The Image and Perceived Quality of Universities as Important Dimensions for Building University Brand Equity - Case Study Involving Albanian Students

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Abstract

Research has shown that the probability of employment for individuals lacking proper qualification is four times smaller than that of those who possess proper qualification. Qualification helps people to occupy a decent job, that is to say a good paying job, with quality working conditions supplied by social and legal benefits and protection. A higher education degree is an investment in human capital however and in our country, the cost of this investment per individual is relatively high compared to the expected income. Since the investment to have a university degree is a rare purchase and for most students can be the first and last purchase, therefore the choice of university must be carefully evaluated which means that the image and the university’s perceived quality can be the main selection criteria by students. Studies about brands, describe the impact of brand image through identification with the customer. This includes personal identification, where customers can identify themselves with some brands and therefore develop a level of fondness towards them. Therefore it can be suggested that people can enrich their image through the image of the brands they buy and use. Therefore, university students, as the most important group of interest are likely to identify their own self with the university they choose. Images of the university as a brand can be used by students to enrich their image, for example, students can begin to call themselves "boy / girl of X University". Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) have found that consumer retention is influenced by the image of corporate and consumer satisfaction. Within the context of a higher education, loyalty fostered by students can be furthered by the students’ own perceived image of the university, as the observed quality of the university. This paper will attempt to treat the influence of perceived quality and image of the Albanian universities as the choice of study provided to Albanian students as well as the impact that these dimensions of brand equity impress upon Albanian universities.

Keywords: university, image, perceived quality, brand equity, student.

1. Introduction

This section will deal with two elements of Aaker's CBBE which are strongly correlated to one another: consumer awareness and brand associations linked to the brand image and reputation.

According to Oliver (1980) in assessing the performance of a product or a service, the customer should measure what is worthy and acceptable therefore the brands can create certain expectations. Barich and Kotler emphasize that the role of the image and institutional reputation have an important effect on consumer purchases considerations. According to Kennedy (1997), the image of the institution consists of two main elements: functional and emotional. Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) define the functional component as tangible characteristics that can be measured easily and emotional component as psychological dimensions manifested in attitudes and feelings about the organization. Raj (1985), Dick and Basu (1994) state that the image and reputation of an institution are important in maintaining consumer loyalty.
Milo, Edson and McEuen (1989) and Weissman (1990) define that the image of the institution and loyalty towards it are used to influence the choice of students towards an institution of higher education. In the study of Treadwell and Harrison (1994) which focuses on the image of the university consisting of students, faculty and staff, it was found that the image of the university was affected by a series of factors: academic excellence, friendships formed, feelings of pride as graduate students, the national image of the school, the image of the school’s level of research, social events and homogeneity among students. Attributes of the university that may affect enrollment of students were: family ties, the ranking of schools, departments, teaching quality, the size of the university and the emphasis that was put on sports.

Institutional image is also affected by ancillary services which include: library, computer laboratories, the availability of quiet zones and areas for study. Brand image has a significant impact on quality perceptions when the information regarding the product is not clear, furthermore it provides information on the quality of products and improves the quality of the product or service.

Brand reputation is defined as a perception of quality associated with the name. In the university environment perceived brands can be used by prospective students as a quality indicator. The same happens to the graduates, where the perception of the brand may be determinant in the future willingness to repurchase or recommended the services offered by the university to others. Not necessarily the reputation of a brand is associated with a product or service, the brand is perceived more about the company’s reputation than with an individual service.

According Herbig and Milewicz (1997), reputation should be followed by one user to another, in the case of students, from current students to future one’s through word of mouth. Also, they suggest that the university should take care in meeting the expectations of students in order not to lose its reputation. This happens if the course experience is perceived as inappropriate from consumer base. A strong brand name can convey its reputation to new products. However, this may not always have a positive mutual impact. This transfer of reputation can occur even in the case of the university where the perception of a good reputation can be passed from one department to a new department or from one branch to another.

