equity in various industries (Liao et al, 2017; Sasmita and Suki, 2015; Subramaniam et al, 2014). The term brand image in the higher education industry correlates with a set of associations that are associated with a certain brand of the university and

8

which are closely entrenched in the worldview of people. The brand image of a university is a reflection of what this university is, what it can offer to the market and students (Rutter et al, 2017). By previous studies, we assume the following hypothesis.

H2: brand image has a significant positive effect on brand equity.

Firm-created social media communication (FCSMC)

According to previous research, FCSMC – is a "form of advertising fully controlled by the company and guided by a marketing strategy agenda" (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014). Now, thanks to the development of new communication technologies, when social network participants can instantly exchange information, more and more companies are realizing the importance of being present in the social media space. FCSMC is also an important and necessary component of a company's promotion strategy, taking into account modern requirements. FCSMC helps to establish contact with the audience, increase their engagement, influence their perceptions of goods and services, inform the audience, and gain data about the customers (Brodie et al, 2013). Further, based on previous studies (Sagynbekova et al, 2020; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014), we propose a hypothesis.

H3: The social media communication created by the Higher Education Institution has a significant positive impact on brand equity.

User-generated social media communication (UGSMC)

Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and others are becoming more important and increasing the possibilities of interaction in any field (Sagynbekova, 2020). Now, when the participants of social networks are becoming more and more immune to traditional advertising created by brands, the content that is created by the users themselves (UGC) has an increasing influence on the choice of a particular product and service. Social networks allow their participants to share their opinions with a large audience, in "real-time" mode. The influence of UGC on the interaction with the brand of other participants is increasing every year and is becoming an increasingly interesting object for consideration by scientific research. Thus, a number of studies have determined that the use of UGC brands

9

allows you to create effective brand equity and collect information from users about the opinion and evaluation of the brand (Christodoulides, Bonhomme, and Jevons, 2012). In the field of higher education, UGSMC includes information created by students, employees, partners of universities, and which is distributed in social networks (Sagynbekova et al, 2020). Under previous studies, we propose a hypothesis.

H4: UGSMC has a significant positive impact on brand equity

Brand equity

Brand equity is strengthened by strengthening consumer associations and feelings about products and services to brands (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014). It is worth noting that there are many studies on brand equity in different contexts. But the sphere of higher education and, accordingly, the brand equity of universities has several distinctive features: higher education services are provided for a long period, has a significant impact on the further development of consumers' lives. Therefore, applicants devote a lot of time to choosing a future place of study (Ogunmokun and Timur, 2020). Perceiving brand equity has a significant impact on the intention to choose a particular university as a future place of study. Thus, we assume the following hypothesis.

H5: Brand equity has a significant positive effect on brand choice intention.

Electronic word-of-mouth

Electronic word-of-mouth is content concerning information about some goods or service, both positive and negative, created in the online social space by former, actual, or potential customers of the company (Sijoria et al., 2019). The development of social networks allows customers to share their ratings and feelings in the process of choosing goods or services and after interacting with specific brands. In the modern world, electronic word-of-mouth can have a significant impact on the desire of consumers to choose a particular brand (Perera et al, 2020). Electronic word-of-mouth allows students to express their opinions, share their views about universities, the educational process, and student life with other participants of social networks. Thus, electronic word-of-mouth allows future students to get

acquainted with the educational process, with the brand of the university before choosing a certain academic institution. Thus, electronic word-of-mouth can have a positive impact on brand choice intention.
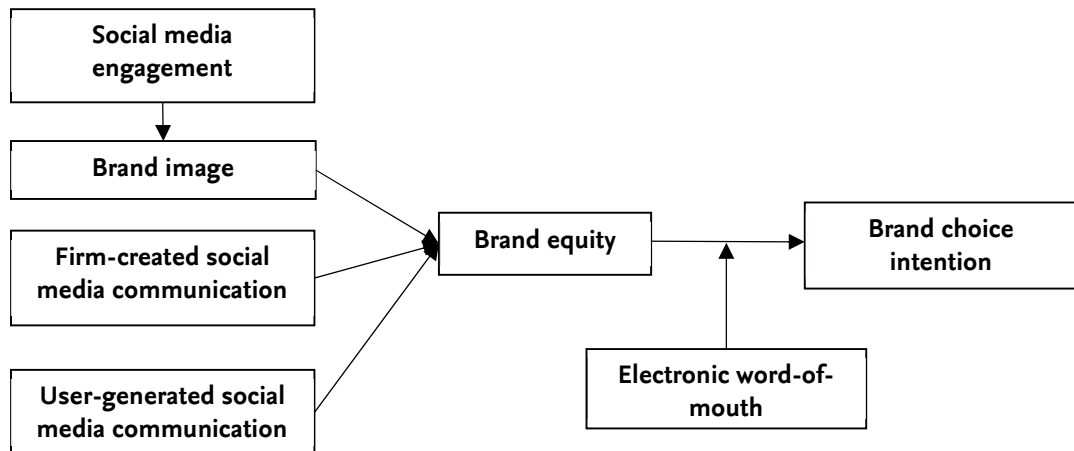
Brand choice intention

