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Branding and reputation as an influence to purchase.

Abstract

The overall aim of this study was to establish the importance of the higher education establishment brand to the potential student's purchase decision. Although the literature review did not provide clear outcomes it would seem that there is a theme emerging whereby perception of a brand and the reputation that it portrays is crucial to traditional universities in influencing purchase. Branding as an influencer emerges as highly important in the decision process with the building and communicating of a strong brand pertinent to a positive outcome.

A qualitative research approach was embarked upon by performing ten semi structured interviews with existing University Centre Grimsby (UCG) Business with Marketing students. The research strategy was grounded theory.

The findings reveal that the primary influencer in this particular scenario is location which opposes the majority of the literature, however it is noted by a few authors that location can be crucial for low socio economic areas which does concur with these findings.

It would have been beneficial to conduct research at an alternative Higher Education provider to establish any disparities. Additionally it would be beneficial and was a recommendation to complete a longitudinal study opposed to this cross sectional study to measure any changes over time.

Introduction

Recent variations offered in the way higher education in the United Kingdom is funded and students recruited with Government White Paper Students at the Heart of the System (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011) is rendering higher education providers exposed to the difficulties of a free market (Nedbalová 2014)

Thus, fostering a significant transformation in higher education, mutating into a service provider for anyone of any age (widening participation) who is willing to take out a student loan as a replacement for that of a select service, usually for 18-21 year olds. This is a further development from an earlier concept of widening participation. (Ramsden 2008 Harper and Quaye 2009). Moreover, the proliferation of new providers is creating a difficult challenge for higher education providers within further education to attract these new market segments whilst concurrently realising an underpinning of faithful clients (Bergerson 2017).

Furthermore, globalisation has further magnified this propagation, with universities competing worldwide with recognised ranking systems being utilised by consumers, further highlighting the importance of consumer perception.

The organisation, whereby the primary research was sourced, is the Grimsby Institute and it offers higher education courses based on partnerships with various universities, with the Business degree being offered through the University of Hull, with the marketing of the programmes conducted independently by Grimsby. Interestingly, according to Schofield et al (2013) further education colleagues are noted to accentuate aspects of teaching, learning and student support in the marketing communications, opposed to universities who focus upon reputation.

Although often considered a controversial theme (Jevons 2006) the management of the university brand is one of the most valuable endeavours confronting educators, and that the boosting of community support and enriching the image is arguably paramount. Conversely, it is consensus that although on the increase, only a limited number of universities are managed as corporate brands and encompassing it within their ethos and processes, also bestowing the view that branding has had a constrained impact on higher education literature over the years (Chapleo 2015. Burmann and Zeplin. 2014). Moreover, it is considered by Chapleo (2015) that it is questionable that branding and reputation are distinct within higher education.

This provides justification for further discussion within this script for the discussion of branding as an influence to purchase. Successful brands have the power to increase an organisation's efficiency and competitive advantage can be attained (Lowrie 2007). Contrarywise, it is asserted that branding in a non-profit organisation could create detrimental rivalry (Sargeant 2005).

Customers are the chief stakeholders in profit making organisations and in higher education students are the chief originators of revenue, therefore education is widely considered a service good and students primarily considered as customers rendering the study of factors driving customer purchases as seemingly valuable (Brown and Mazzarol 2008). Conversely, it is argued that if students fail it is not the university's

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liability due to the assumption that the intelligence and motives that the student produces plays a major part in the outcome. This dual aspect means it is not reasonable to employ a customer model (Hemsley-Brown 2011).

It is argued that establishments such as the University Centre Grimsby need to attract students in a different way to universities with a recognised reputation. It is considered that gaining market share will be an additional pressure (Schofield et al 2013).

The recruitment process is therefore a major concern in competing with this increasingly competitive education market generating the need to modify to this new environment with the communication strategy needing responsiveness (Nedbalová, et al 2014). Moreover, the HE provider and buyer are linked to each other, correspondingly through communication; the said provider aims to persuade customer purchase decisions and the student affecting the provider as a result of their choices (Mihaela 2014).

Hence, it could be argued that the primary aim in the examination of buyer behaviour is to determine why, in this circumstance, students behave in a particular way in specific situations. The Grimsby Institute's communication should attempt to have a positive influence on the students' behaviour and the significance and extent of the information should try to reduce any potential risk in the students' mind (Jisana 2014).

This research is an anti-realist ontology, and could be pronounced as a social constructionist epistemology formed at a specific moment in time. It pursued an embedded case study strategy centred upon the University Centre Grimsby. The investigation gathered qualitative information acquired from semi structured interviews, pertaining the inductive approach. The population sample was the business with marketing students that have enrolled on the degree programme and a systematic sampling method was conducted due to cost and small sample size being employed.

Literature Review

Consumer buyer behaviour

The understanding of why, when and how individuals as customers purchase commodities assist an organisation in constructing the marketing mix (Mowen 1988) thus rendering this marketing pursuit fundamental, and with consumers being all unique with their own individualities it promotes the knowledge of consumer behaviour further.

An early philosophy of customer behaviour was debated by Howard and Sheth (1969) whereby the eminence of the input alternatives is highlighted in the purchasing procedure and that customers would categorize these inputs prior to choosing. These being: external supplies of intelligence; important motivations such as distinguishing characteristics, benefits, quality and cost; symbolic incentives communicated optically and verbally about characteristics of the product; social motivations such as peers and family. Partly disputed by Nicosia (1976) cited in Mihaela (2014) who believed in a theory that the main influencer in the purchase decision is in an organisation's efforts

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to communicate with consumers through messages. This is comparable to the stimulus response (Jisana 2014) in which it emphasises the significance of the organisation's marketing communication mix in the purchase process. In addition this model theorises that the consumers 'black box' signifies the individual's awareness that is triggered with marketing amongst other stimuli that breeds a variety of reactions, and this is known as the stimulus response model.