We know that consumers, in making purchasing decisions, consider several aspects such as social status, esteem or prestige associated with their consumer experience while using the brand. Selecting the institution may come from a total of consumer perceptions dependent on various factors: academic reputation, quality and expertise of teaching, the campus environment and attractiveness. (Lin, L. 1997; Mazzarol 1998; Soutar & Turner 2002)

Researches analyzes factors associated with the image of the university, where their findings included: factors controlled by the university as separate programs, the power of academic programs, libraries and technical facilities were powerful predictors of image perception as compared to environmental factors: location, costs in connection with other universities and eligibility. Also it was revealed that personal experience in a university was of greater relevance on the image of said university than media exposure.

In the context of the university the best way to reduce perceived risk is considering several factors during the selection process. According to Joseph and Joseph (2000) the most important criteria in the selection are the flexibility and longevity of the program and reputation issues. It was discovered that the information related to: career opportunities, information on choosing a field of study and physical aspects as appropriate location, learning environment, social activities on campus, resource availability and a clean and safe environment are considered the most important factors in choosing a university.

Soutar and Turner (2002) adjudicated to the same conclusion in their study that stated that: a university with a strong academic reputation, high quality teaching, studies they (students) wanted, . good employment prospects , and a campus atmosphere are key predictors of selection and evaluation of a university. Tang (2004) states that: graduates from universities with a better academic reputation have more chances to find a job.

Cornelissen and Thorpe (2002) define the reputation as a collective representation of the unallocated images of the past. Bennett and Kottasz (2000) contradict this definition and add that there is a difference between the image and reputation, because reputation evolves with time and therefore cannot be generated as soon as the image. Dolphin (2004) states that the reputation can be defined as: a spread of opinion regarding an entity or as an interaction between stakeholders in which the organization has no direct impact. Dolphin’s determination (2004) also reveals a reputational overlap between the concept of brand image and reputation. Good reputation is important for organizations and particularly important for universities (Hutton et al. 2001).
Nguyen and Leblanc (2001) state that: institutional image and reputation are external perceptions of the organization. Even to a person who has had no experience with the organization, these perceptions can be formed from other sources of information such as advertising and word of mouth (rumors). This is also supported by Ivy (2001) who claims that the institutional image is a result of word of mouth, past experience and marketing activity of the university. According to Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton (2004) students aim to reduce uncertainty by collecting information during the college selection process.

2. Perceived quality

The perceived quality concept is defined by Aaker (1991) as an overall assessment of a service experience which includes overall quality or superiority of the product or service related to its purpose and alternatives available.

The dimension of the perceived quality of Aaker consists of two elements: product quality and service quality. Furthermore, he also makes a distinction between perceived quality and objective or concrete quality, based on product quality and quality in manufacturing. Concrete quality relates to superior service. Product quality is based on features, components and manufacturing quality conforms to specifications. On the other hand, Gronroos (2001) describes the quality as technical and functional, which are critical in the service industry. According to him, the technical quality described what the customer gets the service provider and functional quality is the way in which the service was sent.

Aaker also stated that there is a difference between perceived quality and satisfaction. Aldridge and Rowley (1998) agree with Aaker and emphasize that: quality is the general attitude satisfaction is related to specific transactions. It is known that expectations are what determine consumer satisfaction. The consumer can feel comfortable while having low expectations regarding the performance of the service. Aaker and also discusses the difference between perceived quality and attitudes. A positive attitude may be due to the price advantages of a product with a subpar quality. Parallel, a person can have a negative attitude towards a high quality product that they feel is over-priced.

The higher education sector, explains the difference between the two elements of quality, perceived quality and cost value. The perceived quality focuses on the quality of university classes and the consistency of the results provided by the university courses. Intrinsic value for the cost associated with building a university environment consists of the value of the course compared to the price, time and effort spent on acquiring knowledge.

Aaker defines the perceived quality of products or services through these differences: Product quality consists of several elements such as product performance, features, consistent with specifications, safety, longevity, usability, and convenience (appears and gives the feeling of a quality product). Quality of service is related to features like: tangible (physical elements of the product, equipment, personnel give you image quality), security, competence of staff to assist and perform their job successfully, is the customer service staff ready to provide assistance in solving your problems, empathy- provide a careful service and personalized service providers.

