

Chapter 58

The Identity Salience and Emotional Attachment Strategies in Alumni–University Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has never truly recognized the importance of garnering the resources of alumni by expending university efforts in developing, controlling, and maintaining relationships with alumni. The purpose of this research is to tackle the long-term relationship marketing question. Drawing on the social marketing and relationship marketing literature, the authors propose and empirically test the roles of two relationship marketing strategies, namely identity salience and emotional attachment, in the alumni–university relationship. While the identity salience strategy encourages alumni to connect their identity to their former university, the emotional attachment strategy triggers the psychological ownership that leads alumni to proactively engage in university activities. Based on results of data collected from a large Midwestern university, the identity salience strategy was found to greatly affect symbolic consumption behavior while the emotional attachment strategy was found to strongly promote relationship-specific volunteering. The results also revealed that three social benefits, including development of a business network, enhancement of a friendship network, and enjoyment of participation, are associated with the two relationship marketing strategies. The authors conclude with a discussion addressing limitations of the study as well as practical and theoretical implications of the findings.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of the alumni-university relationship is receiving considerable attention in the social marketing, non-profit marketing, and relationship marketing literature (Arnett, German, & Hunt, 2003; Heckman & Guskey, 1998; Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2013). A common research question from prior studies is how a university can convert its efforts in building alumni-university relationships into the specific outcomes that the university desires to achieve.

In an attempt to answer the question, one stream of research has focused on individual differences that directly affect relationship outcomes involving alumni participation, financial donations, and gift giving (O'Neil & Schenke, 2007; Quigley, Jr., Bingham, Jr., & Murray, 2002; Tom & Elmer, 1994). For example, personal variables such as year of graduation, age, income, and gender are positively associated with alumni contributions for their former university (O'Neil & Schenke, 2007; Quigley, Jr., Bingham, Jr., & Murray, 2002). This approach has focused more on effects of individual identity and therefore can be seen as a cognitive-based approach. Another stream of research has relied on explaining the intrinsic reasons why some alumni are more involved in a relationship with their former university than are others. Researchers in this stream of research discuss the alumni-university relationship as being based on alumni motivations, kinship, and altruism (Bendapudi, Singh, & Bendapudi, 1996; Paswan & Troy, 2004; Reyniers & Bhalla, 2013). This second stream of research appears to emphasize the affective aspects of the relationship with the university.

Although these two streams of research have vastly enhanced our knowledge of alumni relationship management, the cognitive and affective approaches to the alumni-university relationship have often been separately applied. Additionally, they have not investigated this issue using the perspective of long-term relationship management. The purpose of this research is to

fill this important research gap. More specifically, this research introduces a relationship governance mechanism that involves both:

1. The identity salience strategy based on a cognitive approach and
2. The emotional attachment strategy relying on an affective approach, and empirically tests how differently they influence alumni relationship outcomes.

This approach shows promise in that it aids our understanding of how to transform the noneconomic or social benefits (e.g., business network, friendship network, or entertainment) alumni gain from the relationship with the university into desired outcomes for the university.

Drawing on the social marketing and relationship marketing literature, we begin the paper by defining the identity salience and emotional attachment strategies. We then describe a conceptual model and develop hypotheses. The next section outlines the methodology and shows the results from the measurement model and the hypotheses tests. Finally, we conclude with a discussion including limitations of the study.

THE RELATIONSHIP MARKETING STRATEGIES: IDENTITY SALIENCE AND EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

Two relationship marketing strategies form the core of our model, which is presented in Figure 1. We believe that these two strategies are critical in that they serve to mediate effects of the noneconomic benefits alumni gain from their relationships with their universities on the alumni behaviors that benefit the universities. Given that these two strategies are the focus of our paper, we present them first, after which we will discuss why the noneconomic benefits are expected to lead to them and why the alumni behaviors are expected to follow.

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