Check for updates

In the name of the University: the choice to promote as a tool to influence decision-making

Angela Maria D'Uggento[1] · Luca Petruzzellis[2] · Luigi Piper[3] ·
Antonia Rosa Gurrieri[4]

Abstract

Choosing the University to attend is an important decision that is made once or twice in a lifetime and has relevant effects for a person's entire life. In such a process, advice from others, especially current students, is a powerful influencing factor. Therefore, understanding the factors that lead students to become active advocates for their university is strategically important. Social identity theory states that when students choose a university, the image of the institution becomes part of their identity. In case of strong positive identification, the resulting sense of pride enhances their own self-identity and brings positive benefits beyond simply obtaining an education, which are then passed on to everyone. The current study focuses on brand experience and brand reputation and uses a moderated mediation analysis to investigate the mechanisms by which current students can be tools for university choice. Stimulating word-of-mouth (WOM) implies the institution to have and maintain a good reputation and engage students to develop a positive brand experience and pride. This research contributes to the development of a greater strategic awareness of universities' appeal to better tailor their orientation activities to current or prospective students.

Keywords Higher education · University choice · Moderated mediation analysis · University brand · Reputation · Word-of-mouth

1 Introduction

Choice and decision-making in HE is an area of growing research interest since students have a wide range of options from which to choose (Ball et al. 2010). University choice has shifted from an emphasis on quality to one on value, which is a multidimensional and complex construct (Doña-Toledo et al. 2017; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi 2010). Not only tangible factors (e.g., financial availability, commuting time, placement opportunities and quality of teaching and services offered), but also psychological factors (e.g., personal views, aspirations, and expectations of students and their families, the image of the univer-

---

sity) influence the decision of the program to choose (Bertaccini et al. 2021; Doña-Toledo et al. 2017; Gallo 2013; Horstschräer 2012). All these aspects can be summarized in the concept of university experience (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi 2010; Petruzzellis et al. 2006) that indicates the value that a student gets from the overall university life.

Student experience is much more than just teaching and learning, whose evaluation depends on each single student's approach to learning (Petruzzellis and Romanazzi 2010). It is a multidimensional concept that involves also environmental interaction, branding and reputation. In particular, a university's brand contributes also to the students' social identity formation (Balaji et al. 2016), which turns students into ambassadors by creating a sense of identification or belongingness with the university (Wilkins et al. 2016). In fact, word-of-mouth (WOM) has been found to be more trustworthy than advertisements in determining the university choice (Lee et al. 2020).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004), the university choice not only contributes to but also results in the university image that becomes part of student identity. Students who strongly identify with the university are likely to be more committed and perform beyond their role requirements. This allows the students to represent and support their university (Mael and Ashforth 1992). Obviously, this occurs through direct experience and the sharing of common values or goals (Petruzzellis et al. 2006), thus university identification provides an opportunity for students to develop a long-lasting relationship with the university.

To the best of our knowledge, so far very few papers (e.g., Dass et al. 2021) have analysed the effect of both cognitive (i.e., reputation) and affective elements (i.e., pride) on students' intention to promote their university, as a result of the positive outcome of their choice. While brand perception has been found to have an initial impact on the intention to choose the university (Lomer et al. 2018), a university brand synthesizes the overall perceptions (i.e., teaching and research quality, academic staff, tuition fees), and feelings associated with it (i.e., fun, excitement, pride) reinforcing the choice (Alwi et al. 2014). Among others, the quality of the university experience, the reputation of the institution, and the context in which it is located are represented by a university brand (Alessandri et al. 2006).

The study was conducted in the Italian context, which provides a good example of how adopting market-based principles in the strategic planning could multiply the beneficial effects of the education quality level (Masserini et al. 2018). In fact, higher education institutions (HEI) should develop strategic policies to better know their students, attract those who share their strategic vision, and achieve greater alignment of services offered to students with different attitudes and motivations. At the policy level, a better knowledge of the student characteristics can be used to implement more effective policies that place students at the center of value creation (Azzone and Soncin 2020) helping them in their choices also through the link between motivations and social factors.

Therefore, the contribution of the paper is twofold. First, the paper provides empirical support for the notion that students are likely to identify with their university and, as a result, develop strong relationships with it spreading positive WOM. Since branding involves a systematically planned and implemented process of creating a favorable and unique reputation for the university, this study proposes that understanding how students evaluate and relate to the university could influence their identification with the university. Second, the findings support that pride constitutes a valuable psychological resource that is a crucial driver of exceptional customer orientation of universities. The relationship between pride

and brand reputation continuously stimulates students' WOM, thus making pride a driver for students to engage in promoting their university.

On the managerial side, understanding the mechanisms that lead students to take pride in their university has important implications on how HEI could develop a greater strategic awareness of their appeal to better shape their orientation activities toward both current and prospective students. HEI should encourage WOM behavior through stronger brand identification with the university and greater satisfaction with university life rather than marketing incentives.

