A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CONSUMER INTERPRETATION OF MEDIA ADVERTISING FOR UNIVERSITY BRANDING IN SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

This thesis scrutinises how consumers engage with and "read" media advertising in the context of university branding. Employing an interpretive approach, the study aimed to unravel the dynamics of consumer perception before and during advertising consumption. It delved into consumers' comprehension, sense-making of media advertising, and responses to the interpreted narratives. Specifically, the research conducted an interpretive phenomenology study involving twenty participants who are Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) students or recent school graduates in Sarawak. The primary objective was to explore, rather than provide a definitive explanation, the intricate process of meaning construction when these individuals viewed university branding videos. The narratives detailing the participants' cognitive responses were recorded, transcribed, and analysed rigorously. The study's outcomes unveiled seven distinct stages participants underwent when interpreting university branding videos – absorption, anticipation, articulation, alignment, appropriation, alienation, and analysis. These stages are akin to "moments" in the process of understanding, rooted in phenomenology. The participants authored their interpretations of the narrative content by leveraging their cultural knowledge, aligning with or distancing themselves from their perceptions of university branding narratives, ultimately contributing to the shaping of the brand. The thesis offers practical value to advertisers and marketers seeking to develop media advertising campaigns for universities. It furnishes insights into consumer preferences and needs concerning media advertising and provides a roadmap for designing advertisements that resonate with an audience actively engaged in interpreting narratives. The findings from this study will also augment the empirical foundation of interpretive marketing research in Malaysia.

Keywords: Consumer behaviour, interpretive marketing, media advertising, phenomenology study, university branding

APPROVAL

This is to certify that this thesis conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration

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21 March 2024

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the Doctor of Business Administration degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

Name: Michael Tiong Hock Bing

Signature of Candidate: **Date**: 21 March 2024

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

PA	Participants for Focus Group 1
PB	Participants for Focus Group 2
PC	Participants for Focus Group 3
PD	Participants for Focus Group 4

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter Overview

This chapter serves as an introduction to the thesis, providing an overview of the research topic, problem statement, rationale, general and specific objectives, research questions, research scope, and operational definition of terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

Understanding human cognition and interpretation is pivotal across various domains ranging from education (Bransford et al., 2000) to marketing behaviours (Kotler & Armstrong, 2009). Consumer behaviour researchers aim to critically examine the underlying assumptions shaping consumers' interpretations, leading to successful marketing strategies (Solomon et al., 2019). Research on interpretive processes has evolved, encompassing various contexts. Scholars like Iser (1978) initially explored the phenomenology of reading books, highlighting that readers construct meanings based on prior knowledge and experiences, thus emphasising the reader's active role in the interpretation process. Transitioning to electronic media, researchers delved into the phenomenology of reception in television audiences. Pioneers such as Morley (1980), Silverstone (1994), and Ang (1985) investigated how audiences actively interpret and make sense of media texts, particularly in the context of television. They identified different types of readings, highlighting the active engagement of audiences in interpreting media content. However, early studies faced criticism for neglecting cognitive processes of comprehension and needing to delve deeper into the specific mechanisms involved in understanding and making meaning of media texts. Later studies addressed this gap by incorporating cognitive processes into the study of interpretive practices. For example, Zillmann and Brosius (2000) explored the mental processes underlying the interpretation of televised messages, emphasising selective attention, comprehension, and memory, and provided valuable insights into how individuals actively engage with media texts while considering cognitive processes involved in comprehension.

