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journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ism>INTERNATIONAL
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT
R E V I E W

Conference Title

University image and its relationship to student satisfaction- case of the Middle Eastern private business schools

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 June December 14

Received in revised form 11 July 14

Accepted 23 July 14

Keywords:

University Image

Customer Satisfaction

Students

Brand Image.

ABSTRACT

This work focuses on the study of the universities image with the aim of explaining the components of image and attributes of student satisfaction. Our study investigates the relationships between the different components of the university image and to what extent they may affect the students' satisfaction. Hypotheses were drawn setting the relationships between the affective, cognitive and overall image in relation with satisfaction. The results of the empirical work carried out on a representative sample of 763 students located in 8 countries in the Middle East demonstrate that the cognitive component of image is an antecedent of the affective component. In turn, both of these components influence the formation of the overall image of a university. However the affective and overall images statistically and significantly affect the overall satisfaction of students with their university. The research could also be extended to cover the area of the Middle Eastern Basin and study the process of formation of the university image by various publics.

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1. Introduction

The trend in universities today is shifting towards an engagement in marketing and branding programs. The purpose is often to enhance the reputation of the university and to have a positive influence on university ranking. Greater competition existing today is to attract the best and brightest students. A university is no longer just an institution of higher

learning but also a business. Millions of dollars are spent by universities trying to burnish their image and enhance their position in these rankings. Both students and universities are adopting the mantra suggested by Bunzel: "Markets in which small differences in performance give rise to enormous differences in reward" [1]. This leads us to our problematic which states: To what extent does the cognitive, affective and overall image affect student satisfaction? In our study, we will discuss the issue from a perspective focused towards in the context of a university. In this regard, the importance of brand image will be extended to the university

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context which is a new area of interest as a subject for study and as a novel area of study for marketing management.

The aim of the study is to investigate the relationships existing between cognitive, affective and overall university image and as a role precedent to students' satisfaction. This work should be a value to education leaders, education planners, as well as university professors and administration which will help them understand the student behavior and implement strategies which have a direct effect on boosting up the university's image and developing student satisfaction consequently. Image of universities is a new topic that is arousing interest. The academic research into corporate communication has focused on the transmitter and on the construction process of message and has ignored the approaches focusing on the receiver. Thus the originality of this empirical study validates an attractive novel value of university image focused towards the consumer.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The University Image

2.1.1. The University Approach

Standard dictionaries define a university as an educational institution of the highest order, being a corporate body of teachers and students and providing facilities for teaching and researchers as well as offering undergraduate and graduate programs and bestowed degrees. A student is defined as a person who studies or investigates; and faculty or academic staff is described as being related to branches of learning or the learned professions [2]. Bok noted the important role of the university: "Advanced training, specialized knowledge and scientific discovery are now essential to solving many urgent problems facing our civilization – problems of disease and health, of the environment, of economic progress, of human survival... Universities are better equipped than any other institution to produce the knowledge needed to arrive at effective solutions and to prepare highly educated people to carry them out..."[3]. Universities provide a mix of public and private goods. Thus, it is important to understand how the university is creating value. Paulsen and Feldman use a widely popular system to describe the activities of a university [4]. This system explains the nature of faculty work by adopting 4 functional categories: teaching, service, research and academic citizenship. The importance of knowledge creation is very inspiring. It engenders social and economic change and plays a very decisive role in preserving the cultural and social continuity of the democratic system [5]. The open society needs individuals who can make sense of their environment and are able to generate responsible choices [6]. Therein lies the essence of public good provided by higher education system.