These considerations span from wide-ranging social and cultural influences to attitudes, beliefs and motivations. Something needs to be suitably important to be a motive to pursue fulfilment; this could be linked to the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs model that suggests in rudimentary terms that there are five main areas of needs faced by individual: physiologica; security; love and belongingness;, self-esteem; and self-actualisation. Maslow hypothesised that man would progress through these elements but would need to satisfy an element before progressing onto the next (Allen, D.E. 2015). In marketing terms an organisations capability to encompass these motivational stimuli is crucial to gaining the exchange or positive purchase choice. An example might be that a sale of a car may relate to the second need for safety or self-esteem with the portrayal of confidence at the fourth level of the model. Consequentially there would be an alternative marketing communication to entice the potential customer. Therefore the UCG as a provider of higher education in a further education establishment needs to identify who their target audience is and persuade him that the product will deliver precisely that given need.

Economic, social, personal and technical choice criteria are offered by Elliott (1998) as knowledge that can be created regarding consumers. Personal and social fields along with the buying situation has affected these elements too (Aizen and Fishbein 1980). In many situations it is conceded that customers do not noticeably recognise reasons for buying (Mowen 1988).

Choice criteria

A key consideration that embodies rudiments considered by the individual when deciding what to purchase are choice criteria and each person will be driven by different standards (Welsh et al 2015).

The predisposition, search and choice theory by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is a model that represents university choice, whereby predisposition is the point at which one decides if they want to go to university. Perma (2006) implies that it incapsulates many stimuli such as economic, teachers, peers and family.

Comparable stimuli with the addition of direct conversations with universities forms the search phase and the choice phase is simpler with family and friends having less influence and the universities being the primary inspiration (Hossler and Gallagher 1997). This model was expanded upon and was not considered illustrative to low socioeconomic groupings and varying ethnic heritages (Bergerson 2017) along with the notion that individual feelings render it unsuitable (Welsh et al 2015). The prospective students may be influenced by existing social values or on the universities recruitment techniques.

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It is consensus (Burgess et al 2018 and Hooley and Lynch 1981) that prospective students analyse course content rigorously. There are a plethora of investigations that the quality of the education and the entry terms were highly notable (Stephenson et al 2015. Woodhall et al 2014 and Simões and Soares 2010). Likewise, Walsh et al (2015) cited that stimuli examples were location, content, social opportunities and reputation are a consideration. The price of education has risen tremendously since these investigations so they could be described as out of date and there is a need for rich data.

Bergerson (2017), which is arguably more current, suggests that there is a notable difference between the choice characteristics for students, that being a lessened choice due to the notion that certain entry requirements such as a particular level of achievement are needed in order to be eligible to apply. Furthermore (Allen 2015. Moogan 2011) believe locality and lower fees are considered crucial factors for those in lower socio economic groups. For many individuals the compilation of knowledge relating to higher education studies can be a difficult task with family, peers and teachers impacting both positively and negatively on the decision.

Briggs (2006) examined Scottish universities and concluded that reputation and location were of primary interest, however the final decision was predominantly influenced by friends, parents, teachers and promotional events at schools. In addition, a more recent study suggests that the institutions repute is the principal purchase criteria (Gajić* et al 2017).

Moreover, there is a notable lack of studies concentrating upon the United Kingdom denoting validation for supplementary investigations.

Buyer decision process

Although it is recognised that the purchase decision is a crucial consideration for any organisation there are many other elements in the consumer decision process that need the attention of marketers. The Engel-Kollam-Blackwell model (1978) cited in Jisana (2014) of buyer behaviour considers the decision process starting with the recognition of a need and ends with post purchase feelings. It is said to be crucial that the marketers need to be involved with the whole process. For example: needs recognition may involve an advertisement demonstrating a problem and how the product can resolve it; information search would involve the consumer being able to easily access information, perhaps through sales staff, websites, social media , leaflets and brochures; information evaluation would mean that the aforementioned material is redolent and relevant to the target audience to differentiate the product against competitors; purchase decision may involve ensuring the sales staff can efficiently close a sale, the product is obtainable through the appropriate medium such as an efficient website, retail outlet etc. It could be as simple as ensuring the packaging is alluring compared to competitors; post purchase evaluation may involve a good after care service or advertising to reinforce the purchase. This could suggest that branding is a clear consideration for the UCG and that will be analysed later in the script.

Moreover, all of this communication from an organisation to the consumer is just a part of the influence to purchase. Individuals communicate with large amounts of people

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online, through a plethora of devices (sometimes simultaneously) resulting in the fast movement of personal opinions and experiences that can have the power to influence other potential customers. This word of mouth marketing is supplementary to the marketing communication tools and considered a crucial facet of the marketing communication mix (Mihaela 2014). This is conceptualised by Nedbalová, et al (2014) suggesting that higher education marketing should not be just about the striking logos or advertisements but the prolonged capability to realise students' needs. The marketing of higher education is not the colourful logo or interactive website, but the long term ability to meet the clients' needs and maintain satisfaction thereby ensuring repeat trade and word of mouth recommendations (Gribb 2018). This arguably can only be achieved with this low cognitive dissonance at the post purchase decision stage (Elliott 1998).

