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## To “like” or “not to like”: the relation among Facebook, brand attachment and loyalty in Higher Education Institutions

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### Abstract

Social media marketing is assuming a growing importance in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). However, most of these institutions fail in terms of the results achieved. In fact, while some HEI pages have a significant number of fan interactions, others reveal very low engagement. This paper aims at understanding the relationship between HEI brand attachment and the engagement of students with the respective pages on social media. It is based on a quantitative research focused on Facebook. Answers were collected through a questionnaire self-administered to 1200 students from various Portuguese universities and polytechnic institutes. Data was statistically analyzed by structural equation modeling. The results show that students who follow the HEI Facebook page tend to have a higher level of the “consumption” of content on the Facebook page related with brand attachment and loyalty, while in students who do not follow the page this impact is only in attachment to brand (not loyalty). In this line, the study has significant theoretical and managerial contributions to understand the importance of social media in relation to brand attachment and loyalty in HEI.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Higher Education Institutions, Brand Attachment, Loyalty

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the use of digital technologies and the need for social relations via digital have undergone a constant evolution and are increasingly essential factors in differentiation strategies in a global and interactive world.

In the context of Higher Education, Gutman and Miaoulis (2003) state that the website is often the first place where a future student seeks information, that is, he views the courses that the HEI offers, dates, contacts, etc. Therefore, before the appearance of social media, the website was mainly a digital marketing tool for HEIs. However, nowadays, Merrill (2011, p. 26) considers that “university marketing departments can use social media to promote, distribute information, improve the brand, engage future students and gain insights into the needs of the target audience and competing practices.”

Social media are considered a crucial tool for HEIs due to their low cost, immediacy and use by a large number of students (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012). Therefore, HEIs must work on the website and social media as a way not only to attract candidates, but also as a means of interaction and dialogue between students, alumni, institutions and professors in the educational and knowledge sharing processes (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

Social media marketing has taken a prominent role as most HEIs have at least a presence on a (some, even several) social media platform and it could improve brand attachment and loyalty of students.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This investigation intends to analyze the relationship among the engagement of students in HEI facebook page, brand attachment, and loyalty in Portuguese Higher Education Institutions. The main objective of this work is to demonstrate the importance of a “like” in HEI Facebook pages.

Facebook was chosen for this study because it is the most used platform worldwide (Tsai & Men, 2017), as well as in Portugal (Marktest, 2017). It was used a quantitative methodology. The sample is made up of 856 students of both sexes (69,7% female and 30,3% male) who follow Facebook page and 440 students (70,2% female and 29,8% male) who not follow Facebook page, from Universities of: Aveiro, Beira Interior, Évora, Coimbra, ISCTE, Lisboa, Minho, Nova de Lisboa, Porto and Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro. Within the scope of the Polytechnique Institutes, responses were collected from: Bragança, Castelo Branco, Coimbra, Guarda, Leiria, Lisboa, Porto, Setúbal e Viseu.

### 2.1 MEASURE INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire was divided into 8 parts: 1) indication of whether or not to be a student in higher education, having a Facebook profile and following or not the HEI page; 2) frequency of use and importance of social networks; 3) Facebook engagement profile; 4) engagement in Facebook related to the HEI; 5) Brand Attachment; 6) Loyalty 7) characterization of the student. Mostly closed responses (7-point Likert scale option) were used, especially those relating to assessing engagement, brand attachment and loyalty. The scales were adopted by the following authors: Social Media Engagement from Muntinga *et al.*, (2011) and Schivinski *et al.* (2016); Brand Attachment from Park *et al.*, (2010) and Loyalty scale from Brown and Mazzarol (2009).

### 2.2 PROCEDURE

The questionnaire was disseminated via (institutional) email and in Facebook groups of students from the HEIs, thus reaching a large part of students in Portuguese Higher education Institutions. Exploratory and descriptive statistical analyzes were carried out to characterize the sample. Reliability ( $\alpha$ -Cronbach) and validity (factor analysis using the Bartlett sphericity test, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and the Varimax method) were ensured. The hypothesized model was tested by using Structural Model Equations (SEM), which we implemented with SPSS and AMOS 22.0.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education Institutions are increasingly adopting marketing and brand management strategies in the face of competitive pressures to which they are subject. The global competitive environment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Whisman, 2009), the decrease in government financial support, as well as changes in teaching itself (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Wilkins *et al.*, 2015) led HEIs to rethink their strategies.