Nowadays, universities must accept their dual identity in order to survive. The normative identity which is the traditional, ideological image and the other identity is the utilitarian which is cost-effective image. They go to so far as to liken the university to a "church" and a "business". In fact research findings acknowledge that universities must become cost-effective and work like businesses in order to survive and prosper. Universities are obliged to tell their internal and external populations how they function in both traditional and utilitarian ways. In order to respond to the dynamic environment, universities should actively begin to communicate to the outside stakeholders and the media [3]. A positive image should be generated with the various publics with whom a

relationship is established and cultivate positive lines of communication with each. Although organizational image has been studied frequently with the regard of the corporate sector, it has been rarely examined in the non-profit arena. Treadwell and Harrison conducted one of the few studies examining the university's image among its stakeholder groups: students, faculty and staff [7]. The items identified in the study were commitment to academic excellence, having well regarded business school, whether students form close friendships, whether graduates are proud of their education, whether the school has national image, whether faculty research has national image, whether the school makes a cultural contribution to community, whether students party too much, presence of adequate facilities, problems with athletes' academic performance, and the homogeneity of the student population.

2.1.2. Universities Worldwide

Universities around the world are classified mainly into 3 main categories; American, European and Asian. All of these models possess their advantages and disadvantages; however the best university model is the one that combines the best elements of them all.

2.1.2.1. American Universities

In the United States, private universities are very common and tend to be more prestigious. They rely heavily on private funding and often offer scholarships and grants [8]. Sports take a vital role in the student's life, thus universities often have football fields, swimming pools and large gymnasiums. Moreover, Americans opt for a very well-rounded education and are quite flexible in the area of course selection [9].

2.1.2.2. European Universities

They are mostly public funded by the state and offer almost free education for all students. Universities in Europe tend to be egalitarian; for instance there is no major difference between the top ranked universities in Finland (University of Helsinki) and a lesser ranked one [9]. However, private universities have a tendency to be very selective, have high entrance requirements and very specialized courses.

2.1.2.3. Asian Universities

Most Asian nations consider that higher education a highly valued privilege. As a result students tend to take it seriously and live in an environment where they have to compete to be admitted and to earn good grades. All textbooks are written and produced in the private sector however; they must be approved from the Ministry of Education [10]. Research output isn't nearly as supported at Asian universities as in the West. The Asian scholars overwhelmingly believe that their universities view research as of "medium importance" as compared to that of teaching. Another East-West difference is the remuneration. Many Asian professors don't meet up ends with their salaries. Moreover, government control affects funding and also affects scholarships, since academic research in many Asian nations is limited and is not free as in the West [11].

2.2. Consumer Satisfaction

2.2.1. Satisfaction and its implications

In a competitive marketplace, where organizations vie for customers, client satisfaction becomes an important differentiator of marketing strategy. Customer satisfaction largely depends on the degree with which a product supplied by an organization meets or surpasses customer expectation. By measuring customer satisfaction, organizations are able to get indication of how successful they actually are in providing products to the market. Customer satisfaction is an important antecedent of loyalty. A positive impact of satisfaction is reported upon purchase behavior, repurchase intent, positive word-of-mouth, customer retention and the continuous use of provided service [12]. Consumer satisfaction has been a popular topic in marketing [13]. The associated literature can be divided into three broad topics: the first determines the antecedents of satisfaction, the second explores the relationship between consumer expectations and appraisals of performance, and the third and most recent category evaluates the consequences of consumer satisfaction for purchase decisions, sales, and firm profitability.

2.2.2. Satisfaction Measurement

The aim of the marketing concept holds that the goal of the organizations is to satisfy its customers and publics. Although many organizations have adopted this concept, many have failed in assessing and evaluating the consumers' satisfaction level. Instead of directly evaluating satisfaction, they refer to sales, enrollment, attendance and other variables to measure it. Tourangeau and Rasinskim suggested a process through which individuals arrive and report their satisfaction, it involves at least five types of operations: interpreting the survey question, accessing relevant information about the organization from memory, weighing the information according to its relevance and importance, summarizing the information to an implicit judgment, and translating that implicit judgment into the given response format [14].