The paper is organized as follows: first, the theoretical background is discussed, then methodology and data are presented. Lastly, the results are discussed along with a brief conclusion.

2 Theoretical background

Although university choice occurs a few, if not once or twice, times in a lifetime, its effects last for a long time (Le et al. 2020; Simões and Soares 2010). Therefore, beyond the simple characteristics of HEI (Azzone and Soncin 2020), the quality and the prestige of the university (Chapleo 2010, 2011) summarized by the brand is crucial. The values a brand represents are automatically transferred to all individuals who have experienced the university, creating a sense of identification and pride, which, in turn, will influence the decision-making process of potential students and their families (Curtis et al. 2009).

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004) states that when students choose a university, the image of the institution becomes part of their identity. The identification with the university is the result of students' direct experiences (Halbesleben and Wheeler 2009; Wilkins et al. 2016) and its reputation. The more attractive students perceive the university, the stronger will be their identification with it, resulting in shared goals, identities, and values between the university and the students. This suggests that when students identify with the university that meets their self-esteem need, they might reciprocate by promoting the university to others (Halbesleben and Wheeler 2009). Previous research has reported that, when students strongly identify with the university, they are more likely to enjoy talking about their experiences at the institution with others and recommend the institution to other people (Stephenson and Yerger 2014). In particular, Balaji et al. (2016) and Casidy and Wymer (2015) found that students who have stronger identification with the university brand are more likely to spread positive WOM about their universities. Therefore, this will reinforce actual student's choice and influence prospective students' university choice accordingly.

2.1 Brand reputation

Reputation represents a powerful differentiating element in HE (Lomer et al. 2018; Suomi 2014). An institution with a good reputation is perceived as less risky by potential students and therefore is more likely to be chosen. It is a cognitive variable that influences behavior, considering the evaluations deriving from student's experience. A university's brand reputation is formed by different sub-dimensions that develop over time both externally and internally (Alessandri et al. 2006). In particular, Brewer and Zaho (2010) identify five

internal factors such as leadership, teaching, research, service and equity, while Alessandri et al. (2006) consider students' performance and their emotional engagement as well as the evaluations by external subjects (e.g., the media).

Since reputation is an intangible and social construct (Finch et al. 2013), it helps to create a cognitive category that influences behavior such as choice and WOM (Barnett and Hoffman 2008). In fact, advice from friends, peers, and family members is more important than the programs offered, fees, and location especially for prospective students (Le et al. 2020; Sipilä et al. 2017). In turn, WOM has a positive effect both on keeping actual customers (students who might choose a graduate program of the same university) and on attracting new customers (prospective students) (Garnefeld et al. 2011).

Generally speaking, the marketing literature (e.g., Shanka and Taylor 2004; Su et al. 2016) has widely investigated the causal link between WOM and brand reputation, reaching the conclusion that WOM is a tool to create and strengthen brand reputation. However, some studies (e.g., Hong and Yang 2009) have also demonstrated the positive effect of brand reputation on WOM. The higher the brand reputation, the more willing the customers to identify themselves with the company and spread positive WOM. Based on social psychology studies (Alexandrov et al. 2013; Cohen and Sherman 2014) and social identity theory, through sharing experiences and opinions people affirm their own decisions or help others to make better ones.

This approach applies to the HE field; brand reputation facilitates memorable experiences, emotional bonding and WOM (Alessandri et al. 2006; Brewer and Zhao 2010). Also, Harahap et al. (2018) found that WOM has no direct significant effect on university choice but, together with the university reputation, influences prospective students. Students' advocacy behaviors include positively speaking about the university, representing the university to external publics, recruiting for the university, and lending support to the university. Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H1: Brand reputation has a positive direct effect on WOM.

2.2 The mediation effect of brand experience and pride

When students experience the university life, they develop a brand experience, given by their cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social reactions to the environmental stimuli (Gilboa and Vilnai-Yavetz 2013). These complex experiences contribute to forming the university reputation (Japutra et al. 2014). The continuous interaction between students and the educational institution could increase the sense of belonging and pride, especially when they are satisfied with their choice (Espinoza et al. 2019; Freeman et al. 2007). Consistently with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004), pride and sense of belonging imply a stronger intention to share their own experiences (positive or negative), since they identify themselves with the institution (Myers et al. 2016).