HEI are guided by a market orientation (Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004), meeting students' expectations (Elliott & Healy, 2001), implementing quality programs (Bay & Daniel, 2001), and promoting loyalty.

Several researchers (Thackeray *et al.*, 2012; Walsh *et al.*, 2013) recommend that published content encourages discussion and conversation, increasing engagement.

More than attracting new students, the creation of relationships with current ones so that their loyalty exists is the main objective of these institutions, whose key element is people. Therefore it is increasingly important to create brand attachment and foster loyalty.

#### 3.1 SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Engagement is important for brands because is related with trust, commitment and loyalty (Dessart, 2017). Thus, interacting with the brand through social media can lead to high levels of emotional engagement (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Hudson *et al.*, 2015) and, consequently, this emotional connection has behavioral consequences such as word-of-mouth (Hudson *et al.*, 2015). Some authors (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011, Schivinski *et al.* 2016) distinguish level of engagement in three dimensions: consumption, contribution and creation. Consumption corresponds to a minimum interaction as only view or read content while contribution implies like, share or comment content (Dolan *et al.*, 2016). Creation is the highest level and corresponds to produce and publish content about brands (Dolan *et al.*, 2016). So, consumer activities could be active (content publishers) or passive (lurkers or observers) (Schlosser, 2005), which is the most frequent among users (Jones *et al.*, 2004).

Social media allow HEIs to have a quality relationship with students through faster, more interactive and meaningful communication (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). According to Mostafa (2015, p. 145) "academically engaged students through social media view their studies with pleasure, which increases their satisfaction" while relying on communication from HEIs through this medium (Gibbs & Dean, 2015).

Studies by Voss and Kumar (2013) on social media engagement in American HEIs show that even though there is a strong presence in these media, engagement is low. Peruta and Shields (2018) analyzed HEI publications in the United States and concluded that there are content themes such as athletics that significantly increase engagement as well as the use of user generated content. Therefore, it is important to analyze the relation between engagement and brand attachment in HEI.

#### 3.2 BRAND ATTACHMENT

Malär *et al.* (2011) define brand attachment as the emotional bond between the consumer and the brand. Brand attachment has different levels, ranging in strength from strong to weak and not in valence of the link (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Park *et al.*, 2010). There are essentially two scales of brand attachment: the emotional attachment scale (Thomson *et al.*, 2005) and the brand attachment scale (Park *et al.*, 2010).

Park *et al.* (2010) highlight the dimensions of brand self-connection and prominence while Thomson *et al.*, (2005) evidences affection, connection and passion.

In higher education, brand attachment is important because students tend to value emotional aspect when recommend HEI. Lynch and De Chernatony (2004) demonstrate that students firstly value rational values and only then in the higher level the emotional. This emotional connection is antecedent of brand strength and as state Dennis *et al.* (2016) in a study with US students this affects satisfaction, trust and commitment. For Dennis *et al.* (2016) is crucial HEI create and maintain relationships with publics such as (students, alumni, other stakeholders) in social media and other tools.

Pongpaew *et al.* (2017) demonstrate the importance of lurkers who are involved in reading and consuming content on pages, highlighting the need for future studies to better understand this type of users and their impact on the brand community.

Users with a strong attachment to the brand are more likely to behave in support of the brand, maintaining positive attitudes towards it (Spiggle *et al.*, 2012).

Therefore, the first set of hypotheses is:

**Hypothesis 1:** Consumption has a positive impact on the attachment to the brand

**Hypothesis 2:** Contribution has a positive impact on the attachment to the brand

**Hypothesis 3:** Creation has a positive impact on the attachment to the brand

### 3.3 LOYALTY

Loyalty also reflects the consumer's emotional engagement with the brand as it "acts as an important reflection of your identity or is an important sign of something meaningful for the consumer" (Goldsmith, 2012, p. 121).

In Higher Education Institutions, student loyalty is also a crucial aspect. It takes place during and after the study period at an educational institution (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2001) and is an important indicator of commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Commitment in HEIs is the desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the institution, and reflects the student's motivation to continue the relationship, for example, in postgraduate studies at the same Institution (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). For this reason, loyalty is increasingly a central aspect in HEI strategies, rather than attracting new students, it is necessary to retain the current ones. Students' decisions about the institutions they choose to graduate from are influenced by recommendations from family, friends and teachers (Maringe, 2006). Athiyaman (1997) indicates that the student's attitude towards the institution is positively related to their communication behavior after enrollment, that is, positive WOM.