2.2.3. Service Quality

Marketers perceive service quality as the level of service needed to make it acceptable in the market place. For customers, service quality is the level of service required to satisfy their needs [15]. Unlike products, service quality is evaluated by customers not only by the core service but also by the service experience [16]. Andreassen and Lindestad verified that corporate image has a strong influence on customer satisfaction especially if the customer has little knowledge about the service [17]. Consumers regard the image of the brand or the corporation as indicative of the quality of the products or services of that brand. Moreover, services brands with a positive image reinforce the perception of quality for all the services provided [18]. Service quality is usually defined as the result of the comparison between perceived and expected service in either of the following perspectives: The Nordic, defines service quality as a function of "technical" (what the customer gets) and "functional" (how the service is delivered) quality [18]. The American perspective, defines service quality as the discrepancy between expected and perceived service through five dimensions [19].

2.3. Image and its Components

2.3.1. The image perspective

The concept of image has been the object of the much confusion derived from the term itself. Capriotti defines image as "the mental representation of a real object that acts in that object's place" [20]. Most authors defined image as a set of beliefs and feelings that is prone merely to a cognitive approach. However, Martineau regarded the image of commercial establishments as "...the way in which the stores are described in the consumer's mind based on functional qualities and psychological attributes" [21]. According to Cornelissen & Thorpe, an image is an immediate set of meaning inferred by a subject in confrontation or response to one or more signals from or about an institution [22]. Basically, it is the net result of the subject's beliefs, ideas, feelings and impressions about an institution at a single point in time. Consensus has been built that an organizational image can only be held or assessed by its stakeholders or constituents. An image is a result of how signals or messages emitted by organizations are interpreted over time by stakeholders. Avenarius concluded "The real image makers are the publics" [23]. Messages about the organization delivered by the media and other observers, such as family, friends, or employees of a firm, also factor into the images of organizations held by those who evaluate the organization [7]. Another consensus in research built on organizational image is multidimensional. That image is based on a variety of factors such as: organizational size, profitability, extent of diversification, an individual's degree of familiarity with the organization, the perceived nature of community and employee relations, the extent of charitable contributions, perceived quality of goods and services and advertising intensity [24].

2.3.2. Brand and corporate image

Much research in corporate image has agreed that it is a collection or set of "images" in the receiver and controlled by the organization. Any individual can have many positive, negative and indifferent images of the organization, the organization's product, the organization's reputation and so on. One institution that absolutely depends on its image in order to prosper and even survive is the university. Corporate image defined by Gray & Balmer is the immediate mental picture that audiences have of an organization [25]. Wilbur confirmed that most institutions have distinguishable images [26]. In the literature, brand image has been defined as a perception of quality associated with the brand name [27]. On the company level, image has been defined as perceptions of an organization reflected in the associations held in consumer memory [28]. According to established conclusions; brand image has considerable influence on consumer behavior. Thus the image influences the increases in sales and strengthening of brand loyalty. Therefore, brand image is being highly considered in the context of companies and in the non-profit field. Regarding higher education, universities are striving to build a distinct image in order to maintain their competitiveness in the market. Sans De La Tajada believed that corporate image encompassed "...the representations both rational and affective, that and individual or group of individuals associate with a company or institution as a net result of the experiences of, attitude toward, feelings and information about the company that the group has" [29].

2.3.3. *The two components of image*

Kennedy distinguishes two components of image: functional, related to tangible stimuli that can be easily measured, and emotional, associated with psychological conditions that become apparent in feelings and attitudes [30]. Functional qualities referred to physical properties, such as range of goods, the price band and the layout of the store, while the psychological attributes refer to the consumer's sense of belonging, to his sensation of good or bad taste and his feeling of warmth toward the store. After reviewing the literature on brand image, Dobni and Zinkhan concluded that image is a perceptual phenomenon that is formed by rational and emotional interpretation and has cognitive components, the beliefs, and affective components, the feelings [31]. Thus the underlying meanings of brand image include a cognitive dimension as well as an affective one. The overall image is formed subjectively though a system inextricably linked with designative and evaluative perceptions, in other words cognitive and affective components. Many literature reviews identified works in the psychological field that dealt with the cognitive or affective component alone. The authors, pioneers in the cognitive theory are Lynch, Ittelson, Gollege while exponents of affective theory are Craik, Russel and Pratt and Hanyu [32], [33], [34], [35], [36], [37]. However, although the difference is important, they have to be approached together as if they were interrelated. In the literature review, the marketing concept agrees that the cognitive component is an antecedent of the affective component and the consumer's evaluative judgments depend on his knowledge of object [38].