Figure 1. Research model

The brand choice intention is the degree of probability that consumers will choose a particular brand (Ojiaku and Osarenkhoe, 2018). The brand choice intention is considered the most likely predictor of actual consumer buying behavior. Modern buyers spend a lot of time searching for information, reviews, and opinions of their friends and colleagues on social networks before making a purchase decision (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018). Previous studies have found that if consumers discover a huge number of positive reviews about a product or service on social networks, this positively affects their perception of the brand and can increase the intention to choose this brand (See-To and Ho, 2014). Thus, we put forward the last hypothesis.

H6: Electronic word-of-mouth has significant moderating effects on the relationships between brand image and brand equity. The research model is shown in Figure 1.

Methodology

To collect data, a quantitative method of conducting marketing research was used, since this method allows you to obtain a large array of structured data. Taking into

account, the situation in connection with the coronavirus pandemic and the requirement to comply with security measures, remote communication, the survey was conducted online. During the online survey, questionnaires were sent to students and undergraduates studying at UIB and SDU University through the Google forms service. The sample for the survey was graduate students, because they are representatives of generation Y, and are more likely to consider the possibility of entering universities for further study soon.

The data was collected using a structured questionnaire that was developed based on the objectives of this document. The questionnaire questions were taken from previous studies that were considered relevant for measuring variables. The questionnaire questions were translated from English. To verify the accuracy of the translation, a two-stage translation procedure was used, when the originally translated text was translated back into English, and the correspondence of the meaning of the questions was observed. The questionnaire was developed in Russian.

The development of measurement elements was guided by the goal of an adequate representation of variables. All the elements were previously tested by other scientists and used in this study in an adapted form. These measurements of concepts are presented in Table 1. The questionnaire contained information about the objectives of the study, guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity of the respondent.

Respondents assessed the degree of their agreement or disagreement with the submitted statements on a seven-point scale of Likert agreements, ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 is categorical disagreement, and 7 is complete agreement. The measurement scale is very important for choosing the right statistical test. Variables can be measured and transmitted at different scales, but the most commonly used measurement scale in social and behavioral sciences research is the Likert scale (Joshi et al, 2015). Predominantly, the Likert scale is preferred because it is easy to analyze statistically.

Before conducting the main study, a pilot testing of the questionnaire was conducted, during which 6 respondents participated. During the pilot study, questions were analyzed for the degree of clarity and consistency of respondents. The questions that caused difficulty in understanding on the part of the respondents were incomprehensible to them, were later changed so that they became easy to understand on the part of the respondents.

Table 1. Measurement of research concepts

Construct/source	Items
Social media engagement (Kumar and Kaushik, 2022; Nguyen et al, 2020)	1. Using Instagram stimulates my interest in learning more about it (Instagram) 2. I feel very positive when I use Instagram 3. I am proud to be a member of Instagram social media platform 4. Whenever I am searching educational-related information, I usually use Instagram 5. I spend a lot of time using Instagram, compared to other social media platform
Electronic word-of-mouth (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018)	1. To make sure that I choose right brands of Higher education organization, I read online reviews of Higher education organization written by other fellow members in social networks 2. The information that I spread in social networks regarding the Higher education organization brand usually influences opinion of other members 3. I always publish my experiences with Higher education organization brands in social networks on request of other members 4. I am willing to share my experiences with the Higher education organization brands with other fellow members in social networks 5. I try to more effectively share my experiences with the Higher education organization brands with other fellow members in social networks
Brand image (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018)	1. Compared to other brands of the Higher education organizations, the brand recommended to me by my friends in social networks are of high quality 2. Compared to other brands of the Higher education organizations, the brands recommended to me by my friends in social networks has a personality that distinguishes itself from competitors

