

Emanuela Maria AVRAM
University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY IMAGE AND STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO RECOMMEND IT

Case
Study

Keywords

University image,
Willingness to recommend,
Higher Education,
Trust

JEL Classification

M31, I23

Abstract

Any higher education institution builds an image on the market which contributes to the attraction of quality students. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the relationship between the university image and students' trust - manifested through their willingness to recommend the university. Data was collected from a significant number of respondents - higher education students studying economics in Romania, in other words 500 questionnaires were analysed. The findings show that students' personal experience and rumours contribute to the image formation about the higher education institution and greatly influences their willingness to further recommend it therefore this becomes an indicator of the academic performance and success.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of university image has been greatly debated over the last years in the specialized literature, especially with the build-up of the role of the higher education institutions in society. The DEX (The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language) defines the concept of image as a “*sensorial reflection of an object in the human mind under the form of sensations, perceptions or representations - visual or auditory, of an object perceived by the senses.*” (DEX online, 2016). Ivy Jonathan (2001) refers to the concept of the image of a higher education institution, underlying that “the university image strongly impacts on the students’ willingness to apply to that higher education institution”, but also on their willingness to recommend it. (Ivy, 2001, p. 276) Image greatly influences the consumer’s behaviour and attachment to the organization, and higher education institutions are focused on constantly consolidating their image to maintain their position on a competitive market. (Nehme, Lindos, Charbel, 2013, p. 5). Consequently, this paper identifies the relationship between the university image and students’ willingness to recommend it, emphasizing the fact that their personal experience and rumours directly influence their willingness to recommend it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous authors in the specialized literature who approached the subject of how the university image influences the students’ trust to recommend the institution. Bringula and Basa Roselle (2011, p. 59, p. 69) identified a few indicators of the *image of the higher education institutions*: the tuition level, the payment method for academic fees, the admission process, the course planning, the study programmes and facilities offered, the faculty profile, the scholarships, the relatives’ recommendations, campus security and the performance level required to get the degree. Based on their research, the authors concluded that the youth take into consideration other indicators too when evaluating the institutional image: the campus accessibility and proximity, the location of the university, the general ambiance of the campus and the atmosphere in the university. Cretu and Brodie (2007) looked at the concept of *brand image*, arguing that this “is specific to a certain category of company products and that there is a difference between the brand image and the organization’s reputation and is examined by the various influences which these have on the process of forming perceptions and on the consumers’ values as well as on making them loyal to the

organization’s products.” (Cretu, Brodie, 2007, p. 230) There is a series of general determinants of the university brand in higher education and numerous factors that influence it as it can be seen in table no. 1. Therefore, a few extremely important elements for building-up the brand image of the higher education institutions have been identified: the consumer-academic staff relationship, the university size and campus attractiveness, the information availability, especially the access to multiple-source of information, the quality of the academic activities, the tuition fees, the university personality and style reflected in the general atmosphere in the higher education institution and its performance and visibility on the market. Furthermore, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009, p. 315) refer to the concept of *brand reputation*, pointing out that “there is more to developing the brand reputation than the mere satisfaction of the clients’ needs, in other words this involves the organization’s gain in time but also the evaluation of the organization’s stakeholders.” Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001, p. 76) measured the students’ attachment to the university by looking at their intention to continue their studies at the same higher education institution and to encourage others to study at the same university as well as their willingness to recommend it. Yusof & Ariffin, (2016) tackled the concept of functional image and emotional attachment and showed their impact on consumer loyalty. Consequently, the authors define *functional image* as a mental representation of all tangible and intangible aspects of an organization (Yusof, Ariffin, 2016, p. 353) and the concept of *emotional attachment* as the deep individual interaction with the organization and the consumers’ willingness to sacrifice for enjoying the organization’s products. In addition to this, Oliver (1999, p. 33) argues that consumer loyalty is extremely important for organizational success. Moreover, Kennedy (1977) identified the concepts of *functional image* – which refers to the easily identifiable tangible elements and of *emotional image* - associated with the psychological elements manifested through emotions and attitudes. Drapińska (2012) developed a model to show the relationship among the emotional involvement in a university, the students’ trust in the higher education institution and their loyalty. Furthermore, the author indicated that there was a positive influence between the university image and word-of-mouth communication, trust leading thus to a satisfaction increase. Rojas-Mendez et. al. (2009, p. 25) refer to the *students’ trust* which is the result of their personal experience with the higher education institution, especially their relationship with the university’s employees. For a long-lasting relationship with the students, the university needs to win their trust, which has an implicit impact on their willingness to recommend it to others. In

addition, Korneta (2014, p. 72) writes about the consumers' willingness to recommend the organization, emphasizing the fact that this concept is an indicator of the organizational performance and an anticipation of the future success.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The definition of the variables aims at formulating them in such a way that they reflect the subject of this research and be in line with the trends of the specialized literature.