Buying situation influence

The buying situation is another consideration made by Neal et al (2007) and Allen (2015), whereby there are limited, habitual or extended problem resolving buys which denotes the differing timelines in evaluation. Debatably the undergraduate purchase of a particular programme could be described as an extended problem solving matter due to the time line of evaluation and many choice criteria being prevalent in this life changing high risk purchase (Zaichkowsky 1985).

In opposition, with the surfeit of information accessible to the learner such as the current Teaching Excellence Framework (Hefce 2019), key information set data, National Student Survey and university league tables that aid the decision process, it may have reduced the decision time line as a result. However, a notable difference of opinion is demonstrated with Allen's (2015) FLAG model that implies that the purchase will conclude with whether the emotions are positive notwithstanding the apparent sizeable deliberation necessary.

This rational action with selection among alternatives can be said to often be made on the basis of accomplishing highest value at the smallest price (Shah et al 2017) The individuality and intricacy of purchase situations are the dominating factors in the decision process of a buying centre (Laroche et al 2003). Furthermore, the level of involvement and purchase frequency impacts on this with the level of involvement being variable dependent upon customers' individual perception of buying situation with the level of impact being variable from one individual to another (Kim et al 1998). In addition the level of involvement can be impacted by whether the choice is between known brands and whether there are many differences amongst those brands.

It is consensus (Allen 2015. Jisana 2014) that nearly all theories of buyer behaviour are centred upon the notion that consumers attempt to attain the maximum gains. This pertains to the behavioural economics theory of how consumers make economic decisions. Alternatively, the hybrid perspective proposes that sometimes decisions are not based upon price or quality as one may assume but are influenced by feelings and various signals in the environment. Furthermore the rational theory advocates that choices can vary dependent upon the source of the funding as consumers are willing to take supplementary risks when using money that is perceived as being somebody else's, for example a pooled resource for the housekeeping. Conversely the prospect

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theory is focused upon the belief that choices are dependant purely upon the sense of gains and losses (Gajić et al 2017) It is further examined by (Lowrie 2007) who states that sometimes consumers partake in bounded rationality in decision making whereby they are pleased to take the acceptable easy choice in trade for precious time and effort. It could be disputed that this would depend upon the typical influencers already discussed such as economic and lifestyle factors, whereby some individuals would consider 'time as money' or simply their lifestyle is such that time is limited.

Conversely, but comparable to Jabbar et al's (2018) limited, habitual or extended model the elaboration likelihood model believes that in high involvement purchases one will adopt the direct path to persuasion concentrating on the buyer's cognitive retort, but within low involvement, one will follow a peripheral route (see figure 1) with alternative indications being the decider (Jisana 2014).

It could be argued that imperfections within these models have formed since consumer's are communicating multidimensionally through many mediums simultaneously, resulting in consumers being more receptive to many messages that are short and punchy but highly persuasive regardless of the buyer situation. This would suggest that even with a suggested high involvement, extended problem solving service purchase such as a degree there would be less of a likelihood that the consumer performed such lengthy enquiry and would simply be persuaded by a couple of messages on a social media platform. However, once again it can be further disputed in that 'shopping' for some consumers is a pleasure and is treated as a social event and would probably be very lengthy pursuit indeed. Moreover, the buying situation in terms of online versus offline could be a notable consideration.

Branding as an influencer

It could be argued that a strong brand is a significant intangible asset. It commands deep consumer devotion (Burmann and Zeplin 2014). Rothchild (1978) defines a *brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." A brand is thus a product or service whose dimensions differentiate it in some way from other products or services designed to satisfy the same need.* The disparities may be coherent, tangible, operational, or emotional and intangible involving what the brand represents theoretically but they should satisfy their need, which can relate to the aforementioned Maslow's Hierarchical model (Coates 1998). Mastercard is a brand that manages to encompass both the rational and emotional advantages in their communication of the product, with the acceptance worldwide and the strap line 'there are some things money can't buy; for everything else, there's MasterCard'.

Early brand development was based on the marketing mix, encompassing the four 'Ps' (Heding et al 2009). It could be said that the product is the study experience received; the place could be the physical environment; the price could be all the cost encountered, fees for programme and accommodation; promotion will encompass any marketing communication activities.

Kapferer (1992) suggests a brand identity prism whereby a brand should have their own story with six components, Brand Physique, such as Cola's bottle shape and colour; personality, example being Mountain Dew drink from Pepsico, communicates exciting activity with sports celebrities being used to influence consumers; brand culture, the ethos creating a following, such as Harley Davidson who have a large brand community; Relationship with consumer, for example Nike bears a Greek name which narrates to explicit social values and body image; Reflection, portraying the type of consumer who will use it through the communication; Self-image, the inner of who the consumer is, what they see themselves as to the outside world. Alternatively, Aaker (1991) theorises brand equity as owning brand assets and liabilities which either enhance or detract the worth of the brand dependent upon the individual consumer, those being, brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations. Likewise, *ibid* allude that interaction with the brand community increases the brand strength and both traditional and online brand communities have comparable success.

Once again it is clear that the quality of communication of these elements to the target audience is crucial, and the notion of everyone perceiving these elements differently is apparent. This is indicating that the UCG brand as an influencing factor is sizeable.

Non-profit organisations have historically viewed branding as unnecessary and capable of fostering damaging relationships with rivals, however, branding can offer something more concrete and consumer's choice process more personal to them as it re-enacts emotions and belonging (Blumenthal and Bergstrom 2003).