	3 The brands of Higher education organizations introduced by my friends in social networks have a rich history
	4. The brands of Higher education organizations introduced by my friends in social networks is one of the best brands in the sector
	5 My friends in social networks can reliably estimate efficiency of brands of Higher education organizations
Brand equity (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018; Yoo and Donthu, 2001)	1. It makes sense to Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends in social networks instead of any other brand, even if they are the same.
	2. Even if another brand has the same features as Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends, I would prefer to choose this Higher education organization brand.
	3. If there is another brand as good as Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends, I prefer to choose this Higher education organization brand
	4. If another brand is not different from Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends in any way, it seems smarter to choose this Higher education organization brand
Firm-created social media communication (Sagynbekova et al, 2020)	1. I am satisfied with social media communications on Instagram of the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends
	2. The level of social media communications on Instagram of the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends meets my expectations
	3. Social media communications on Instagram of the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends are very attractive
	4. Social media communications on Instagram of the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends perform well, when compared with the social media communications of other Higher education organization
User-generated social media communication (Sagynbekova et al, 2020)	1. I am satisfied with the content generated on social media by other users about the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends
	2. The level of the content generated social media by other users about the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends meets my expectations
	3. The content generated on by other users about the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends is very attractive

	4. The content generated on social media by other users about the Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends performs well, when compared with other brands
Brand choice intention (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018)	1. I would rather choose Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends than the other existing (competing) brands 2. I would like to recommend Higher education organization brand introduced by my friends to other people 3 I would like to choose Higher education organization brand following their introduction by my friends

This study used descriptive statistics, regression analysis and comparison of averages (t-test and ANOVA test). The reliability analysis of the research tool was carried out using the alpha-Cronbach coefficient. The validity of the analysis was verified using factor analysis. All measurements and tests were carried out in Smart PLS 3 and SPSS 23 programs.

Findings and Discussion

During the survey, 206 responses were received from respondents. During the initial examination, 9 questionnaires were deleted, due to the fact that they contained more than 20% of the missed questions. Thus, 197 questionnaires were allowed to analyze the results.

The results of the demographic profile showed that 47.7% of these respondents are men (94 male respondents), and 52.3% are women (103 female respondents). The majority of respondents are in the age group from 18 to 20 years and make up 79.7% of respondents (157 respondents), 17.7% are 29 respondents aged 21-22 years, 4.1% of respondents aged 23-24 years (8 respondents), 1% of respondents aged 30-31 years (2 respondents) and 0.5% (1 respondent) aged 25-26.

The reliability analysis of the measuring instrument was carried out using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Cronbach's Alpha is used to assess the reliability of questions when measuring a latent variable, a value greater than 0.7 is considered acceptable, more than 0.8 is a good indicator. The test conducted using the Smart

15

PLS 3 software showed that the measurement tool is reliable, the Cronbach's Alpha indicators for each concept are more than 0.7, and are in the range of 0.705 and 0.854. These indicators indicate that the questionnaire has a high reliability of questions for measuring variables. Reliability analysis data are presented in Table 2. In the process of reliability analysis, 1 question was removed, which reduced the level of reliability of the measuring instrument (EWOM1).

The analysis of the validity of the tool was carried out using factor analysis, which includes several indicators: convergent validity and discriminate validity.

Convergent validity was evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All composite reliability (CR) values were also above the 0.70 threshold. They were in the range of 0.818 and 0.896, demonstrating a high level of internal consistency of questions. In addition, all AVE values exceeded 0.50. An AVE value of at least 0.50 indicates that the latent variable is, on average, "able to explain more than half of the variance of its indicators" (Hair et al, 2016). The results are presented in Table 2. Thus, the measurement model has achieved satisfactory convergent validity.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity measurements

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Social media engagement	0,77	0,844	0,523
Electronic word-of-mouth	0,725	0,825	0,543
Brand image	0,854	0,896	0,633
Brand equity	0,705	0,818	0,534
Firm-created social media Social media communication	0,813	0,876	0,638
User-generated social media communication	0,804	0,871	0,627
Brand choice intention	0,722	0,842	0,641

Discriminant validity was evaluated by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Table 3 shows that all the square roots of AVE (diagonally in bold) were greater than the correlations between the variables (in the corresponding column and row). assuming that the validity of the discriminant has been achieved, since each reflecting variable is more closely related to its own indicators than to others. Thus, discriminant validity was well established.