- **The concept of image:** Hatch and Schultz (1997), Ivy (2001), Weiwei (2007), Cretu, Brodie (2007), Alves, Raposo, (2010)

- **Emotional Image:** Kennedy, (1977), Nguyen, LeBlanc (2001), Alves, Raposo, (2010), Yusof, Ariffin, (2016)

- **Brand image in higher education:** Mourad, Ennew, Kortam (2010)

- **Image - logo and slogan:** Bennett And Koudelova (2001)

- **The willingness to recommend:** Nguyen (2001), Darley, Luethge, Thatte (2008), Rojas-Mendez, et.al. (2009), Drapińska (2012), Korneta (2014).

Data collection

Various errors may crop up during the data collection stage: *non-answers* (Cătoi, 2009, p. 138) – the refusal of some respondents to fill in the questionnaire completely, *respondents' inaccurate answers* (Cătoi, 2009, p. 138) – the interviewees do not wish to provide certain information. Thus, 680 questionnaires were initially sent out to be filled in, but after selecting them and eliminating the inadequate ones, 500 Bachelor-level students studying economics at several Romanian universities represented the data analysis sample. The universities involved were: University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, the Romanian-American University, Bucharest, the University of Bucharest, Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu.

Data processing

The stage of data processing prepares data for analysis and interpretation. For data processing, *SPSS Statistics 19* and *Excel* were used. This stage comprised *data coding* used for introducing the 500 questionnaires in the *SPSS Statistics 19* programme, *numerical symbols association* for the collected data, *data tabulation* – this being the object of the analysis process for understanding significance of the data.

Research objectives:

1. Identifying the sample structure.
2. Determining how proud the students were of the university they were enrolled at.

3. Identifying how the students' personal experience during university influences their willingness to recommend the higher education institution.

4. Determining how the rumours about the university influence the youth's willingness to recommend the higher education institution.

Research hypotheses:

1. The majority of the subjects were first and second year students.

2. The most part of the subjects was satisfied with the university they were enrolled at, their satisfaction level being over 70%.

3. Over 50% of the respondents agreed that their personal experience during university influenced their decision to recommend the higher education institution.

4. The willingness to recommend the university is influenced by the rumours about the higher education institution in over 50% of the cases.

DATA AND FINDINGS ANALYSIS

The current research is based on 500 questionnaires which provided information to be analysed regarding the influence of image on the students' willingness to recommend the university. To this end, the sample structure is presented in table no. 2. It follows that the major part of the respondents come from the Romanian-American University of Bucharest, 227 respondents, and next in line being the 153 subjects from the University of Economic Studies, Bucharest. 283 subjects were second-year students, 172 first-year students and only 45 were third-year students.

The youth were asked to rate in percentages their satisfaction level regarding the following sentence: "*I am proud to be a graduate of this university.*" The results are presented in graphic no. 1. The analysis shows that 25.8% of the youth have an 80% satisfaction level with the university they are enrolled at, while 24.4% of them are 90% satisfied with it. The research results indicate that only very few students are dissatisfied with their university.

Students were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on different elements with contribution to the image formation about the higher education institution (table no. 3 and the graph no. 4). The results show that 23% of the respondents agreed that their personal experience during university is influenced by *staff's dedication towards the students*, while 54% totally agreed with this; *the professor-student relationship* – 41% agreed, while 33% totally agreed; *the campus and the university's facilities and attractiveness* – 22% agreed, while 48% totally agreed; *the quality of education* – 39% agreed, while 24% totally agreed;

the availability of scientific materials, their quality and novelty – 28% agreed, while 53% totally agreed; *the possibility to obtain internships in-country or abroad* – 27 % agreed, while 12% totally agreed; *the possibility to do scientific research* - 36% agreed, while 22% totally agreed.

The respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the fact that their personal experience during university and the rumours about the institution, i.e. the word-of-mouth and written communication, influence their decision to recommend the university. Their answers are presented in graphics no. 2 and 3. By analysing graphic no. 2, it follows that the decision to recommend the university is greatly affected by the youth's personal experience during university. Therefore, 55.2% of the subjects (276 out of 500) agreed that their personal experience during university influenced their decision to recommend the university, while 33.6% totally agreed with this. Thus, 88.8% of all respondents expressed their agreement with the influence of personal experience on the decision to recommend the university. Only 0.4% of the subjects totally disagreed with the fact that their personal experience during university affected their decision to recommend the university. Regarding the rumours about the university (graphic no. 3), 59.2% of the respondents agreed that the rumours influenced their decision to recommend the higher education institution, therefore 75.4% of all respondents expressed their agreement with the influence of rumours on the decision to recommend the university. Only 1.4% of the respondents said they were not influenced by such rumours when deciding whether or not to recommend the university because their decision was influenced only by their personal experience. The findings of this research are extremely useful to the academic management with a view to make the best decisions to improve the university image among the target audience because this would translate into the students' trust in the higher education institution and implicitly to their willingness to recommend it.

CONCLUSIONS

This research proves that the willingness to recommend the university is closely related to its market image - manifested through all the mental representations of the university and the students' trust in the higher education institution - as a result of their personal experience and the rumours heard. Consequently, the quality of these elements contributes to the youth's willingness to recommend the higher education institution, while word-of-mouth and written communication play an extremely important role in building the students' trust in the higher education institution because the

dissemination of the positive elements enhances their willingness to recommend the university. At the same time, the staff's dedication towards the students, the professor-student relationship, the campus and the university's facilities and attractiveness, the access level, the quality of education, the availability of scientific materials, their quality and novelty, the possibility to obtain internships in-country or abroad, as well as the possibility to do scientific research and the process of communication contribute to the youth's personal experience during university which forms their image of the higher education institution.

In accordance with the findings of this research, a pleasant experience translates into the willingness to recommend the higher education institution, this being a strong indicator of the academic performance and success.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alves H., Raposo M., (2010). The influence of university image on student behavior, International. *Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, pp. 73 – 85, ISSN 0951-354X.
- [2] Bennett R., Koudelova R., (2001). Image selection and the marketing of downtown areas in London and New York. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, pp. 205 – 220, ISSN 0951-3558.
- [3] Bringula R. P., Basa R. S. (2011). Institutional image indicators of three Universities: basis for attracting prospective entrants. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 10, 2011, pp. 53-72, ISSN 1570-2081.
- [4] Cătoi I. (coord.), (2009). Cercetări de Marketing – Tratat [Marketing research - Treaty], Bucharest: Uranus Publishing House, ISBN 978-973-7765-70-3.
- [5] Cretu A. E., Brodie R. J., (2007). The influence of brand image and company reputation where manufacturers market to small firms: A customer value perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 36, pp. 230-224, ISSN 0019-8501.
- [6] Drapińska A., (2012). A concept of student relationship management in higher education. *Marketing of Scientific and Research Organizations*, no. 6, pp. 35-49.
- [7] Darley W. K., Luethge D. J., Thatte A., (2008). Exploring the relationship of perceived automotive salesperson attributes, customer satisfaction and intentions to automotive service department patronage: The moderating role of customer gender. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 15, ISSN 0969-6989, pp. 469–479.

- [8] Hatch M. Jo, Schultz M., (1997). Relations between organizational culture, identity and image. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31 No. 5/6, 1997, p. 356-365, ISSN 0309-0566.
- [9] Ivy, J., (2001). Higher education institution image: A correspondence analysis approach. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, vol. 15, no. 6/7, 2001, pp. 276-282, ISSN 0951-354X.
- [10] Kennedy, S.H., (1977). Nurturing corporate image. *European Journal of Marketing*, 11(3), pp. 119-164.
- [11] Korneta P (2014). What makes customers willing to recommend a retailer – the study on roots of positive net promoter score index. *Central European Review of Economics & Finance* vol. 5, no. 2 (2014) pp. 61-74.
- [12] Mourad M., Ennew C., Kortam W., (2010). Descriptive Evidence on the Role of Corporate Brands in Marketing Higher Education Services. *Service Science*, 2(3), pp. 154-166, Print ISSN 2164-3962, Online ISSN 2164-3970.
- [13] Nehme M.A., Lindos E.D., Charbel m. EK., (2013). University Image and its Relationship to Student Satisfaction: Case of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Lebanon. *Journal of Executive Education*, Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 4, pp. 1-13.
- [14] Nguyen N., LeBlanc G., (2011). Image and reputation of higher education institutions in students' retention decisions. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 15/6, 2001, pp. 303-311, ISSN 0951-354X.
- [15] Oliver, R. L., (1999). Whence Consumer Loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 63, (Special Issue), pp. 33-34.
- [16] Rojas-Mendez J.I., Vasquez-Parraga A.Z., Kara A., Cerda Urrutia A., (2009). Determinants of Student Loyalty in Higher Education: A Tested Relationship Approach in Latin America. *Latin American Business Review*, 10, pp. 21–39, ISSN: 1097-8526 print ISSN 1528-6932 online.
- [17] Veloutsou C., Moutinho L., (2009). Brand relationships through brand reputation and brand tribalism. *Journal of Business Research*, 62, pp. 314-322, ISSN 0148-2963.
- [18] Weiwei T., (2007). Impact of Corporate Image and Corporate Reputation on Customer Loyalty: A Review, *Management Science and Engineering*, Vol.1 No.2, pp. 57-62, ISSN 19130341.
- [19] Yusof J.M., Ariffin S., (2016). The Influence of Self-Congruity, Functional Image, and Emotional Attachment on Loyalty. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 37, pp. 350 – 357.
- [20] <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/imagine>.