In particular, pride is defined as a positive emotion associated with self-esteem and self-image, deriving from own or others' achievement of predetermined goals (Kraemer et al. 2017; Helm 2012; Lea and Webley 1997). Pride is accompanied by pleasant feelings and, unlike other positive emotions, also promotes positive self-perceptions. Importantly, people may experience pride with respect not only to their own successes but also to the successes of groups with which they identify (Celsi and Gilly 2010; Decrop and Derbaix 2009). When people identify with an organization, they incorporate this organization into their social

identity, perceive the organization as part of their selves, and feel self-conscious emotions toward it (Riketta 2005). Therefore, when people believe that the organization they identify with has performed beyond their expectations, or better than comparable organizations, and they attribute this performance to internal causes (i.e., the organization's abilities and efforts), they experience pride (Kraemer and Gouthier 2014). Individuals who repeatedly experience positive organization-related emotions develop a sustained attitude that captures their overall pride in the organization (Gouthier and Rhein 2011).

Previous HE research (e.g., Choi and Cha 2021; Titsworth et al. 2013) has found that some traditional elements of the university experience, such as the communication method chosen by educators, positively influences students' positive emotional processes and responses such as pride and enjoyment, which in turn lead to communicate their feelings to others. In fact, not only students can develop positive emotions towards the university but also their parents or relatives being proud of their children (Holbrook et al. 2014; Wong and Yuan-Li 2019). Therefore, we assumed that:

H2: The path from brand reputation to WOM is mediated by a sequence of mediators, i.e. brand experience and pride.

2.3 Involvement as a moderator

Generally speaking, involvement combines experiential and functional aspects and can contribute to emotional satisfaction and greater brand experiences with consequentially greater perceived value (Xie et al. 2008). A high level of involvement enhances the consumer's desire to engage (Xie et al. 2013) and, consequently, results in a higher level of satisfaction and enjoyment and a stronger attachment (Olsen and Mai 2013). Therefore, involvement represents a key factor in reducing the effect of preference instability as it moderates consumer decisions (Park and Mittal 1985). As well, when students feel a strong emotional involvement with the academic environment, they are more inclined to report greater levels of brand experience, satisfaction, and pride (Bowden et al. 2021; Butt et al. 2014).

Students' involvement in educational activities stimulates commitment and increases the willingness to participate to the university life (Doña-Toledo et al. 2017; Skinner and Pitzer 2012; Wilkins et al. 2016). As suggested by Skinner and Pitzer (2012) individuals who are low involved in fruition processes are also unwilling to extend their behaviour outside the sphere of the institution. Indeed, the greater the involvement the greater the value attributed to the service offered in terms of joy, enjoyment, passion, and pride (Bowden et al. 2021; Butt et al. 2014). In particular, Doña-Toledo et al. (2017) have shown that the level of involvement affects students' assessment of their university experience improving the image of the institution. Therefore, we assumed that:

H3: Involvement moderates the path from brand reputation to WOM.

3 Methodological approach and data

In order to understand the effect of both cognitive (i.e., reputation) and affective elements (i.e., pride) on students' intention to promote their university through branding, a structured questionnaire was administered to students of one of the largest Italian public Universities. For four weeks, between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., two trained interviewers intercepted potential
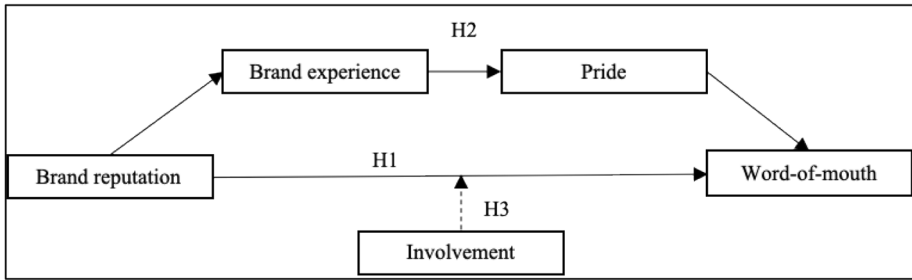
Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

respondents at various university areas (library, parks, cafeterias, classrooms, and bus stations) and, after explaining the survey objectives, invited them to participate in the study providing a link to the online questionnaire. In order to reduce evaluation apprehension (Podsakoff et al. 2003), the questionnaire guaranteed anonymity and that there were no right or wrong answers. Since the questionnaire was administered online, control questions were used to ensure that participants were paying attention to each question. An attention filter question was included at approximately the half-way point, asking to check point 5 on a five-point scale. If they did not select the "5" button, they were screened out.

The constructs were measured using scales already tested in literature. Brand reputation was measured through a five-point Likert scale from Fombrun and Gardberg (2000), which evaluated six dimensions of reputation such as emotional appeal, products and services, vision and leadership, workplace environment, financial performance, social responsibility. Brand experience was measured with a four-item semantic differential scale from Zarantonello (2008). Pride was measured by a single item (How proud are you of being a student at your university?) according to Robins et al. (2001). Involvement was measured by a one-item five-point Likert scale from Dhar (1997). Last, WOM was measured with a two-item scale adapted from Zeithaml et al. (1996). All items were translated from English into Italian using an iterative approach. At the end of the questionnaire, gender, age, level of education (i.e., bachelor, master and single cycle), field of study (i.e., Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Humanities, and Health Sciences) were collected.