Brown and Mazzarol (2009) measure loyalty by the student's intention to recommend the course or the Institution to others, maintain contact with the Institution, select the Institution for future studies and belong to the alumni.

After students acquire a sense of belonging to HEI, WOM and eWOM will occur naturally. This is a more effective way to recruit new students and retain current ones. Higher education institutions have great benefits in student loyalty (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2001) and should strive to define strategies in this field.

Hence, the hypotheses are:

**Hypothesis 4:** Brand Attachment has a positive impact on loyalty

**Hypothesis 5:** Consumption has a positive impact on loyalty

**Hypothesis 6:** Contribution has a positive impact on loyalty

**Hypothesis 7:** Creation has a positive impact on loyalty

**Hypothesis 8:** There are differences between students who follow the HEI Facebook page and those who do not, in brand attachment and loyalty, according to the following dimensions:

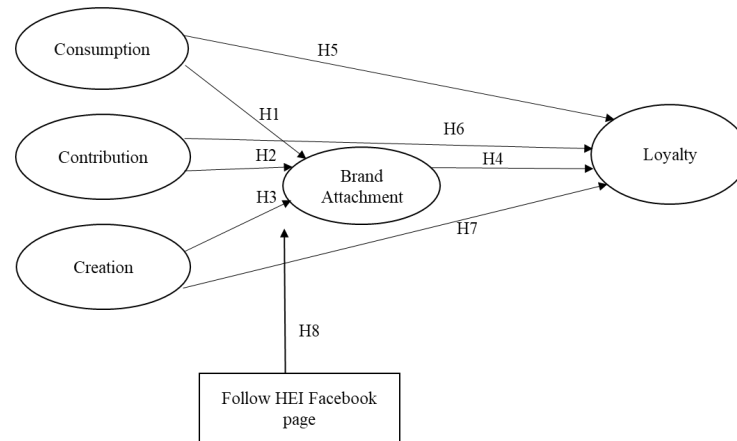
**Hypothesis 8a:** Consumption

**Hypothesis 8b:** Contribution

**Hypothesis 8c:** Creation

## 4 EMPIRICAL COMPONENT

The conceptual model (see Fig. 1) includes five constructs, related as follows.



**Figure 1 - Conceptual Model**

The model for the sample showed an acceptable fit,  $\chi^2 (283, N = 856) = 1459.990, p < .001$ , CFI = .926, RMSEA = .070, 90% CI [.066, .073]  $P(\text{rmsea} \leq .05) < .001$

Consumption contributed positively to the brand attachment ( $B = 0.353$ ;  $b = 0.381$ ;  $p < .001$ ) which supports hypothesis 1. However, neither the contribution ( $B = 0.06$ ;  $b = 0.035$ ;  $p = .554$ ) nor the creation ( $B = 0.08$ ;  $b = 0.049$ ;  $p = .395$ ) contribute to the brand attachment.

On the other hand, the brand attachment contributes positively to loyalty ( $B = 0.556$ ;  $b = 0.709$ ;  $p < .001$ ), supporting hypothesis 4.

Table 1 provides an overview of the hypothesis testing results:

**Table 1 Hypothesis Test**

| No. |                  |      |                  | <i>B</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>P</i> | Hypothesis supported |
|-----|------------------|------|------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------------------|
| H1  | Brand Attachment | <--- | Consumption      | 0.353    | 0.381    | ***      | Yes                  |
| H2  | Brand Attachment | <--- | Contribution     | 0.06     | 0.035    | 0.554    | No                   |
| H3  | Brand Attachment | <--- | Creation         | 0.08     | 0.049    | 0.395    | No                   |
| H4  | Loyalty          | <--- | Brand Attachment | 0.556    | 0.709    | ***      | Yes                  |

**Legend: B = Factorial weights b = Standardized factorial weights; P= p-value**

Subsequently, an attempt was made to understand whether there are differences between students who follow the HEI Facebook page and those who do not, in terms of brand attachment and loyalty, according to the dimensions of consumption, contribution and creation (hypothesis 8).

The analysis of the invariance showed that there are differences in the models of the analyzed samples, they are not invariant, the value of  $p < .001$ .

The model suggested a good model fit:  $\chi^2 (286, N = 1296) = 1644.1, p < .001$ . CFI = .929. RMSEA = .061. 90% CI [.058, .063]  $P(\text{rmsea} \leq .05) = .000$ .