Harvard Business School could be presented as an illustration of an educational brand that is powerful, since it has an obvious stance in prospective students' thoughts as high quality and enhanced future employment benefits (Dibb and Simkin 1993)

Consumers learn about a brand through past experience, however in addition to this their knowledge is attained through external stimuli such as marketing efforts, i.e advertising, but perhaps more pertinent opinions are formed by the aforementioned word of mouth phenomena whereby they are influenced by other individuals. A profound development in marketing is the acknowledgement of the importance of an organisation communicating with opinion leaders and formers to assist in them spreading the word and influencing the wider target audience (Rutler et al 2017). In reality a brand inhabits the thoughts of the consumer or in other words it is their perception of the product (Burmann, and Zeplin. 2014) and, consequently, a 'brand' is to some extent a subjective notion whereby not one individual is feeling or reacting in the same way (Kapferer, 2001).

This emphasises the importance of brand positioning and the organisation managing this effectively. It could be suggested that all higher education providers have a brand; it is whether it is recognised by both the employees and the prospective students that is crucial to consumer behaviour.

In reality, the nature of branding means that all universities have a brand by default, but whether these brands are actively embraced, managed and understood is another matter.

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The University Centre is probably considered as providing a service, therefore it could be indicated that the perception of the brand would involve elements such as knowledge of satisfied and loyal customers, internal service quality with satisfied employees and known continued success rates with many years of being a provider.

It is suggested by Elliott (1998) that a successful way of communicating and creating a brand positioning in the minds of the consumer is by articulating the brand essence or core brand promise. This could be achieved with a short phrase that depict the soul of the brand, and the employees would comprehend what the organisation represents and portray this in the service provided. Nike adopted a three word phrase of "authentic athletic performance" and all efforts now reflect these brand values. Conversely, it is thought that a lot of brand likings are founded post purchase as individuals want to justify their choices (Marketing week 2017).

Service providers should make particularly good efforts in their internal marketing with the motivation of employees to provide customer satisfaction and this must precede any external marketing efforts (Burmann and Zeplin. 2014) and will assist in the creation of a strong brand. Furthermore it is suggested by Edgett and Parkinson (1993) that a service brand needs to communicate an image, possibly with a symbol, along with creating an image of more able and reliable employees and processes and any distinctive features. For the University Centre it could be a personal service pertaining a small provider.

In opposition (Hatch and Shultz 2003), most universities are similar in what they offer, and therefore arguably the individual courses are 'products' and could offer the basis for distinction. Aaker (2004) mirrors this opinion viewing most organisations displaying any real differentiation. This view could be said to render universities as having no need to propel their brand positively in the eyes of the students as 'higher education providers' are all basically the same. However, it is conceded that a fruitful brand is one which connects their strategic vision and culture (Nedbalová, et al 2014).

Customer Experience (CX) as an influencer

The customer experience or learner journey could be argued to be an influencer in the purchase criteria, either as a returning customer or as a result of prospective students' decision making unit influencing the decision as a result of their learner journey, ultimately an example of the aforementioned word of mouth (Berry et al 1980). The student experience is constructed with how they perceived every rudiment or touchpoint during their study, therefore if this is a positive experience it will develop enhanced loyalty, contentment and constructive appraisals (Hotjar 2019). According to Javetski (2016) the consumer journey begins from the instant they contemplate an acquisition. Hence, this constructive perception that the students portray can deliver assistance in the enrolment of new students.

The output of these experiences are not only portrayed through word of mouth, but are published in the aforementioned NSS data. The NSS attains the opinions of existing students with multiple questions around all touchpoints, from teaching and resources to transferable skills and the student union (Office for Students 2019). Therefore, reinforcing the notion that the University Centre Grimsby's brand is of

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crucial importance in the recruitment of new students. Furthermore, other publications, such as media university tables that reflect the students' opinions of their 'CX' represents communication that can influence a purchase.

Additionally, a similar publication 'The Teaching and Excellence Framework', formulated by the Office for Students (OFS) but judged by independent academics and students, demonstrates whether an institution gains a bronze, silver and gold in teaching and providing skills for future employment is promoted as a tool to assist the student choice (OFS 2019). It is considered that it inspires institutions to cultivate an improved experience for the learner (ibid). The University Centre Grimsby received a silver award, and the primary research may reveal further recommendations here.

Interestingly Lyons (2019) suggests that many executives are reducing the emphasis on customer experience believing business transformation and innovation should take priority. Conversely, Hensley (2019) maintains that CX is indicative of whether a customer will ever purchase from an organisation.

The University Centre considers that the consumer journey is paramount, with a student centred approach to all of the processes, promoting a student voice throughout. This justifies the further investigation concerning the students' beliefs on this topic.

Recruitment techniques

Higher education providers need to perform activities to adapt to the aforementioned recent difficult market events. It could be argued that there is now a need to utilise an appropriate communication mix to reach the target audience and compete (Chapleo, 2015). In addition it reinforces the need to brand effectively (Hanover Research 2014). It could be suggested that simple advertising would be inferior and an integrated marketing communication strategy is crucial in the recruitment process (Mihaela 2014). It needs to be recognised that although the target market is paramount, the wider target audience is integral, with appropriate communication to the community, alumni, parents, schools, colleges, and employees; these examples are not exhaustive (Berry et al 1980). This is built upon by Mihaela, (2014) alluding that it is important to communicate messages in the mind of the consumer. Gaining a knowledge of the phases of purchasing, when and where will the communication be more appropriate and what message will be more relevant.

It could be said that the recruitment process has developed in recent years as it encompasses online and digital space, with improved interactive websites and social media, with the target audience using and accessing these points on multiple devices simultaneously (Hanover Research 2014).

Prospective students of the University Centre during the information search and evaluation stages of the decision making process can evaluate a plethora of information such as programme particulars, reputation, career prospects, facilities such as libraries, restaurant, coffee lounge, information technology and pending scheduled open events. The cost of the programme, which is lower than traditional universities is also available. According to Rutler et al (2017) the cost of the course is a significant criteria when making the decision.