Table 3. Discriminate Validity

Constructs	SME	E-WOM	BI	BE	FCSMC	UGSMC	BCI
Social media engagement (SME)	**0,723**						
Electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM)	0,364	**0,737**					
Brand image (BI)	0,586	0,463	**0,796**				
Brand equity (BE)	0,311	0,232	0,374	**0,731**			
Firm-created social media communication (FCSMC)	0,452	0,321	0,648	0,446	**0,799**		
User-generated social media communication (UGSMC)	0,462	0,396	0,664	0,440	0,769	**0,792**	
Brand choice intention (BCI)	0,393	0,315	0,529	0,616	0,624	0,617	**0,800**

Further, regression analyses were carried out to test the hypotheses of direct influence. The results of regression analyses are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Standard coefficient and p-value for each path

№	Hypotheses	Standard coefficient	p-value
1	SME → BI	0,586	0,000***
2	BI → BE	0,094	0,301
3	FCSMC →BE	0,223	0,035*
4	UGSMC →BE	0,211	0,046*
5	BE → BCI	0,555	0,000***

17

The results of the regression analysis showed that the following factors are statistically significant: the influence of social media engagement on brand image, the influence of FCSMC and UGSMC on brand equity, as well as the influence of brand equity on brand choice intention. The statistical significance of the regression coefficients is marked with "*" ($p<0.05$), "**" ($p<0,01$), "***" ($p<0.001$).

Further, to test the hypothesis of the moderating influence of electronic word-of-mouth, an analysis was carried out in the Smart PLS 3 program. The results of this analysis are presented in table 5.

Table 5. Moderating effect of electronic word-of-mouth

№	Hypotheses	Standard coefficient	p-value
1	Moderating effect→ BCI	0,058	0,677

This analysis shows that the moderating effect of electronic word-of-mouth on the relationship between brand equity and brand choice intention is not statistically significant.

The result of this study is that we can confirm hypotheses 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6. We reject hypothesis No. 2 "brand image has a significant positive effect on brand equity" due to the statistical insignificance of the results. So according to the results of the study, we can say that social media engagement has a positive effect on brand image, which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Kumar and Kaushik, 2022; Nguyen et al, 2020). FCSMC and UGSMC has a positive effect on brand equity. This result is consistent with previous studies ((Sagynbekova et al, 2020; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2014) Brand equity has a positive impact on brand choice intention. This result is also confirmed by previous studies (Farzin and Fattahi, 2018; Perera et al, 2020).

The results obtained complement the theoretical knowledge about the influence of social media on the brand image being formed and the further choice of a certain brand by consumers in the field of higher education. Also, the acquired knowledge can be used by marketing departments of universities to build a more effective policy of relations with existing and potential students.

18

Conclusion

The results of this study can help in understanding what factors influence the choice of applicants for future training organizations. Thus, according to the data obtained, involvement in social networks positively affects the perceived brand image, and content created by organizations and users of social networks. it has a positive effect on brand equity. Thus, higher education organizations should pay more attention to the development of social networks, generate high-quality content and involve students to share their reviews, opinions and other content regarding the place of study. Positive brand equity, in turn, affects the intention of students to choose a particular brand of the university. This study did not confirm the influence of electronic word-of-mouth on the relationship between brand equity and brand choice intention as a moderator, it can be assumed that electronic word-of-mouth can have a positive or negative impact on the relationship between variables at earlier stages of perception of the university brand.

The limitations of this study are a small sample of respondents. Another limitation of the study is that the respondents were only from two universities in Almaty. In the future, it is necessary to conduct a survey of students from different universities in Almaty and other cities of Kazakhstan. Perhaps the results will be different for residents of megacities and other cities.

In further studies of the influence of social media on the choice of educational organizations by the younger generation, generation Z can be considered, since representatives of this generation are future applicants and students. Also, in the model of choosing a University brand, you can consider other variables such as Brand Interactivity, Brand Credibility, etc.

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20

The Influence of Social Networks on the Choice of a University Brand by Generation Y
Gaukhar Mukhamediyeva, Nargiza Aliyeva

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21

The Influence of Social Networks on the Choice of a University Brand by Generation Y
Gaukhar Mukhamediyeva, Nargiza Aliyeva

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