Expanding upon earlier research, Silverstone (1994) introduced a hermeneutic phenomenology of reception, emphasising thought processes between media users and texts. He described audience engagement as immersion in a game-like situation where understanding can be achieved by thinking or acting like the characters in the media. Similarly, Ang (1985) studied audience interpretations and the production of meaning by analysing a soap opera, highlighting active meaning-making as audiences engage with the narrative based on experiences and social context. These studies collectively challenged the notion of passive reception, emphasising the active role of audiences and readers in understanding media text. Heideggerian phenomenology, described by Heidegger (1962), provides a valuable framework for understanding interpretation. According to Heidegger, humans engage with the world through practices and ‘the equipment' to navigate existence and interact with others. This perspective, further developed by Gadamer (1975) in Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, emphasises the reciprocal relationship between individuals and their cultural context. Gadamer highlights the concept of the 'hermeneutic circle of understanding’, where individuals perceive intelligible accounts of circumstances through cultural horizons. Literature has also contributed to understanding and applying Heideggerian phenomenology in various fields. For example, studies by Crowell (2013) explored Heidegger's concepts of pre-understanding and interpretation in philosophical hermeneutics, while Kisiel (2016) examined the implications of Heidegger's philosophy for understanding human existence and interpretation.

Research has been conducted on marketing consumers’ interpretation of marketing media across different mediums and contexts. Stern (1993) investigated gender differences in interpreting gender images in advertisements, while Scott (1994) focused on the role of visual rhetoric in constructing meaning within visual arguments in advertisements. Thompson (1997) emphasised the influence of personal substance and cultural background on consumer decision-making. In their study on consumer interpretations of online advertising, Maslowska et al. (2016) explore how consumers' sociocultural backgrounds influence their interpretations and responses to online advertisements, highlighting the need for marketers to consider cultural nuances and tailor their advertising strategies accordingly. Moreover, the work of Hilde et al. (2018) examines consumer engagement with digital advertising and emphasises the significance of understanding the sociocultural context in which advertisements are consumed. They argue that cultural factors influence the interpretation and reception of advertising messages, highlighting the need for marketers to be attuned to these dynamics to create effective campaigns. These studies highlight the significance of understanding consumers' interpretations of marketing media in shaping effective marketing strategies. They also illuminated how consumers construct meanings and make purchase decisions based on their interpretations of marketing materials.

While existing research has contributed to our understanding of consumer interpretation, further exploration is warranted, especially considering recent developments such as the increasing reliance on digital platforms for advertising and the evolving socio-cultural landscape. Incorporating Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics into consumer understanding and interpretation research can yield more profound insights into the cultural and contextual factors shaping consumers' meanings and behaviours. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals engage with marketing media and make sense of the messages presented to them, particularly in the post-COVID era, where digital platforms have become increasingly important in marketing communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the higher education sector globally. Approximately 98.4% of the world’s student population disrupted their learning due to national shutdowns implemented in 191 countries (Chinazziet al., 2020). UNESCO’s 2020 study revealed that as of April 2020, 1.3 billion students were affected by school and university closures, representing 91.3% of the global student population. This disruption caused significant financial losses for institutions globally, with a study by the National Association of College and University Business Officers estimating a $120 billion revenue loss for these institutions in 2020 alone (NACUBO, 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on private universities in Malaysia has been particularly severe, exacerbating their financial challenges. The Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (MAPCU) highlighted a distressing 25% decrease in student enrollment, a pivotal source of revenue for these institutions (The Malaysian Reserve, 2020). This decline has directly jeopardised their financial stability, compounded by the Malaysian government's travel restrictions, which curtailed the influx of international students into Malaysian universities (The Malaysian Reserve, 2020). The pandemic-induced closure of borders disrupted international student intake (Sayahir, 2021), further intensifying financial woes for private universities reliant on student enrollment (Choi et al., 2021; Husaini, 2021). Recent research indicates that a significant proportion of private higher learning institutions in Malaysia are operating at a loss, with 20% facing the risk of closure (Ng, 2019; University World News, 2020). This problem is compounded by the increasing number of local secondary school leavers opting not to pursue further studies but to enter the workforce due to economic stress (Othman et al., 2023).

Effective marketing strategies tailored to consumer needs and preferences are imperative to ensure the financial sustainability of private higher learning institutions. Understanding and meeting consumer needs take precedence in today’s consumer-centric marketing landscape. Marketers have shifted their focus towards consumers, crafting strategies and offerings aligned with their specific preferences and requirements (Solomon et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the urgency for private universities in Malaysia to adapt their marketing strategies to attract students amidst unprecedented challenges. By understanding consumers’ interpretations of marketing media, particularly in the context of university branding, insights can be gained for industry practitioners and advertisement developers to design more effective branding strategies. Adopting a phenomenological approach can provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals engage with and interpret media advertising, particularly in the post-COVID era, where digital platforms have become increasingly important in marketing communication. This holistic understanding can inform the development of targeted marketing strategies that resonate with consumers' needs and preferences, thereby contributing to the financial sustainability of private universities in Malaysia.