2.3.4. *Corporate Reputation*

In today's sensitive business milieu, an organization's ultimate chance of survival is to develop a positive image and a favorable reputation in its environment. With the growing competition and the absence of differences in quality, design, price, and benefits, the factor having the greatest influence on the consumer's decision making process is the positive image and reputation of the brand of company [28]. The concept of corporate reputation is based on a social identity and interprets it as a vital resource that is inevitable to the survival of the organization [39]. Corporate reputation is described as the overall perception of what the organization stands for and what aspects and expectations are associated by individuals when benefiting from the company's products and services [40]. In short, it is the result of the past actions of the corporation. It is formed through accumulated judgments over time of different stakeholders who interact with the organization [41]. Therefore, an organization can have multiple reputations: one for each attribute such as employee professionalism, top-notch facilities, price, quality service, strategic locations, and innovative products.

2.4. *Relationship between image and satisfaction*

2.4.1. *Sources of satisfaction*

After having reviewed the definition Giese and Cote identified 3 basic components of satisfaction [42]:

- Type of response whether it is cognitive, affective or conative as well as the intensity of the response;
- The center of attention or object of the response;
- The time or moment at which the evaluation is made.

The image is the construct that most influences student satisfaction. The influence of the image is also relevant on student loyalty. If higher education institutions have to compete through image, the first step to take is to measure the university image held by its students [43]. Fornell defines satisfaction as a general evaluation based on the result of the product perceived after the purchase and compared with the expectations prior to the purchase [44]. Halstead et al consider satisfaction as an affective response centered on comparing the result of the product with some standard set prior to the purchase and measured during or after consumption [45]. On the other hand, Mano & Oliver state that satisfaction is an attitude or evaluative judgment that varies on a hedonistic continuum centered on the product and evaluated after consumption [46].

2.4.2. *Relationship between customer satisfaction and corporate image*

The literature hasn't obviously identified a clear relationship between satisfaction and image. On the other hand Nguyen and Leblanc considered that satisfaction has no significant and direct effect on corporate image [47]. High level of customer satisfaction does not necessarily lead to favorable corporate image. This contradicts much of the literature that states that corporate image is the function of the accumulated effect of (dis)satisfaction [48], [44]. However in the study of Nguyen and Leblanc, satisfaction through the perceived value of the service has a direct effect on image, which is explained by the assertion of Barich and Kotler that a company has a strong image if the clients believe that they receive good value in their transactions with the company [28]. Even though customer satisfaction is strongly associated with loyalty, it is not the only variable that can impact upon loyalty. Ostrowski found in their study a significant relationship between passengers' image of an airline carrier and customer loyalty [49]. Surprisingly, the relationship between image and loyalty has received much less attention than the one between satisfaction and loyalty. Studies that integrated all three variables – satisfaction, image, and loyalty – are even scarcer and none of them considers the customer's experience with the service or product. However, experience might play an important role because image changes with experience [50]. Several authors such as Bigné and Zins suggested that image perceptions affected satisfaction since they mold customers' expectations before the visit and since, by definition, satisfaction depends on the comparison between those expectations and the actual service [51], [52]. Moreover when a customer is satisfied with the service, the image of the company in his mind is improved and this upgraded image will directly influence satisfaction, thus making the relationship between those two constructs reciprocal [17].