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The University Centre conduct several open events during the year where by individuals can talk to teaching staff, explore the facilities and gain advice around student finance and accommodation. This could be argued to be an important part of prospective students' choices and an effective event generating positive public relations, however, conversely in the University Centre's position of targeting predominantly local individuals it is arguably just an opportunity for just a 'look around' as they have already made the final decision to attend Grimsby. Furthermore, the aforementioned study by Briggs (2006) concluded that events held in high schools was a major contributary factor rather than the events held at the new educational institution.

In agreement, a more recent study conducted by Gajić et al (2017) suggests that the communication activities that universities should adopt to be more successful during the consumer decision process is an integration of digital and traditional methods. The personal contact with potential students with public relations activities, being exceedingly visible at sixth form schools/college events, communicating well with not only the student but influential family members and friends they are accompanying. This mirrors Grib (2018) maintaining that marketing communications is a crucial facet of a business's ability to be competitive and achieve the corporate strategies, but is often undervalued. This activity combined with interactive presence on various digital platforms were considered vital in gaining the trust of the potential student. In agreement, Gajic et al (2017), denotes it is not enough to rely upon the utilisation of university websites as audiences expect integration.

This integrated approach is a consensus with many marketing authors (Fill and Turnbull 2017. Gajic 2017. Grib 2018). Moreover, in addition to billboards and online presence more inventive activities such as competitions and computer games have been cited as successful recruitment methods (Greenacre & Schulz, 2014).

Literature review conclusion

The overall aim of this study is to establish the importance of the higher education establishment brand to the purchase decision of a potential student. Although the literature review did not provide clear outcomes it would seem that there is a theme emerging whereby perception of a brand and the reputation that portrays is crucial to traditional universities in influencing purchase. This indeed concurs with literature suggesting that within a service organisation their reputation it crucial. It does demonstrate though that there are numerous other influencing factors such as location and cost that are additional considerations for a student. In addition the cost element has disparities of opinion, whereby the rational theory advocates that choices can vary dependent upon the source of the funding as consumers are willing to take supplementary risks when using money that is perceived as being somebody else's and arguably many students do not perceive a loan as their money, many believing they will never pay it back.

The purchase situation has been identified as important, however it has uncovered some anomalies, such as, many students are making decisions as early as their time at sixth form school and although you may consider a costly degree as a high

involvement purchase it is often not involving lengthy research on part of the consumer.

According to the literature, branding as an influencer emerges as highly important in the decision process with the building and communicating of a strong brand pertinent to a positive outcome, this will be further investigated later in the script to establish if this is accurate in the purchase of a business degree.

Research Findings

The University Centre is a facility within the Grimsby further education college which provides higher education for the community. It is located in a low socio economic area with approximately 70 students enrolled on different programmes in the Business department. The Business department achieved an overall satisfaction rate of 85.19% in the 18-19 National student survey results (Office For Students 2019) in which although there could be improvement, it is an promising result.

The purchase criteria of the business degree is the focus of the studies and it could be argued to be the provision of a service rather than a product in marketing terms. This is arguable due to it being intangible, inseparable, variable and perishable (Edgett and Parkinson 1993). Conversely, it is contemplated that the possession of the physical document, knowledge and business skills constitute a more tangible consequence (Berry and Parasuraman 1991).

The population was 30 individuals with varying genders and ages ranging from 18 to 60, however, only 10 agreed to partake, which represents 33%. This represents an agreeable representation, though it would have been desirable that a higher number had contributed.

First standard question

Why did you enrol on the business management degree here at the UCG?

Answers were:

Never looked at going anywhere else, didn't have an alternative because I have children and a husband who works around here. I need to be able to get to the school quickly if they ring, and I need to get them to school and pick them up, why would I go anywhere else. I didn't look at the content, just wanted a degree.

I wanted to study again as I didn't do well at school and this was the closest, I probably wouldn't have got in anywhere else anyway, haven't got any other qualifications.

My friend is studying here so she took me to the open event and introduced me to one of her tutors and I decided to apply. Until my friend came here I didn't know you could get a degree without having done well at school.

I did my business diploma here and didn't want to go away to study. I didn't look elsewhere.

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I went to an open event to see what I could do and the lady I saw said I should apply for a degree and not a diploma. She took my details and I was invited in for an interview, and here I am. I didn't look anywhere else, no point when you can do it on your doorstep.

I looked at several universities but decided the lower cost overall was what I wanted. I don't have to pay out for digs and I can continue with my job.

It is easier, round the corner and I wasn't sure I would even be able to go to another Uni. I didn't have many options, I have a young child and I'm a single mum, it was a bonus that I could get the student loans, it's helped me survive!

I only signed up because I went with my son when he signed up and I just asked if I could do it too. It was a spare of the moment thing, as I'm retired I thought I would give it a go to fill my time. She signed me up there and then. I was surprised as I do not have qualifications, I just worked my way up through the system , on the job, do you know what I mean?

Just wanted to continue here as I didn't want to go away. I knew that the classroom sizes were small as we had talks with tutors whilst we were doing our diplomas here. I liked business and was hoping for distinction so I just decided to stay at Grimsby.

My mate said he was going to do it so I enquired by phone and the next thing I was being interviewed and offered a place. Didn't consider anywhere else, I probably wouldn't have got in as I've got no qualifications and anyway wanted to go with my mate.