3. Study

The following section presents the proposed model of this search. We used the appropriate literature review and reviewed the methods used to measure consumer-based brand equity using them as the basis of our study. More specifically we attempted to measure brand equity based on the student body of the School of Economics at the University of Tirana. Upon these measures we devised a number of research questions that will yield the following answer.

The importance of student assessment of the image and perceived quality of Albanian universities, has a direct effect on the selection of the university as well as the brand equity of universities.

The sample used for our research is made up of students from the School of Economics at the University of Tirana, from the Bachelor and Master level of studies and from the Part-Time system. The sample selected was comprised of students who have experience with the teaching body, who have completed part or a complete level of studies.

115 students from School of Management (Bachelor), Finance (Master of Science) and Marketing (Master of Science and Professional) were selected as the base of this study. The sample taken has an error interval of 9.72%, a 95% confidence level, which means that the sample is representative.
The selected sample is mitigating non-probability, since the students were chosen from either a group recognized by the teaching body, or a group helping our professors in their teaching hours. They were asked about various issues related to reputation, quality, the support environment of the staff, learning environment, loyalty.

The aim of the research was explained to the participants in broad terms. The respondents were also assured that their responses would remain anonymous. All participants were given the opportunity to participate in the questionnaire and were also given the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were also encouraged to respond to the questionnaire honestly.

The questionnaire was distributed to respondents prior to the commencement of a lecture. The questionnaire was structured with closed questions, except for a question pertaining to brand awareness. Other questions, dealing with university issues, experience, quality and loyalty are in interval form and based on the Likert scale, with five levels: 1-do not agree to 5-very much agrees. The questionnaire was also distributed via the Internet through Qualtrics, a site for the creation and analysis of questionnaires. Analysis of the questionnaires was also made with Qualtrics, which offers the options of cross tabulation that provides a link between variables. Although there are many other sites, or statistical programs, this program seemed as most suitable for our research and more easily usable.

Analysis of the questionnaire is presented with graphics, tables, with data rates and adequate explanations for each question. There is also the analysis of links between different variables which Qualtrics provides through the X2 test. Under this test we should find that the expected frequencies for different values of cross tabulation to be greater than 5 which allows for the latter automatic calculation of the p-value. According to this value could see if there is a relationship between variables.

4. Results

The respondents were 115 students. 89% of respondents were within the 21-24 year old range, 9% in the 18-20 year range and 2% were over the age of 25 years. Of these, 20% were male and 80% were female. About 54% were studying for the MSc or Professional Master Degree, about 45% were finishing their undergraduate studies and about 1%, Part-time. 46.5% of respondents were enrolled in the Management Department, 25.5% Marketing 26% Finance and 1.7% Economics.

The next question pertains to the following "What has influenced the decision to continue the School of Economics of the University of Tirana?" which sheds some evidence on some of the sources of brand equity. Whether word of mouth worked better? If the already established reputation of the school brings sufficient validity of the degree? If other schools are worse, or the inability to choose another? About 46% of respondents answered that they are "agree strongly" about the fact that they have chosen the university because of the validity of the diploma and 43% answered "agree", which means that for these students the established validity of the diploma means more, and the university has exceeded in meeting this standard whereas validating the students assertion that they should feel confident with this choice.

For questions pertaining to private universities, whether these institutions are worth it, the answers tend to hover above the "neutral, agree strongly" line, whereas 29% of respondents to agree. If we join "agree" and "strongly agree" together we will see that 53% of students are of the opinion that private schools are too expensive and generally not worth it. This shows that students are confident in the level and system of public universities and have no confidence in private.

Most of the answers to the question regarding the word-of-mouth from others for the school ranged between the "neutral" and "agree", respectively 40% and 33%, which means that to some extent the decision to choose this university is affected by the word-of-mouth. This, however, confirms the fact that we are influenced by the words of others or their experiences.