ANNEXES

Table no. 1
Brand determinants in higher education

<i>General brand determinants in higher education</i>	<i>Factors influencing brand in higher education</i>	<i>Sources</i>
Students' relationship with the university's employees	Academic and non-academic performance Support for students	Cheng & Tam, 1997; Davies & Ellison, 1997; Kent, Lian, Khan, and Anene, 1993; Smith & Ennew, 2000
University size and attractiveness	Positive influence on the reputation and market classification	Ferris & Stallings, 1988; Hagstrom, 1971; Kent et al., 1993; Oromaner, 1970; Temple, 2006; Chen, 2008
Information availability	The university curriculum Posters Magazines Local media Regional press The national press Radio TV Yellow Pages Press Releases Web	Davies & Ellison, 1997
The quality of university activities	Academic benefits Program structure Academic facilities Library General facilities Accommodation for students Building modernity Gym Laboratories Courses availability Consultation availability	Cheng & Tam, 1997 Davies & Ellison, 1997 Kent et al., 1993 Smith & Ennew, 2000
Tuition fees	Tuition fees are the main source of income for private universities and exerts a major influence on students and their families. University fees reflected the quality of services provided.	Davies & Ellison, 1997 Kotler & Fox, 1995
Personality and style	The general environment of the university	Cheng & Tam, 1997

Note. Mourad M., Ennew C., Kortam W., (2010). *Descriptive Evidence on the Role of Corporate Brands in Marketing Higher Education Services*, Service Science, 2(3), p. 160, Online ISSN 2164-3970, Print ISSN 2164-3962

Table no. 2
Sample structure

Universities	I Year	II Year	III Year	Total
Romanian-American University of Bucharest	76	113	38	227
University of Economic Studies	61	92	0	153
University of Bucharest	0	51	7	58
University of Sibiu	35	27	0	62
Total	172	283	45	500

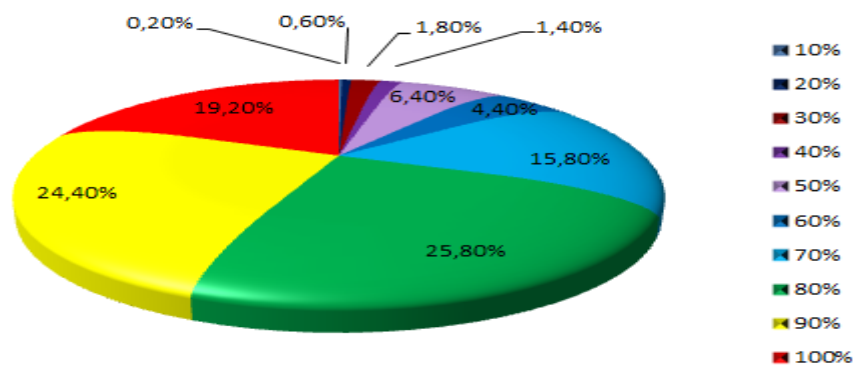
Note. own research carried out using SPSS Statistics 19

Table no. 3
Students' personal experience – "The following elements are excellent in my university and contribute to a positive experience within the higher education institution"