There was an overwhelming indication (70%) from these statements that location was a primary concern, unsurprising perhaps given that the majority of students are non-traditional. Non-traditional being those incorporated in the widening participation concept, of differing age groups and social backgrounds. Furthermore this partly concurs with Walsh et al (2015) who suggested the main influencing factors were reputation, social opportunities, location and content. It perhaps could be further explained in that the UCG is not an actual University and that fact may attract a notoriety which dissuades high achieving traditional A' level students from applying, hence the low level of traditional student taking part in this study.

Interestingly these answers could also be explained with the choices being narrowed as a result of individuals needing to attain relevant qualifications to enable purchase due to the high percentage of 60% not believing they could apply elsewhere due to the lack of existing qualifications. It could be suggested that it is widely accepted that universities require specific qualifications pertaining to 'UCAS points' in order to be accepted with variations in the amount of points needed to gain this entry, however, although the entry requirements for the UCG business programme requires traditional students to attain a low level of UCAS points, non-traditional students can partake in an entry test which overrides said requirement.

Some studies suggest that prominent influencers such as friends and family (Perma 2006) - although this was not pronounced in these results it was an underlying trait of

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the data, with 20% clearly stating this was a criteria - the 70% quoting locality could be assumed to have this criteria in order to maintain relationships with friends and family with this choice, this is a limitation of the results, and a further direct question regarding the influencers could have been posed. It opposes alternative studies which imply that family and friends have less influence and the universities being the primary inspiration (Hossler and Gallagher 1997).

The explicit lack of concern about the content of the course could be explained as a direct result of the overwhelming indication that a majority of the applicants did not believe they had a choice of university as a result of their circumstances rendering the content of the programme irrelevant.

Second standard question:

At the time of enrolling what distance in km was the campus from your home?

All answers were between 1-25KM with 70% being less than 3km

Intriguingly, given that the UCG is situated in a low socioeconomic area with social deprivation and that 100% of interviewees were local, it further coincides with a plethora of studies (Walsh et al 2015. Bergerson 2017, Stephenson et al 2015) implying that students in these groups such as those who live in the vicinity of the UCG are more interested in locality than those in higher socioeconomic groups.

Third standard question

The perspective of the next interview question was to establish the perception of the experience the prospective student had of the recruitment marketing techniques instigated by the UCG. The analysis of which would inform my recommendations to the UCG in the later chapter.

Describe your experience of the recruitment marketing techniques, for example, advertisements, social media, open events.

The following responses were provided:

I saw the large advert board sat on the front of the college garden telling me the dates of the open events. I went to the open event and looked around all the stalls, plumped for the business stall as I thought it would be more likely to get me a job afterwards. The man was nice and helpful so I completed an application form. I haven't noticed any other stuff elsewhere about the UCG.

I didn't see any adverts or go to any events, I just phoned up and they sent me an application form and that's it.

My friend took me to the open event, no I didn't see any adverts about it. Not noticed anything else.

I'd seen the bill boards outside the college as I already went there and we had talks during this time from the tutors in the UCG so we knew all about it. I've seen them on Facebook too.

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I went to the open event, phoned up and asked them when it was, it was for the college not the UCG. I did see the board on the front but didn't take notice of it as I was invited for an interview following the college event.

As I said, I looked at lots of Uni's, looked at their web sites, and went to their open events. I did look on Facebook too.

I phoned up to ask and I was sent an application form, didn't go to an open event and didn't notice anything otherwise. But to be honest I didn't look (laughing).

Never noticed, as I said it was a last minute thing.

As I have been coming here for years anyway I probably did see stuff without taking it in. The tutors coming to give us a talk was all I remember.

No, just phoned up, I have seen bits around the town over the years, I just new about the place as I've lived here for donkeys years.

The responses from the interviewees were somewhat consistent in that apart from 40% who attended the open events and had seen the bill boards outside the UCG, the apparent lack of presence in terms of marketing communications is evident. Certainly, it could be argued that some responses suggested that there was not a need to observe such content as they had either been influenced by a friend, were existing college students or had just taken it upon themselves to telephone the UCG for further information. Furthermore, in conjunction with the knowledge that 100% of the respondents were local and knowledgeable of the area, this may justify this lack of observation or assist to diminish the relevance of this result.

There were only 20% of responses implying they had observed social media response and given that it is presently a digital world quite remarkable. Gajić* et al (2017) agrees advocating gaining the trust of potential students with digital presence at vital.

Fourth standard question

The context of the following two questions is to establish the relevance of branding in the university sector in terms of recruitment and buyer choice. In addition the CX, with the results of the National Student Survey being represented.

Explain the extent to which the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), National Student survey, Key Information Set data and university league tables affected your purchase.

All of the interviewees were consistent in that they were not aware of this data at the time of applying. When asking if they were aware of the data now, only 20% replied positively with regards to the TEF awards and replied:

I've seen the thing on the outside of the UCG saying it has silver, but that is all I know about it.

Just seen the banner on the front of the building saying its silver

The UCG does communicate the silver TEF award on the outside of the building in several places and disconcerting that these have not been observed. It could be explained with the theory of noise in marketing communications whereby the message is being interrupted and not being encoded appropriately, and this can be as a result of a variety of reasons such as inappropriate language of level of education in terms of the receiver (Rutler et al 2017).

Moreover, it could be explained considering previous responses pertaining to locality and previous educational attainment as once again that predisposed perception that most of the applicants would not be able to go to another university actually could render this particular set of data partly irrelevant.

Clearly, it can be seen from these results that the excellence of the education is not a significant criteria however, additionally the aforementioned analysis supports this notion. Intriguingly, this result opposes those of Stephenson et al (2015) Woodhall et al (2014) and Simões and Soares (2010) who believe excellence of the education as being a significant criteria.