About 62% of the respondents answered that they chose the school for its good image. This indicates that the university has managed to create a good image during its years and that this image is conveyed to the consumer. It seems that this is another strong argument favoring the School of Economics. This image is a result of fact that there is a professional academic staff comprised of the best names in their respective field, which has produced students who have established their name in the appropriate fields, etc.
The next question had to do with a selection which was not influenced by the student but rather by other factors (other schools were their first choice). Notwithstanding, 56% of respondents answered that this university has been their first choice and they have willingly chosen to continue their studies here which reinforces the brand image of the school.

To the question whether it was their decision to continue this school or a family influenced one, 63% answered "agree strongly" that the school was selected at their own volition, 36% are "neutral" and 34% "agree" that parents affected their decision. Therefore, in addition to their own opinion it seems that family has a significant impact on the choice. Therefore a positive marketing impact can be drawn from reaching the families of students.

About 58% of students answered "agree", 20% "neutral" and 16% "agree strongly" on the professionalism of the staff. There seems to be a general positive attitude towards them, however, it seems that there are reserves that can be special cases for specific teachers or special students. There are times however, that single isolated instances have a further reaching effect on the whole.

On the question of whether students feel more prepared for the challenges of life the answers were 34% "neutral" and 46% "agree ". School programs, experiences obtained and developed practices seem to have managed to create a level of comfort with the challenges upon graduation. The way that students have managed to pass the processes of school, learning, various difficulties seems to have made them stronger to face the challenges of the real world.

30% say "not agree", 33% say "neutral" and 22% "agree" to the question whether the testing of knowledge is based on understanding rather than memorizing. The most commonly accepted term of testing the knowledge obtained is through written examinations. The problem is if you ask for what you have learned over time, for your arguments, analysis, or simply for what you have memorized the book. From the results it appears that students are split between agreeing and disagreeing on the matter. This has to do with ways of learning and what each student decides is the simplest. However a substantial part are of the opinion that exams tend to focus on what each of them has memorized.

Teamwork is very important nowadays, especially when most of the tasks are dependent on or affect other tasks and general communication is very important. 54% of students answered "agree" and 33% "strongly agree" about whether they had some training in teamwork while pursuing their studies. Apparently The School of Economics reached its goal to enable its students to work in a group, although if we take into account the fact that we are a collectivist culture, it should also teach the students to work less individually. Furthermore, to the question whether they were trained in problem solving and analytical thinking, 62% of respondents answered "agree", which is a very good result.

To the question if the curriculum fits with selected trades 54% think "agree". Overall, the classes and curricula developed in class was relevant to the particular profession that the students have eventually followed. However this is an issue that can better judge teachers rather than students. In terms of communication and relationships with the teaching staff 31% answered "not agree", 33% "neutral" and 20% "agree", if teachers are supportive. Also, 30% answered "not agree", 32% "neutral" and 28% "agree ", whether it was simple to understand what was expected of them.

So it seems that there is a mix of views, which may have resulted from different opinions and different teachers that make the average being unclear. It seems that not all teachers are good at communicating with their students, not always their relationship with them is satisfactory.

5. Analysis research

Earlier we showed the results that emerged from the questionnaire and some of the conclusions that result. These results were presented by means of tables and graphs to facilitate the analysis. Below are some links between different factors, which were handled above. This analysis will be done with the help of Qualtrics. Under this program the value the probability (p) should be smaller than 0. 05 so that variables have strong ties with each other. In order that the value of p to be valid X² or frequency of waiting, must be greater than 5. Calculations of data are made automatically by the program. Also, we have introduced a cross tabulation between variables to indicate frequencies and expected frequencies for each.

First, we will see if the perception of students will affect the image quality perception. We analyzed the quality and image variable in a liaison table and the results are shown in the table below. From the results of tables it seems that many students who assessed the image with agree, strongly agree also assessed the quality in the same manner.
As we can see from the results the value of the probability of $p = 2$, which means there is no connection between the variables. This means that the perception of the quality will not be affected by the image. A good image can result in a better quality determination, but quality assessment after creating an experience is not affected by the image. So, students are not affected by the image to evaluate quality.