500 questionnaires were collected, 20 of which were removed since they were incomplete or failed the control check. The sample included 294 women (61.2%) and 186 men (38.8%) with a mean age of 21.8 years (SD=2.2). In terms of level of education and field of study the sample was representative of the student population at the same university (MUR, 2022) in the academic year in which the study was conducted (see Table 1).

This was also confirmed by the non-significant difference between the sample and the population distributions by gender ($\chi^2=0.021$, p-value=0.884), field of study ($\chi^2=0.484$, p-value=0.922) and degree program ($\chi^2=0.855$, p-value=0.652).

First, to verify the assumption of multivariate normality (Cain et al. 2017) we conducted the Mardia's test for multivariate skewness and kurtosis (DeCarlo 1997). Then, we evaluated the threat of common method variance (CMV) entering the constructs with more than two items into a factor analysis and conducting the Harman's one-factor test (Diamantopoulos et al. 2012; Podsakoff et al. 2003). Also, the internal consistency of the scales was evaluated calculating the Cronbach's α coefficients. Lastly, in order to have a unidimensional value for each scale, we averaged the responses to the items for all scales (Diamantopoulos

Table 1 Characteristics of survey respondents

	Category	Sample	Population
Gender (%)	Male	38.8	37.8
	Female	61.2	62.2
Age (in years)	Mean	21.8	23.5
	SD	2.2	4.5
Field of study (%)	Social Sciences	39.4	37.6
	Science and Technology	26.0	26.3
	Humanities	22.5	20.8
	Health Sciences	12.1	15.3
Degree program (%)	Bachelor	63.1	63.0
	Master	15.5	11.9
	Single Cycle	20.9	25.1

et al. 2012) and tested the hypotheses through model 6 of Process for SPSS (Hayes 2022) with involvement as moderator and age, gender and year of enrolment as covariates.

The objective of the serial multiple mediator models with two mediators M_1 and M_2 is to evaluate the direct and indirect effects of the process in which the independent variable X causes M_1, which in turn causes M_2, concluding with the dependent variable Y (Hayes 2018). Therefore, four pathways were established: (i) the indirect path from X to Y through M_1; (ii) the indirect path from X to Y through M_2; (iii) the indirect path from X to Y through both M_1 and M_2 in series; (iv) the direct path from X to Y.

The serial multiple mediator model with one moderator W is formed of three different equations:

$$M_1 = i_{M_1} + a_1X + a_2W + a_3XW + e_{M_1}$$
$$M_2 = i_{M_2} + a_4X + d_{21}M_1 + a_5W + a_6XW + e_{M_2}$$
$$Y = i_Y + c'X + b_1M_1 + b_2M_2 + a_7W + a_8XW + e_Y$$

where a_i for $i = 1, \ldots, 8$ are the regression coefficients.

The indirect effects are estimated as the product of the regression weights linking X to Y through the mediators M_1 and M_2: a_1b_1 is the indirect effect of X on Y through M_1, a_2b_2 is the indirect effect through M_2, and $a_1d_{12}b_2$ is the indirect effect through both M_1 and M_2 in serial.

The total indirect effect of X on Y is the sum of these three indirect effects: $a_1b_1 + a_2b_2 + a_1d_{12}b_2$. Finally, adding c', the direct effect of X, to the total indirect effect, the result is $c = c' + a_1b_1 + a_2b_2 + a_1d_{12}b_2$ the total effect of X.

Data were multivariate normal according to the Mardia's multivariate skewness ($b = 0.505, p < .001$) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis ($b = 121.49, p = .029$) (Mardia 1970). The Harman's one-factor test revealed that 33.9% of the unrotated factor solution is attributable to a single factor. This suggests that CMV bias is not an issue in this study (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Finally, since Cronbach's α coefficients were all above the 0.70 cut-off (brand reputation $\alpha = 0.85$; brand experience $\alpha = 0.75$), the scales were reliable (Nunnally 1978).

Table 2 Mediation analysis

Pathway	To Brand experience	To pride	To WOM
Brand Reputation	0.502*** (0.032)	0.499*** (0.060)	0.308*** (0.043)
Brand Experience		0.176*** (0.074)	0.157*** (0.072)
Pride			0.426*** (0.043)
Direct Effect			0.303*** (0.063)
Total Effect			0.634*** (0.057)
Involvement			0.121** (0.021)

Note: N=480; *** = p<.001; ** = p<.050; * = p<.100; ns=not significant

4 Results

Data (see Table 2) show a positive direct effect between brand reputation and WOM (β=0.303; p<.001), thus verifying H1. Also, the effect through the mediated path resulted significant (β=0.634; SE=0.057, p<.001), thus confirming H2. In particular, the partial effect between brand reputation and brand experience is positive and significant (β=0.502; p<.001). Similarly, an increase in brand experience corresponds to a significant increase in pride (β=0.176; p<.001). Finally, a high level of pride leads to a high level of WOM (β=0.426; p<.001).