	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Undecided %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
Staff's dedication towards the students	54	23	9	8	6
The professor-student relationship	33	41	14	9	3
The campus and the university's facilities and attractiveness	48	22	4	18	8
The quality of education	24	39	6	27	4
The availability of scientific materials, their quality and novelty	53	28	2	12	5
The possibility to obtain internships in-country or abroad	12	27	5	32	24
The possibility to do scientific research	22	36	31	2	9

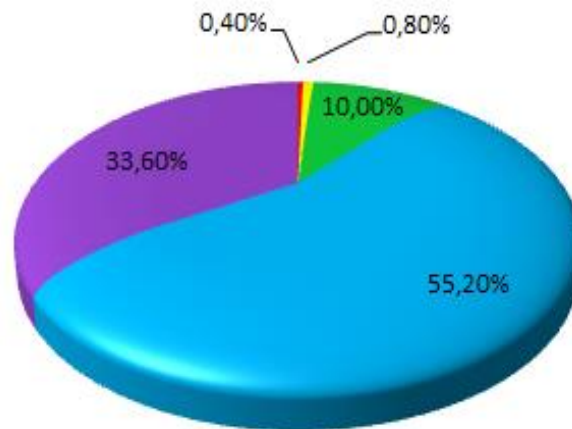
Note. own research carried out using SPSS Statistics 19

Graph no. 1
"I am proud to be a graduate of this university."



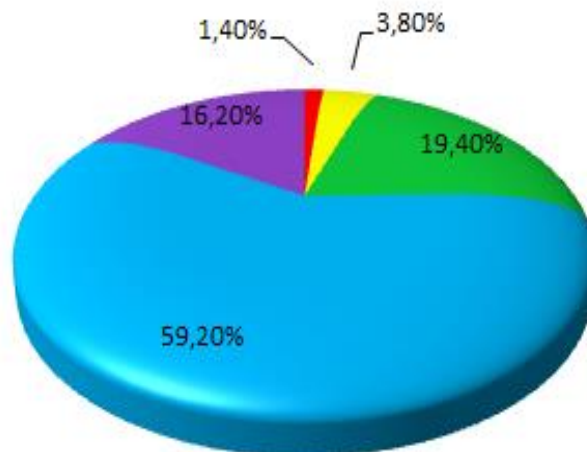
Note. own research carried out using SPSS Statistics 19 and Excel

Graph no. 2
„My personal experience influence my decision to recommend the university”
■ dezacord total ■ dezacord ■ indiferent ■ acord ■ acord total



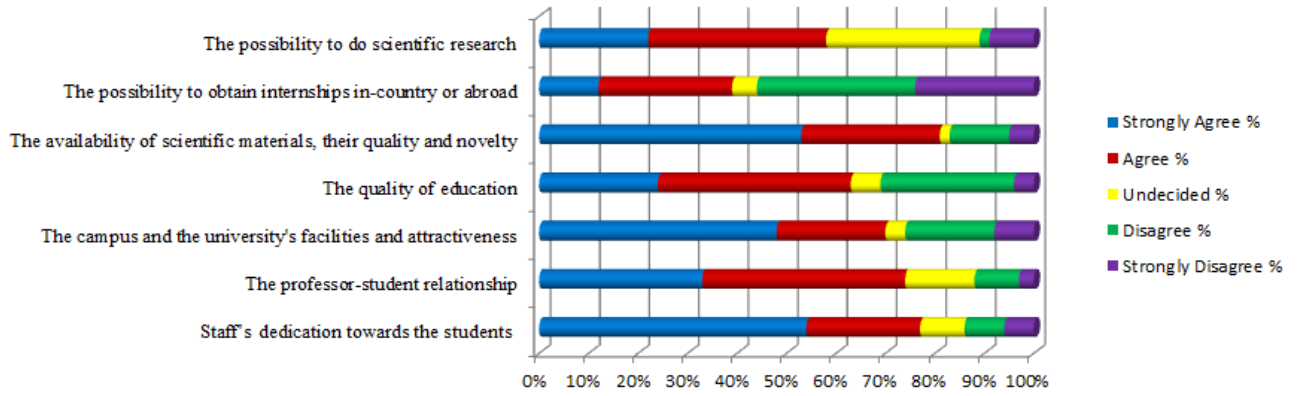
Note. own research carried out using SPSS Statistics 19 and Excel

Graph no. 3
„Rumours influence my decision to recommend the university”
■ dezacord total ■ dezacord ■ indiferent ■ acord ■ acord total



Note. own research carried out using SPSS Statistics 19 and Excel

Graph no. 4
University image - „Students’ personal experience”



Note. own research carried out using Excel