1.2 Problem Statement

In the competitive landscape of higher education, university branding is pivotal in attracting students, faculty, and funding (Shehzadi et al., 2020; Kaushal & Ali, 2019;

Lim et al., 2020). Effective university branding fosters a positive image, drives enrollment, and secures partnerships (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2019; Balaji et al., 2016; Kamal Basha et al., 2019). Despite the recognised significance of university corporate videos and websites in shaping perceptions and conveying institutional essence (Wilson, 2011), there remains a need to explore the impact and efficacy of these corporate videos in conveying the institution's identity and values (Wu & Cheong, 2022). The accelerated reliance on digital platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the urgency for higher education institutions to adapt their marketing strategies (Yaping et al., 2023; Tungpantong et al., 2022; Meng et al., 2022). Understanding how stakeholders interpret and construct meanings from corporate videos is essential for enhancing strategic branding efforts (Wilson, 2011; Wu & Cheong, 2022). However, existing literature on university branding predominantly focuses on quantitative metrics or anecdotal evidence (Foss et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2020; Cristancho et al., 2019; Panda et al., 2019), overlooking the nuanced lived experiences portrayed through corporate videos. This gap hinders a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of university branding efforts, necessitating a deeper exploration of stakeholder perceptions to inform informed branding strategies and foster stakeholder engagement.

Utilising phenomenology as a qualitative research approach presents a promising avenue for delving into stakeholders’ subjective experiences and perceptions towards university branding through corporate videos. Phenomenology offers a holistic understanding of how stakeholders interpret and engage with branding narratives portrayed in these videos by exploring the essence of lived experiences (Wilson, 2011). Consumer perception, crucial in shaping purchasing decisions and behaviours, involves individuals recognising and interpreting their surroundings as familiar

(Heidegger, 1962), bringing pre-existing meanings and expectations to their perception process, and constructing meanings based on their interpretation of events (Gadamer, 1975). Studies in consumer behaviour research have emphasised the importance of understanding consumer perception in various contexts, including advertising (Stern, 1993; Scott, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Wilson, 2009), internet marketing (Wilson et al., 2003), and physical settings like telecommunication (Wilson & Thang, 2007), fast food (Wilson & Lim, 2008), banks (Wilson, 2011) and shopping malls (Wilson et al., 2014). While limited research exists on employing phenomenology to investigate university branding through corporate videos (Pham et al., 2017; Hogne Lerøy Sataøen et al., 2023), existing phenomenological studies in marketing and communication provide valuable methodological frameworks for exploring subjective experiences and perceptions (Wilson, 2011), offering an innovative approach to qualitative research in higher education marketing.

From the literature review, it is evident that while there is substantial acknowledgment of the importance of university branding in attracting stakeholders such as students, faculty, and funding, existing studies primarily focus on quantitative metrics or anecdotal evidence, neglecting the nuanced lived experiences portrayed through corporate videos. Despite recognising the pivotal role of corporate videos in shaping perceptions and conveying institutional essence, the literature needs a comprehensive exploration into the impact and efficacy of these videos in conveying the institution's identity and values. This limitation hampers a thorough understanding of the effectiveness of university branding efforts, highlighting the need for a deeper investigation into stakeholder perceptions to inform strategic branding strategies and enhance stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, while phenomenology is identified as a promising qualitative research approach for understanding stakeholders' subjective experiences and perceptions towards university branding through corporate videos, limited research exists on employing this methodology specifically in this context. While phenomenological studies in marketing and communication offer valuable methodological frameworks, the application of phenomenology to investigate university branding through corporate videos still needs to be explored, signalling a gap in the literature that warrants further exploration.