Involvement proved to be significant (β=0.121; p=.001), thus suggesting that this variable stimulates commitment to university life spreading WOM. Finally, among the covariates introduced in the model, only age had a significant impact on the total effect of brand reputation on WOM (β = –0.094, p=.019), highlighting that older students tend to be less likely to spread WOM.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The findings provide further insights into choice within the HEI context. In contrast with previous literature (e.g., Le et al. 2020; Shanka and Taylor 2004), results show that the reputation of an HE institution has an effect on WOM. This might be given by the peculiarity of HE. Students use some heuristics like reputation to make an important decision for their life. They also want to be identified through the institution in which they study for their future career, so they are more inclined to spread positive information that could lead them to stand out from others.

This is also confirmed by the sequence of mediators (i.e., brand experience and pride). In fact, students with a high reputation of their university develop higher brand experience, which then strengthens the pride to belong to the institution and identify with it. As a consequence, students are more willing to communicate the reasons for this pride to others, thus spreading positive WOM. The role of emotional engagement emerges in its multidimensional expressions, among which pride is the most evident.

Given the importance of the university choice, results also show that involvement moderates the relationship between university reputation and WOM. Students who have a good brand reputation of their university, tend to be highly involved and over time the brand experience increases accordingly. On the other hand, low-involved students are less interested in taking advantage of the whole experience, thus resulting in lower pride and interest to share.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The paper contributes to the literature on social identification and branding, given that, by considering students as customers and universities as service providers (Halbesleben and Wheeler 2009), university identification has the potential to provide new and valuable insights into how branding can influence students' perceptions and behaviors towards the university. In particular, the findings support that pride constitutes a valuable psychological resource that is a crucial driver of exceptional customer orientation of HEIs. The interrelationship between pride and brand reputation creates longer-lasting momentum that repeatedly stimulates students' WOM, thus making pride an impetus for students to continuously engage in promoting their university.

Moreover, the findings contributes to the very limited literature that links collective forms of pride to behavioral outcomes. The positive effect of pride resulting from a stronger brand experience provide more insights into which practice of instilling pride in students and also staff members.

5.2 Managerial implications

From a practical point of view, the study indicates that universities would benefit from investing in branding efforts to develop a strong university identification. The strategic brand marketing efforts for the internal and external audience should convey a strong, exceptional and distinctive reputation and strengthen the positive associations of the university experience in students' and parents' mind. In fact, creating strong university identification among students involves improving the core and supporting value proposition activities and creating an exceptional student experience. When students engage with university through various experiential activities, they will build personal relationships and reciprocate by engaging in greater levels of university supportive behaviours and become genuine university ambassadors.

The implications of this research may contribute to the design of more effective marketing communication campaigns that use branding to underline differentiation assets (Watkins and Gonzenbach 2013). Prospective candidates often turn to current and former students for orientation, and very often use informal information channels such as WOM and social media. This study has showed that stimulating WOM implies a commitment of the institution to have and maintain a good reputation, involve students in order to develop a positive brand experience and pride. This will rely on brand-supportive behaviours from students who will act as brand ambassadors, which in turn will have an effect on the enrolments. This confirms that students are not only the main university's customers and resources but also the most precious "asset" to invest in. On the other hand, as campus climate can play an important role in strengthening students' sense of belonging (Fan et al. 2021), universities should embrace this concept and build an inclusive, welcoming campus climate, adopting all those fruitful initiatives to enhance students' experience and build a bridge between them and senior graduate students, who have already found a job and can be as mentors for them.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The paper has some limitations. First, the framework should be tested in different contexts with more universities to understand the relation between the HEIs and their students, whether actual and prospective. Moreover, the difference between actual and prospective should be taken into account to assess the impact of a university brand and its components. Furthermore, since students could perceive the sense of belonging as the outcome of their experiences (Freeman et al. 2007), it would be possible to identify this construct as an additional mediator positioned between brand experience and pride. Additional predictors such as student satisfaction, brand trust and loyalty, could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The role played by rankings and international accreditations has not been considered in this study as well (Yousaf et al. 2020). Last, the joint effect of pride and identification in the context of university choice should be investigated in more detail.

References

Alessandri, S., S.-Un Yang, Kinsey, D. F.: An integrative approach to university visual identity and reputation. Corporate Reputation Review 9 (4): 258–270 (2006).
Alexandrov, A., Lilly, B., Babakus, E.: The effects of social and self-motives on the intentions to share positive and negative word of mouth. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 41: 531–546 (2013).
Alwi, S., Faridah, S., Kitchen, P. J.: Projecting corporate brand image and behavioural response in business schools: cognitive or affective brand attributes? Journal of Business Research 67 (11): 2324–2336 (2014).
Azzone, G., Soncin, M.: Factors driving university choice: a principal component analysis on Italian institutions. Studies in Higher Education 45 (12): 2426–2438 (2020).