Fifth standard question

How did you depict the UCG brand prior to enrolment?

Answers comprised of the following:

> *I thought it was good as I've got family members who had been to the college and they were happy with it. I probably assumed the UCG would be the same.*

> *I just thought of it at a college, not really knowing anything more.*

> *My opinion was that it was a fun place to be, my friend loved it and said it was a real laugh.*

> *I knew it as an existing student, it was okay, never been really keen on school so I suppose it wasn't entirely positive.*

> *Didn't give it much thought, just knew I wanted to improve my job opportunities but I had heard there was a lot of choice there.*

> *Didn't depict it at all*

> *Just new it as the local college nothing else.*

> *Didn't give it any thought.*

> *Not sure really, just thought of it as a college like any other.*

> *Thought it was a good place to learn according to my mate anyway.*

The results portrayed an overpowering disregard of the knowledge of the UCG as a brand, with 70% having no real apparent stance. This could be explained by 70% of said respondents being unaware of the brand as it did not form part of their significant thoughts prior to application due to their apparent lack of belief in themselves as a result of not achieving in their past. Moreover, the results do not marry with a plethora of articles cited in Walsh et al (2015) that proposes reputation is a crucial influencer,

however, explanations may be that reputation only becomes important when a number of brands are available offering similar products and it is suggested (Hatch and Shultz 2003) that all universities offerings are similar and there is no significant differentiation (Aaker 2004). Additionally, the primary research has found that in the students perception there were not any other brands available to them and coupled with a thought that all universities offerings are similar there is no significant differentiation.

The 30% that at least had an opinion of the UCG did portray a reasonably positive leaning which in most parts was as a result of word of mouth marketing (WOMM), whereby the message is dispersed through others and it is a powerful form of communication both positively and negatively. This is said to be as a result of the credibility WOMM attains, with opinion formers influencing (in this case peers) and passing on messages therein (Rutler et al 2017). This is further justified by Grib (2018) who states that higher education marketing should be the long term ability to meet the customer needs and ensure repeat business through positive word of mouth.

The sixth standard question

The perspective of the last question is to examine the interviewees experience of the UCG's marketing methods within the decision making process which will give an overview of the success of the marketing recruitment techniques and the communication of the UCG brand. In addition it will portray the post purchase decision, and this will provide an indication whether the student's journey is positive and a positive relationship has been formed.

In relation to marketing disciplines, describe your experience at each stage of the decision making process:

Need recognition:

The students mostly (60%) stated that they were not influenced by any UCG communications at this stage. Alternatively the remaining interviewees replied:

> *My college spoke to me about what I will do next, and this occurred lots of times.*

> *I was asked while I was at college.*

> *I saw a bus advert and it made me think*

> *The day I went with my son for him to sign up, that made me think.*

Information search

70% of students stated that nothing was experienced at this stage of the decision process. The further 30% stated:

> *I looked on University websites and the UCAS website. I then went along to the open events to look around.*

> *The college discussed alternative universities and we had a few sessions doing this.*

> *I did it at college with my teacher, we looked at other university websites*

Evaluation of alternatives

70% of students answered stating that they did not evaluate alternatives, the remaining 30% said:

The open events and website helped me decide.

The website and the college helped me decide

The college helped me decide.

Purchase decision

100% of the students stated that the purchase decision was not influenced by any marketing methods. A majority stated that they did not have any alternatives and the subject of cost and being at home was raised by 30% of students who stated:

I wanted to stay at home so decision was easy

The cost and being able to continue my job made my decision.

Just being at home, not marketing

The distinct lack of recognition of marketing techniques at each stage of the decision process is pertinent to low involvement purchases, whereby there are many choices with little differences between brands. This could be argued to be unexpected as the purchase of an expensive service or product such as a degree could be considered a high involvement purchase with lengthy gathering and evaluation of information in order to come to a satisfactory purchase. Conversely it could be explained in that as previously conversed most universities are not differentiated and have similar offerings.

Furthermore, buyer behaviour theory (Jisana 2014) previously discussed in chapter three suggesting the stimulus response model with the 'black box' representing the consumers mind and considerations such as social and cultural influences to attitudes, beliefs and motivations could explain the responses. This is justified in the motivational differences in low socio economic areas, whereby aspirations may be impaired by social aspects experienced. Furthermore, it could be argued that there is an explicit integration of similarities of justifications of the non-traditional students and their motivations for study.

Post purchase decision:

All applicants were satisfied with their post purchase decision and clarified that the support and communication experienced from the UCG once they had enrolled was excellent and the relationship had been fostered well. Some comments were:

The tutors are fabulous and make me feel comfortable

Everyone is lovely and the experience is fabulous

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I like that tutors know my name and not just my face. I like that the tutors are always available and easy accessible. I enjoy the facilities and resources available on campus, but I also like the sense of pride when I put on my lanyard, I am part of the UCG. I feel satisfied with my purchase

The results for the post purchase decision and CX causing a reduced cognitive dissonance (Jisana 2014) can be justified as the UCG business department has small cohorts that benefit from a personalised service and support. This correlates with the positive NSS (2019) data of 85.19% attained by the business department, conceding these students would have taken part in the survey it is following a pattern.

These positive results should indicate a positive relationship and customer journey, however unless the UCG utilise this positivity within its marketing strategy it will be partly wasted. That saying because to some extent it should be reinforced again that positive WOMM is powerful and these complimentary messages may be spread through this method. It could be argued however that as they were being interviewed by an employee of the UCG the responses could be distorted if they felt as though they could not provide an honest answer here.