3. Methodology

3.1. *Research design and data collection*

A Multi Stage Study is suggested, starting with: A qualitative Exploratory Research aiming at defining the attributes of the different components of the university image. It includes a Review of the literature followed by a focus Group interview research of 15 students. The second stage of the research would be a conclusive Quantitative Survey aiming at getting from concerned population more statistically reliable measurements parameters. Our exploratory research will be based upon a survey. The tool used is the questionnaire constructed and based on the identified criteria in the exploratory research. Our primary data sources

were collected from a representative sample through a direct contact with the students completed via a questionnaire.

Sample Description

Our study suggests that the work carried out is based on a self-administered questionnaire in a personal survey of 1000 students enrolled in different private business schools located in Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Egypt, UAE, Oman, Turkey and Cyprus.

The sample size was determined by a random selection of 1000 students over the 8 countries. The total number of responses was 763 questionnaires with a response rate of 76.3%. First year students were not included in our sample due to their lack of experience, since they cannot assess their satisfaction with their university.

Representation of Hypotheses

H1 The cognitive component of image significantly influences the affective component of image.

H2 The cognitive component of university's image significantly and positively influences the overall image of the university.

H3 The affective component of university's image significantly and positively influences the overall image of the university.

H4 The cognitive component of the university's image significantly influences the students' satisfaction with the university.

H5 The affective component of the university's image significantly influences the students' satisfaction with the university.

H6 The overall image significantly and positively influences the students' satisfaction with the university.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted as well as a factorial analysis and Chi-square were used to test the hypotheses. We also concluded that the distribution follows the central limit theorem. We applied Cronbach's alpha coefficient in order to check the reliability of the scales used. Thus, the scales showed a high reliability. We have also carried out analyses for factorial validity of the cognitive and affective components of the university image. The attributes determining the university image allowed us to extract six factors with eigenvalues higher than that of the whole.

Table 1:

The six most prominent factors deduced after the factorial analysis

	Factors	Description
F1	Reputation and Age	Prestige, reputation, trendiness, innovation, traditionalist
F2	Student Life	Popularity, general atmosphere, student life on campus
F3	University Relationships	University oriented towards students, society and companies
F4	Class	Crowding in class, range of courses, facilities
F5	Cost/Quality ratio	Quality of teaching staff, tuition fees, professors holding PhDs
F6	Ease of entry and preparation	Admission difficulty, Project and homework preparation

4.2. Discussion of the results

It can be seen that most factors of the cognitive factor of image significantly influence the affective image, thus verifying H1. The cognitive factors that exercise the greatest positive influence are the "reputation and age", "student life", "university relationships", "class" and "cost to quality ratio". Thus, when a university is prestigious and has a reputable history, life on campus is dynamic and the students can easily get jobs while their tuitions are affordable. Students also tend to have affection toward their university and consider it as second refuge other than home. On the other hand, the "ease" factor does not exert a functional relationship with the affective component since the ease of admission and how students prepare their classes are not evident. In relationship between the cognitive image and the overall image, it can be seen that all the cognitive factors significantly influence the overall image except for the "ease" factor", thus, verifying H2, though only partially. The most remarkable factor is "reputation and age" however to a lesser extent "cost to quality ratio". This proves that students are more concerned about the prestige and reputation of their educational institution rather than their value for money. The affective component has a positive and significant influence on the overall image of the university, accordingly leading us to accept H3. H4, which maintains that there is a statistically significant relationship between the cognitive component of image and the student satisfaction, is verified partly since the only discernible factor is "University relationships". We conclude that students' satisfaction is mainly affected by the university's relations with the society. In this regard, companies would be keen to provide decent jobs for fresh graduates as well as internships for current students. Moreover, when the university is oriented towards students, they feel that their opinion is heard and taken into consideration which is a major factor in satisfaction. The relationships between the affective component of image, overall image and satisfaction show statistically significant relationship and therefore confirm H4 and H5.