Balaji, MS, Roy, S. K., Sadeque, S.: Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification. Journal of Business Research 69(8): 3023–3032 (2016).

Ball, S., Davies, J., David, M., Reay, D.:'Classification' and 'Judgement': Social class and the 'cognitive structures' of choice of Higher Education". British Journal Sociology of Education, 23(1), 51–72 (2010).

Barnett, M. L., Hoffman, A. J.: Beyond Corporate Reputation: Managing Reputational Interdependence. Corporate Reputation Review 11: 1–9 (2008).

Bertaccini, B., Bacci, S., Petrucci, A.: A graduates' satisfaction index for the evaluation of the university overall quality. Socio-Economic Planning Sciences 73: 100875 (2021).

Bowden, J. L.-H., Tickle, L., Naumann, K.: The four pillars of tertiary student engagement and success: a holistic measurement approach. Studies in Higher Education 46(6): 1207–1224 (2021).

Brewer, A., Zhao, J.: The impact of a pathway college on reputation and brand awareness for its affiliated university in Sydney. International Journal of Educational Management 24 (1): 34–47 (2010).

Butt, L, More E., Avery. G.C.: The myth of the 'green student': student involvement in Australian university sustainability programmes. Studies in Higher Education 39 (5): 786–804 (2014).

Cain, M. K., Zhang, Z., Yuan, K.-H.: Univariate and multivariate skewness and kurtosis for measuring non-normality: Prevalence, influence, and estimation. Behavior Research Methods 49: 1716–1735 (2017).

Casidy, R., Wymer, W.: The impact of brand strength on satisfaction, loyalty and WOM: An empirical examination in the higher education sector. Journal of Brand Management 22: 117–135 (2015).

Celsi, M. W., Gilly, M. C.: Employees as internal audience: How advertising affects employees' customer focus. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 38(4): 520–529 (2010).

Chapleo, C.: What defines "successful" university brands? International Journal of Public Sector Management 23 (2): 169–183 (2010).

Chapleo, C.: Exploring rationales for branding a university: Should we be seeking to measure branding in UK universities? Journal of Brand Management 18: 411–422 (2011).

Choi, S., Cha, Y. K.: Integration policy in education and immigrant students' patriotic pride in host countries: A cross-national analysis of 24 European countries". International Journal of Inclusive Education 25(7): 812–826 (2021).

Cohen, G. L., Sherman, D. K.: The Psychology of Change: Self-Affirmation and Social Psychological Intervention. Annual Review of Psychology 65: 333–371 (2014).

Curtis, T., Abratt, R., Minor,W.: Corporate brand management in higher education: The case of ERAU. Journal of Product & Brand Management 18 (6): 404–413 (2009).

Dass, S., Popli, S., Sarkar, A., Sarkar, J. G., Vinay, M.: Empirically examining the psychological mechanism of a loved and trusted business school brand. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education 31(1): 23–40 (2021).

DeCarlo, L. T.: On the meaning and use of kurtosis. Psychological Methods 2: 292–307 (1997).

Decrop, A., Derbaix, C.: Pride in contemporary sport consumption: A marketing perspective. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 38(5): 586–603 (2009).

Dhar, R.: Consumer Preference for a No-Choice Option. Journal of Consumer Research 24 (2): 215–231 (1997).

Diamantopoulos, A., Sarstedt, M., Fuchs C., Wilczynski, P., Kaiser, S.: Guidelines for choosing between multi-item and single-item scales for construct measurement: a predictive validity perspective. Journal of the Academy Marketing Science 40: 434–449 (2012).

Doña-Toledo, L., Luque-Martínez, T., Del Barrio-García, S.: Antecedents and consequences of university perceived value, according to graduates: The moderating role of Higher Education involvement. International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing 14: 535–565 (2017).

Espinoza, O., González, L. E., McGinn, N., Castillo, D., Sandoval, L.: Factors that affect post-graduation satisfaction of Chilean university students. Studies in Higher Education 44 (6): 1023–1038 (2019).

Fan, X., Luchok, K. Dozier, J.: College students' satisfaction and sense of belonging: differences between underrepresented groups and the majority groups. SN Social Sciences 1: 22. (2021). DOI:https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-020-00026-0.

Finch, D., McDonald, S. Staple, J.: Reputational interdependence: an examination of category reputation in higher education. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education 23 (1): 34–61 (2013).

Fombrun, C., Gardberg, N.: Who's top in corporate reputation? Corporate Reputation Review 3 (1): 13–17 (2000).

Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., Jensen, J. M.: Sense of Belonging in College Freshmen at the Classroom and Campus Levels. The Journal of Experimental Education 75 (3): 203–220 (2007).

Gallo, M.: Higher education over a lifespan: a gown to grave assessment of a lifelong relationship between universities and their graduates. Studies in Higher Education 38 (8):1150–1161 (2013).

Garnefeld, I., Helm, S., Eggert, A.: Walk Your Talk: An Experimental Investigation of the Relationship Between Word of Mouth and Communicators' Loyalty. Journal of Service Research 14 (1): 93–107 (2011).

Gilboa, S. Vilnai-Yavetz, I.: Shop until you drop? An exploratory analysis of mall experiences. European Journal of Marketing 47 (1): 239–259 (2013).

Gouthier, M. H. J., Rhein, M.: Organizational pride and its positive effects on employee behavior. Journal of Service Management 22(5): 633–649 (2011).

Halbesleben, J. R. B. Wheeler, A. R.: Student identification with business education models measurement and relationship to educational outcomes. Journal of Management Education 33(2): 166–195 (2009).

Harahap, D. A., Hurriyati, R., Gaffar, V., Amanah, D.: The impact of word of mouth and university reputation on student decision to study at university. Management Science Letters 8: 649–658 (2018).

Hayes, A. F. Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach. Third edition. New York: Guilford Publications. (2022).

Helm, S.V.: A matter of reputation and pride: associations between perceived external reputation, pride in membership, job satisfaction and turnover intentions. British Journal of Management 24(4): 542–556 (2012).

Holbrook, C., Piazza, J., Fessler, D. M.T.: Further challenges to the "Authentic"/ "Hubristic" model of pride: conceptual clarifications and new evidence. Emotion 14 (1): 38–42 (2014).

Hong, S. Y., Yang, S.-Un: Effects of Reputation, Relational Satisfaction, and Customer–Company Identification on Positive Word-of-Mouth Intentions. Journal of Public Relations Research 21 (4): 381–403 (2009).

Horstschräer, J.: University rankings in action? The importance of rankings and an excellence competition for university choice of high-ability students. Economics of Education Review 31 (6): 1162–1176 (2012).

Japutra, A., Ekinci, Y., Simkin, L.: Exploring brand attachment, its determinants and outcomes. Journal of Strategic Marketing 22: 616–630 (2014).

Kraemer, T., Gouthier, M. H. J., Heidenreich, S.: Proud to stay or too proud to stay? How pride in personal performance develops and how it affects turnover intentions. Journal of Service Research 20(2): 152–170 (2017).

Kraemer, T., Gouthier, M. H. J.: How organizational pride and emotional exhaustion explain turnover intentions in call centers: A multi-group analysis with gender and organizational tenure. Journal of Service Management 25(1): 125–148 (2014).

Le, T. D., Robinson, L. J. Dobele, A. R.: Understanding high school students use of choice factors and word-of-mouth information sources in university selection. Studies in Higher Education 45 (4): 808–818 (2020).

Lea, S., Webley, P.: Pride in economic psychology. Journal of Economic Psychology 18: 323–340 (1997).

Lee, D., Ng, P. M., Bogomolova, S.: The impact of university brand identification and eWOM behaviour on students' psychological well-being: a multi- group analysis among active and passive social media users. Journal of Marketing Management 36(3–4): 384–403 (2020).

Lomer, S., Papatsiba, V., Naidoo, R.: Constructing a national higher education brand for the UK: positional competition and promised capitals. Studies in Higher Education 43 (1): 134–153 (2018).

Mael, F., Ashforth, B. E.: Alumni and their alma mater: A partial test of the reformulated model of organizational identification. Journal of Organizational Behavior 13(2): 103–123 (1992).

Mardia, K.V.: Measures of Multivariate Skewness and Kurtosis with Applications. Biometrika 57 (3): 519–530 (1970).

Masserini, L., Bini, M. Pratesi, M.: Do Quality of Services and Institutional Image Impact Students' Satisfaction and Loyalty in Higher Education? Social Indicators Research 115 (2): 1–25 (2018).

Myers, K., Courtney, W. D., Schreuder, E. R. Seibold. D. R.: Organizational Identification: A Mixed Methods Study Exploring Students' Relationship with Their University. Communication Quarterly 64(2): 210–231 (2016).

Nunnally, J. C. Psychometric Theory. New York: McGraw-Hill. (1978).

Olsen, S. O., Xuan Mai, H. T.: Consumer Participation: The Case of Home Meal Preparation. Psychology & Marketing 30(1): 1–11 (2013).

Park, C.W., Mittal, B.: A theory of involvement in consumer behavior: Problems and issues. Research in Consumer Behavior 1: 201–231 (1985).