Understanding the stages of consumer interpretation and engagement with university branding messages in media advertising is crucial for developing effective marketing strategies. Focus groups allow researchers to delve into the nuanced processes of anticipation, articulation, alignment, and alienation, shedding light on how each stage influences consumers' perceptions of university branding. Employing Heideggerian Phenomenology offers a deeper exploration of consumers' lived experiences, uncovering the underlying meanings they attribute to branding messages. This enables a comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour and facilitates the development of targeted and impactful marketing strategies in higher education branding.

1.3 Research Questions

Building upon the problem statement, this thesis aims to address the following research questions:

i How can the stages of consumer interpretation and engagement with university branding messages in media advertising be investigated and described?

ii How does Heideggerian Phenomenology influence consumers' understanding of university branding in media advertising?

iii How do consumers' anticipation, articulation, alignment, and alienation impact their perception of university branding in media advertising?

iv How does audience engagement and response to media content impact consumers' interpretations of university branding messages in media advertising?

By exploring these research questions, this study seeks to gain insights into consumers' understanding, interpretation, and reactions to media advertising, specifically in the context of university branding.

1.4 Research Objectives

1.4.1 General Objective

This thesis investigates how consumers interpret and make sense of media advertising related to university branding. The study aims to understand how consumers engage with and perceive these advertisements, focusing on the cognitive processes involved in their interpretation.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this thesis are as follows:

i To investigate and describe the stages of consumer interpretation and engagement with university branding messages in media advertising.

ii To investigate the influence of Heideggerian Phenomenology on consumers' understanding of university branding in media advertising.

iii To investigate how consumers' anticipation, articulation, alignment, and alienation impact their perception of university branding in media advertising.

iv To investigate the impact of audience engagement and response to media content on consumers’ interpretations of university branding messages in media advertising.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The present study holds significant importance in several aspects. Firstly, it contributes to interpretive marketing research by exploring consumers' interpretation of media advertising in the context of university branding. While previous studies have examined consumers' perceptions and understanding of various forms of branding, such as television shows, internet platforms, and physical spaces, more attention should be given to the specific area of university branding. By focusing on this particular domain, the present study expands the empirical database of interpretive marketing research, enhancing our understanding of how consumers engage with and make sense of media advertising related to universities.

Secondly, the study addresses a research gap in the Malaysian context, where interpretive marketing research focusing on university branding needs improvement. While there have been studies on the determinants that lead consumers to make purchasing decisions related to universities, there is a need to delve deeper into the cognitive interpretive process of consumers when interpreting media advertising for university branding. By conducting this study in Malaysia, the findings will provide valuable insights into the perceptions and interpretations of Malaysian consumers, allowing for a better understanding of their needs and preferences about media advertising for universities.

Another significance of this study lies in its practical implications for advertisers and marketers. The study’s results, which shed light on consumers' needs and preferences regarding university advertisements, can guide advertisers in developing effective media advertising strategies. By understanding how consumers interpret and construct meanings from media advertising for university branding, marketers can design advertisements that align with consumers' expectations and resonate with their target audience. This knowledge is crucial in capturing consumers' attention and making a positive first impression, as the advertisement is the initial point of contact with potential students. Therefore, the present study provides practical guidance for advertisers and marketers in designing ads that effectively communicate universities' unique features and benefits to attract prospective students.

Lastly, the study's significance lies in the context of the evolving marketing landscape, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. The pandemic has brought about significant changes in consumer behaviour and decision-making processes, necessitating the adaptation of marketing strategies to cater to these changes. By examining consumers' perceptions and understanding their shifting needs and preferences in the context of media advertising for university branding, this study equips higher education institutions with valuable insights to develop effective marketing strategies. The findings will enable universities to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and enhance their competitiveness in attracting students in the evolving higher education landscape.

Overall, the present study holds significant importance as it contributes to interpretive marketing research, addresses a research gap in the Malaysian context, provides practical guidance for advertisers and marketers, and offers insights into consumers' perceptions in the evolving marketing landscape. The study enhances our understanding of consumers' needs and preferences by exploring consumers'