Based on the findings above, the university proved to have a great responsibility on the future generations. It is from this context that we assume that undergraduate students need to be equipped with the adequate skills, knowledge and theoretical tools in order to form the bridge between academic and executive education. It has been also recognized that students are an important asset for the university since they will project the appropriate image of what they have learned theoretically in the actual business context. Thus on the level of higher education, the issue of executive global education is no longer an option for university stakeholders; it has become a must.

Table 2:
Summary of the findings along with the implications of every hypothesis

Hypothesis	Related Factors	Relationship	Implications
H1: Cognitive factors of image affecting the affective components	Reputation and Age Student Life University relationships Class Cost/Quality ratio	Positive significant relationship	Dynamic life on campus Students get jobs easily Affordable tuitions Affiliation and commitment
H2: Cognitive factors of university's image overall image.	Reputation and Age Cost/Quality ratio	Positive relationship	More concern for prestige and reputation rather than the value for money
H3: Affective component of image influencing the overall university image.	Student Life	Positive significant relationship	
H4: Cognitive components of image influencing the students' satisfaction.	University relationships	Partial relationship	Concern for corporate relations who provide students with jobs and internships
H5: Affective component image influencing the students' satisfaction.	Reputation and Age Student Life University relationships Class	Positive significant relationship	
H6: overall image influences the students' satisfaction.	Reputation and Age Student Life University relationships Cost/Quality ratio	Positive significant relationship	

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, competition in the high education sector is growing tremendously. Thus competition for students, teaching and research staff, and new sources of funding has become very fierce. In that context, universities that have a strong distinctive image will be in a better position to face successfully the competition taking place in the near future. There are a few published works in the empirical context that analyze the perceived image from a descriptive point of view since many universities choose not to disclose information that affect their strategic position and

that would reveal its strengths and weaknesses to their competitors (Landrum et al[53]. Moreover most of the empirical works approached the corporate image of the university from the perspective of the transmitter but not from the perspective of the receiver. The increasing competition in the academic institutions field and shortage of analyses of the perceived university image with its relation to satisfaction have lead us to this empirical work, which is based on a survey of 1000 students at a private universities in Middle Easter region. By that means, we analyzed how the image of educational centers is formed through cognitive and affective components, as well as analyzing the influence of different components on satisfaction.

The results of our empirical work verified that:

- The cognitive component of university image is influenced by the affective component of image
- The overall image is more influenced by the affective component than by the cognitive component
- “University relationships” is the only aspect of the cognitive components that influences student satisfaction
- The overall image and the affective component significantly influence the student satisfaction.

Based on this empirical study, university administration should pay more attention to develop policies regarding communication and management. Thus, they should exert most influence on the affective and overall images and on satisfaction. The policies should take into account the factors relating to “Class”, “Student life”, “University relations”, “Reputation and age” and “cost/ quality ratio” but they must avoid the cognitive attribute relating to the “ease of entry”. In this way the brand image of the university will have sound foundations relevant to its publics, the students, whose satisfaction is dependent on image and able to project a corporate identity in which the benefits are provided in a unique, distinctive manner. Nevertheless, the limitations of this work stem from a purely academic point of view. It would be recommendable that we extent the research to other fields of activity in order to generalize the results. In our study we could not include all the universities in the region due to factors such as unstable political and safety conditions, some deans prefer not to reveal such personal information. Furthermore it would be advisable to include a larger sample counting all the public and private business schools in order to have a generalization of the Middle Eastern students and their image formation about their university and satisfaction. Similarly, it would be interesting to study the image formation process among teaching staff, companies, public organizations and society in general. Even though all organizations are moving towards the same concept and direction, the transition phase is full of adaptations, conflicts and partial rejections. Hence, the university has to adapt to the best practices that fit into the organization's culture and to stay aware of the changes happening on the global level to avoid the risk of being left behind.

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