Petruzzellis, L., Romanazzi, S.: Educational value: how students choose university: Evidence from an Italian university. International Journal of Educational Management 24(2):139–158 (2010).

Petruzzellis, L., D'Uggento, A. M., Romanazzi, S.: Student satisfaction and quality of service in Italian universities. Managing Service Quality: An International Journal 16 (4): 349–364 (2006).

Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., Lee, J.-Y., Podsakoff, N. P.: Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. Journal of Applied Psychology 88 (5): 879–903 (2003).

Riketta, M.: Organizational identification: A meta-analysis. Journal of Vocational Behavior 66(2): 358–384 (2005).

Robins, R. W., Hendin, H. M., Trzesniewski, K. H.: Measuring Global Self-Esteem: Construct Validation of a Single-Item Measure and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 27 (2): 151–161 (2001).

Shanka, T., Taylor, R.: A correspondence analysis of sources of information used by festival visitors. Tourism Analysis 9: 55–62 (2004).

Simões, C., Soares, A.M.: Applying to higher education: information sources and choice factors. Studies in Higher Education 35 (4): 371–389 (2010).

Sipilä, J., Herold, K., Tarkiainen, A., Sundqvist, S.: The influence of word-of-mouth on attitudinal ambivalence during the higher education decision-making process". Journal of Business Research 80: 176–187 (2017).

Skinner, E. A., Pitzer, J.R.: Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In: Christenson, Sandra L., Amy L. Reschly and Cathy Wylie (Eds.) Handbook of research on student engagement (pp. 21–44). New York: Springer Science (2012).

Stephenson, A. L., Yerger, D. B. Does brand identification transform alumni into university advocates? International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing 11(3): 243–262 (2014).

Su, L., Swanson, S.R., Chinchanachokchai, S., Hsu, M. K., Chen, X.: Reputation and intentions: The role of satisfaction, identification, and commitment. Journal of Business Research 69(9): 3261–3269 (2016).

Suomi, K. Exploring the dimensions of brand reputation in higher education – a case study of a Finnish master's degree programme. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management 36 (6): 646–660 (2014).

Tajfel, H., Turner, J. C.: The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. Key readings in social psychology. In Jost, John T. and Jim Sidanius (Eds.) Political psychology: Key readings, Key readings in social psychology. (pp. 276–293). New York, NY: Psychology Press (2004).

Titsworth, S., McKenna, T. P., Mazer, J. P., Quinlan, M. M.: The Bright Side of Emotion in the Classroom: Do Teachers' Behaviors Predict Students' Enjoyment, Hope, and Pride? Communication Education 62 (2): 191–209 (2013).

Watkins, B. A., Gonzenbach, W. J.: Assessing university brand personality through logos: An analysis of the use of academics and athletics in university branding". Journal of Marketing for Higher Education 23 (1): 15–33 (2013).

Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Kratochvil, D., Balakrishnan, M. S.: The effects of social identification and organizational identification on student commitment, achievement and satisfaction in higher education. Studies in Higher Education 41 (12): 2232–2252 (2016).

Wong, B. Yuan-Li, T. C.: Swallow your pride and fear': the educational strategies of high-achieving non-traditional university students. Sociology of Education, 40(7), 868–882. (2019).

Xie, C., Bagozzi, R. P., Østli, J.: Cognitive, Emotional, and Sociocultural Processes in Consumption. Psychology & Marketing 30 (1): 12–25 (2013).

Xie, C., Bagozzi, R. P., Troye, S. V.: Trying to Prosume: Toward a Theory of Consumers as Co-Creators of Value. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 36: 109–122 (2008).

Yousaf, A., Mishra, A., Bashir, M.: Brand trust, institutional commitment, and their impact on student loyalty: evidence for higher education in India. Studies in Higher Education 45 (4): 878–891 (2020).

Zarantonello, L.: L'adattamento della brand experience scale al mercato italiano. Mercati e competitività. 3: 109–132 (2008).

Zeithaml, V. A., Berry, L. L., Parasuraman, A.: The Behavioral Consequences of Service Quality. Journal of Marketing 60 (4): 31–46 (1996).

Authors and Affiliations

Angela Maria D'Uggento[1] · Luca Petruzzellis[2] · Luigi Piper[3] · Antonia Rosa Gurrieri[4]

✉ Angela Maria D'Uggento
angelamaria.duggento@uniba.it

Luca Petruzzellis
luca.petruzzellis@uniba.it

Luigi Piper

luigi.piper@unisalento.it

Antonia Rosa Gurrieri
antoniarosa.gurrieri@unifg.it

1   Department of Economics and Finance, University of Bari Aldo Moro Largo Abbazia Santa Scolastica, 53 70124 Bari, Italy

2   Department of Physics, University of Bari Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy

3   Department of Economic Sciences, University of Salento, Lecce, Italy

4   Department of Law, University of Foggia, Foggia, Italy