Summary

There are several perceptions emphasised from the primary findings chapter; firstly the interviewees' apparent lack of knowledge of marketing techniques portrayed by the UCG prior to becoming a student; secondly, the reputation or brand was only marginally considered by the learners; thirdly there is an overwhelming influence of location as an influencer; fourthly, the post purchase decision was encouraging, indicating the CX and reputation of the brand is positive; fifthly, the researcher has established that a pilot sample of interviews would have been preferable to ascertain the appropriateness of the questions posed.

Analysis of results

Choice criteria

As previously established the primary influencer for the business student at the UCG was location, and this partly concurs with Walsh et al (2015) who suggested the main influencing factors were reputation, social opportunities, location and content.

Furthermore the content of the course and reputation did not play any part in the UCG consumers' decision, which numerous studies imply is crucial to decision making (Nedbalová et al 2014). Further expanding on this, it is consensus both from early and contemporary studies that the programme content is a noteworthy influencer with the potential students evaluating the programmes carefully (Hooley and Lynch 1981 and Burgess et al 2018). This is in total opposition to the primary results, which could be as a result of the aforementioned low socio economic group discussion or the fruitless effort by the UCG to create effective information for the information stage of the decision process (Jisana 2014).

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It could be argued that early work by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and the predisposition theory cited in Perna (2006) does agree with the results to some extent with some of the applicants being influenced by peers and teachers in relation to whether to even attend university in the first place.

The overwhelming need by the interviewees for low entry requirements mirrors the studies by Welsh et al (2015) stating the choice is narrowed as a result of the need to accomplish specific qualifications to empower purchase or none at all in the case of the UCG. This could be argued to be a positive strategy for the UCG, but conversely could it to be said part of the reason that the UCG is not attracting traditional students from other areas of the country. It can be perceived as an indication of quality of teaching and provisions should a university insist upon high 'A' level grades or UCAS points to qualify.

Buyer decision process

According to Gribs (2014) as a result of busy lives and elevating customer demand to be successful interaction needs to be cohesive and multi-faceted to be seen and reminisced. Thus, the apparent lack of experience of the marketing communications by the respondents was remarkable, indicating that there is a need for an improvement by the UCG in some methods of communication.

Customer experience CX

The primary research analysis was remarkably in approval of the positive customer experience extended by the UCG with all respondents very satisfied with the personal service received. This is excellent for the UCG as studies suggest that this positive experience will foster enhanced loyalty, contentment and constructive appraisals (Hotjar 2019). Moreover, Hensley (2019) maintains that CX is indicative of whether a customer will ever purchase from an organisation. Hence, this constructive perception that the students portray can deliver assistance in the enrolment of new students.

Although this is a positive result this very fact is not being exploited fully by the UCG in communicating this to the population and building the aforementioned brand as a service provider.

Recruitment techniques

The primary results pertaining to the experience of the marketing techniques was poor as only 40% having noticed any form of communications. This is unfortunate due to the highly competitive market it exists within and It could be argued that there is now more than ever a need to utilise an appropriate communication mix to reach the target audience and compete (Chapleo, 2015). Furthermore it reinforces the need for the UCG to brand effectively (Hanover Research 2014). It could be suggested that simple advertising would be inferior and an integrated marketing communication strategy is crucial in the recruitment process (Mihaela 2014).

Branding as an influencer

It has been established that the UCG brand was predominantly unknown to the respondents' and considering that a strong brand can offer something more to an

organisation's marketing success encompassing something personal with emotion and belonging to a consumer's choice process (Bergstrom 2003) it is a learning curve for the UCG.

As an individual usually learns about a brand through past experience (Rutler et al 2017) this is not generally true of most new potential students of a University, thus rendering their knowledge being attained through external stimuli such as marketing efforts, i.e advertising as more pertinent. In addition, as found in the primary research, 20% of the learners had formed their opinion through peers, which could be improved upon due to the profound development in marketing being acknowledgement of the importance of an organisation communicating with opinion leaders and formers to assist in them spreading the word and influencing the wider target audience (ibid).

The UCG could be said to be providing a service and this low perceived knowledge by the interviewees could be particularly damaging as a service brand needs to communicate an image, possibly with a symbol, along with creating an appearance of more able and reliable employees and processes and any distinctive features (Bray (2008) due to the arguably lack of tangibility it can offer.

It has been seen that brand reputation is crucial in higher education in terms of an influencer, however in terms of the UCG location is the primary choice criteria. That said, it would be prudent for the UCG in terms of market penetration to increase the brand awareness through the marketing recruitment techniques in order to widen the audience to encourage students from other geographical areas too. If this is a success it could render the brand and reputation more influential.

Limitations to the study and future recommended research

It could be said that a limitation to this study is the cross sectional time horizon looking at a snapshot in time as it would be recommended for future research that a longitudinal nature be prescribed with a more detailed examination of the University Centre's existing marketing communications in order to make recommendations in relation to the buyer behaviour findings.

The interviewees were pre-selected existing business with marketing students and not randomly selected which could affect the validity. The additional limitation was the percentage in agreement to be interviewed, an increase in this would have assisted in the reliability of the outcomes. Furthermore, the investigation was constrained to the UCG only and coupled with the aforementioned preselection of the population findings can only be observed as symptomatic and ought to be substantiated with further research. Moreover, the generalisability of the discoveries could be compromised.

It was recognised that a focus group may have encouraged more participation and yielded a more valid outcome, however in argument to this the semi structured interviews had the potential to gain rich research and increased clarification in some areas if necessary.

Further study recommended would attempt to incorporate a larger population to assist in mitigating the possible low uptake in participation and improve generalisability and

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validity. The study could examine another higher education provider in order to make comparisons and assist with marketing communications recommendations being made.

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