There are two different determinations that we can based upon these results, whereas one can have a very good image but the quality lacks after the experience or vice-versa. Therefore a good image should be supported by good quality. On the other hand we have the variables Image-Fidelity. Even in this case have the greater frequency of responses in the “agree” and “strongly agree” for both variables. Those who have positive comments for the image have shown positive attitude towards loyalty.
Considering that the value of $p = 0.06$ demonstrates that there is a weak relationship between image and loyalty that students show towards the academic staff. A good image will also affect a greater fidelity. This connection is not very strong, but still there is a link, which shows that having a good image will result in higher fidelity to the staff and a return of the students toward this group, as well as to the recommendation to others and in generating good words of the mouth.

Now, we will present the results of the case if the perceptions of students for a supportive teaching environment affected their perceptions of quality. In order to make this determination we are considering several variables: quality, expectation, staff support, training in problem solving, the type of test and professionalism of the staff.

The table below shows the results of the values of $X^2$ and $p$ that show even if there is a relationship between variables. For "It was easy to understand what was expected of me", $p = 0.08$, which is greater than 0.05 but less than 0.1. This means that there is a weak relationship between expectations and perceived quality. This indicates that the communication with teachers is important.

For "The staff is supportive and interested in the problems of students", $p = 0.1$, indicating that there is no connection between the variable quality with the support of teachers. This means that lack of interest, lack of support or the opposite will not affect the perception of the quality of the staff. To have those qualities is a plus, but you may show interest and be supportive while lacking any skill for your particular profession.

For "I am trained in problem solving and analytical thinking", $p = 0$, which means that there is a strong link between training and quality. So, the work that makes school or teachers to enable students will certainly affect their opinion on the quality.

For "Testing is based on understanding and not in memory", $p = 0.12$, this value is greater than 0.1 and this means that testing and quality have no link between them. According to respondents, for it does not affect the quality perception of how testing is done.

For "The lecturers are prepared and professional", $p = 0$, which is less than 0.01, and means that there is a strong correlation between the quality and professionalism of teachers. So their teaching ability will affect the quality perceived by the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good image of the school</th>
<th>$X^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will continue my studies at the university</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shkalla e gabimit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 4. Table of values.
6. Conclusions and recommendations

We interviewed students of the School of Economics, the management department, Marketing and Finance from the Undergraduate and Graduate levels. Based upon the conclusions derived from these students we can ascertain that the School of Economics and the University of Tirana are at the forefront of the minds of consumers. It seems that the first effect is created successfully.

Students have chosen the school of Economics at their own volition and it was their first preference. Also, the students have a positive opinion regarding the staff and have chosen the school also because of the good image it has. One other factor that affected has been the influence of family, somewhat. The negative connotation and image presented by the non-public schools, coupled with the positive reputation of the staff have helped in the creation of a better image for the University.

The experience created at a school is very important to decide, whether we like it its quality, to validate expectations or to influence the loyalty and relationships that will create it. It seems that in general the experience of teaching is very good, including the professionalism of teachers, the manner of testing, acquired skills, etc.

Results of relations between variables will show the points required for adjustments. First, we link quality image, which indicated that there is a relationship between two variables. This means that the image can lead to a high perceived quality, but this quality must be established. It seems that the image must be supported by a good quality. The image appears to have a strong relationship with loyalty. This may result from the fact that a good image for the staff, can also lead to a better social image. It gives the status of being in college, being an "economics student". And it will also lead to a higher fidelity through the generation of the word of mouth, thus consequently lead to a higher demand for the finest student.

We also examined the link quality teaching- environment. It seems that there is a strong correlation between the quality and perception of expectations, skills and professionalism received from the teaching core. And because the School of Economics was in positive waters with these assessments means that there is a perception of good quality. It seems that the perception of the quality does not affect whether teachers are very supportive or if testing is based on memory or understanding. Most important for students is the ability of the teachers.

References