The results showed (according to table 2) that in the group of students who follow the HEI page, there is a positive impact of consumption on the brand attachment and on loyalty, while on students who do not follow the page, this impact only occurs on the brand attachment.

Table 2 provides an overview of the hypothesis testing results:

**Table 2 - Differences analysis for following or not following the page**

|   |     |                  |      | No.          | <i>B</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>P</i> | Hypothesis supported |
|---|-----|------------------|------|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------------------|
| Students who follow HEI Facebook page     | H8a | Brand attachment | <--- | Consumption  | 0.343    | 0.366    | ***      | Yes                  |
|   |     | Loyalty          | <--- |              | 0.098    | 0.134    | ***      | Yes                  |
|   | H8b | Brand attachment | <--- | Contribution | 0.075    | 0.047    | 0.426    | No                   |
|   |     | Loyalty          | <--- |              | 0.027    | 0.022    | 0.653    | No                   |
|   | H8c | Brand attachment | <--- | Creation     | 0.065    | 0.04     | 0.489    | No                   |
|   |     | Loyalty          | <--- |              | -0.077   | -0.061   | 0.202    | No                   |
| Hip.                                      |     |                  |      | <i>B</i>     | <i>b</i> | <i>P</i> | Yes      |                      |
| Students who not follow HEI Facebook page | H8a | Brand attachment | <--- | Consumption  | 0.413    | 0.441    | ***      | Yes                  |
|   |     | Loyalty          | <--- |              | 0.053    | 0.064    | 0.167    | No                   |
|   | H8b | Brand attachment | <--- | Contribution | -0.008   | -0.005   | 0.943    | No                   |
|   |     | Loyalty          | <--- |              | -0.084   | -0.067   | 0.24     | No                   |
|   | H8c | Brand attachment | <--- | Creation     | 0.034    | 0.022    | 0.753    | No                   |
|   |     | Loyalty          | <--- |              | -0.04    | -0.03    | 0.583    | No                   |

## 5 DISCUSSION

The results showed that consumption contributed positively to the connection to the brand. Also Pongpaew et al. (2017) demonstrated the importance of lurkers who consume content on the pages, highlighting the need for future studies to better understand this type of users and their impact on the brand community. However, neither contribution nor creation contributes to the link to the brand. On the other hand, the link to the brand contributes positively to loyalty, since students identify with and engage with the brand.

As Belaid and Temessk (2011) and Park et al. (2013) indicate engagement has an important role in mediating between constructs of brand connection and loyalty. However, this engagement is essentially passive (consumption) as the studies by Voss and Kumar (2013) showed in American HEIs: the engagement is reduced, despite the strong presence. Whether students follow the HEI Facebook page or not also influences engagement. The results showed that in students who follow the HEI page, there is a positive impact of consumption in connection with the brand and in loyalty, while in students who do not follow the page, this impact only occurs in connection with the brand. These results are consistent with the studies by Moran et al. (2014) that show that the “like” on the page leads to a positive word of mouth (assessed on loyalty), as the message automatically appears in the friends’ feed (Swani et al., 2013).

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Engagement in social media has attracted growing interest on the part of academia. However, studies in this area are still limited in the context of HEIs. This work contributes with its originality at a theoretical level, showing the importance of Consumption is related to brand link and loyalty, especially in students who follow the IES website.

The results show that currently the power of “like” is also a reality in HEIs, which has an impact on students’ loyalty. Brand attachment measured by brand self-connection (Park et al., 2010) demonstrates that for



students the HEI is not only part of themselves but also transmits a message to others about themselves, which makes them feel become personally and emotionally connected to it.

Previous studies by Thomson et al. (2005) and Park et al. (2013) consider that the strong link to the brand promotes loyalty (for example, through the commitment to the brand and the refusal to consider alternative brands) as well as the predisposition to pay a premium price. In this study, it is demonstrated that the link to the brand also has a direct impact on loyalty in the HEI through the Consumption variable. In this sense, communication through social media contributes to the development and commitment in relationships, which means that this research responds to the need presented by Voss and Kumar (2013), Štefko et al. (2015) and Dennis et al. (2016) for future exploration of the possibilities of using social media in the educational sector to improve engagement with students in higher education.

The use of two samples (separating those who follow from those who do not follow the IES page) also contributes to scientific knowledge since there is little research on the relationship between "like" in social media and behavior in relation to the brand.

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