

A model for managing the “social appeal” of a university: Satisfaction and Reputation as mechanisms of behavioral intentions

Keywords:

Higher Education, Perceived Quality, Satisfaction, Reputation, Behavioral Intentions, Structural Equation Models.

Abstract:

We are advancing a causal model that allows to manage the graduate student perception of the university, so that the main drivers that optimize the promotion of behaviors connected to values on the side of graduate students that just have finished the university experience. The model we are proposing is based on customers satisfaction theories and corporate reputation theories both of them within the wider frame of the planned behavior theory. We explore the possibility of adding new theoretically compatible drivers that increase the model's explaining power. To test the model we have carried out a survey applying the measurement instrument to a probability sample of graduates at the University of A Coruña (Spain). The results have been analyzed by SEM techniques which allow to test the scope and utility of the new proposed model.

The growing need of managing universities' social attraction

Because of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Higher Education (HE) institutions should complement their assessments of objective measures such as rankings with measures of social corporate image. There is an extensive literature relating the social perception of an institution to the generation of behaviours associated with values (Weigl, Keith and Colin Camerer 1988; Hall 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Oliver 1997; Roberts and Dowling 2002; Rindova et al. 2005; Basdeo et al 2006; Highhouse et al. 2009; Walker 2010; Bergh et al. 2010). Those relationships have been tested among Higher Education institutions as well (Vidaver-Cohen 2007; Helhesen y Nettet 2007; Arambewela y Hall 2008; Brown y Mazzarol 2008; Nettet y Helhesen 2009; Mutafa et al. 2012).

We set for an explicative model aimed to the promotion of Higher Education graduates valuable behaviors. Graduates own both an academic and a professional knowledge, so that this double condition allows graduates to assess their HE institutions and recommend the institution to both their companies and other people in their social environment, such as their relatives and friends.

We have set up a hierarchical multidimensional scale on HE perceived quality, based on a study carried out at the University of A Coruña. The fieldwork of this study took place between January and June 2012 (González-Rodríguez y Carreras-Franco 2012). It used a random sample among the university graduates. Having analyzed the results of this study we were able to set forth a number of hypotheses, to be tested in this presentation. These hypotheses build our model for managing graduates' conative or intentional attitudes (Oliver, 1997). The goal of this research attempts to propose a model with a greater predictive power. This model is expected to be more useful than the previous ones in order to manage graduates' attitudes and value oriented behaviors.

Theoretical framework

There are several already tested models explaining the formation of behaviors and attitudes towards organizations, such as the Satisfaction Theory (Bagozzi 1992; Fornell et al. 1996; Johnson 2001; Harris and Goode 2004), the Utility Theory (Zeithalm et al. 1996; Cronin et al. 2000; Ngobo 2004) (Morgan y Hunt 1994; Fornell et al. 1996; Oliver 1997; Lam et al. 2004; Carter and Zackbar 2008), the Corporate Reputation Theory (Fombrun 2000; Basdeo 2006; Highhouse 2009), the Planned Action Theory (Ajzen 1991; Ajzen y Fishbein 2005) and the Social identity applied to the Planned Action Theory (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006).

Both the Reasoned Action Theory and Planned Action Theory (Ajzen y Fishbein 1980; Ajzen 1991) have shown that intention, as a conative attitude, is the antecedent of behavior (Oliver, 1997). The vast majority of the existing models include the behavioral intention as a focus variable and perceived quality as its antecedent. There are two different mediator mechanisms here: satisfaction and perceived quality (Carreras-Romero and González-Rodríguez 2012b). These models have been already tested on HE students (Helhesen and Nettet 2007; Brown and Mazarrol 2008; Nettet and Helhesen 2009; Sung and Yang 2009; Ciftcioglu 2011; Mutafa et al. 2012).

Our model has added two new theoretically based constructs: HE institution's social responsibility as moral legitimacy (Suchman 1995; Deephouse and Carter 2005) and social identity as a student (Rise et al. 2010). These two new constructs are expected to improve the explanation of the behavioral intentions towards HE institutions.

Research goal

The research goal consists of designing and validating a model which explains the graduates' valuable intentions towards their university within the Planned Action framework. For this purpose two new elements have been added: graduates' perceived ethical responsibility as well as social identity as HE students. One of the main points of the project aims at the validation of the measurement model which tests the metric possibilities of all the sub-scales included: perceived quality, satisfaction, service value, social responsibility, ethics, reputation, sense of belonging and intentional supportive attitude.

Theoretical constructs included

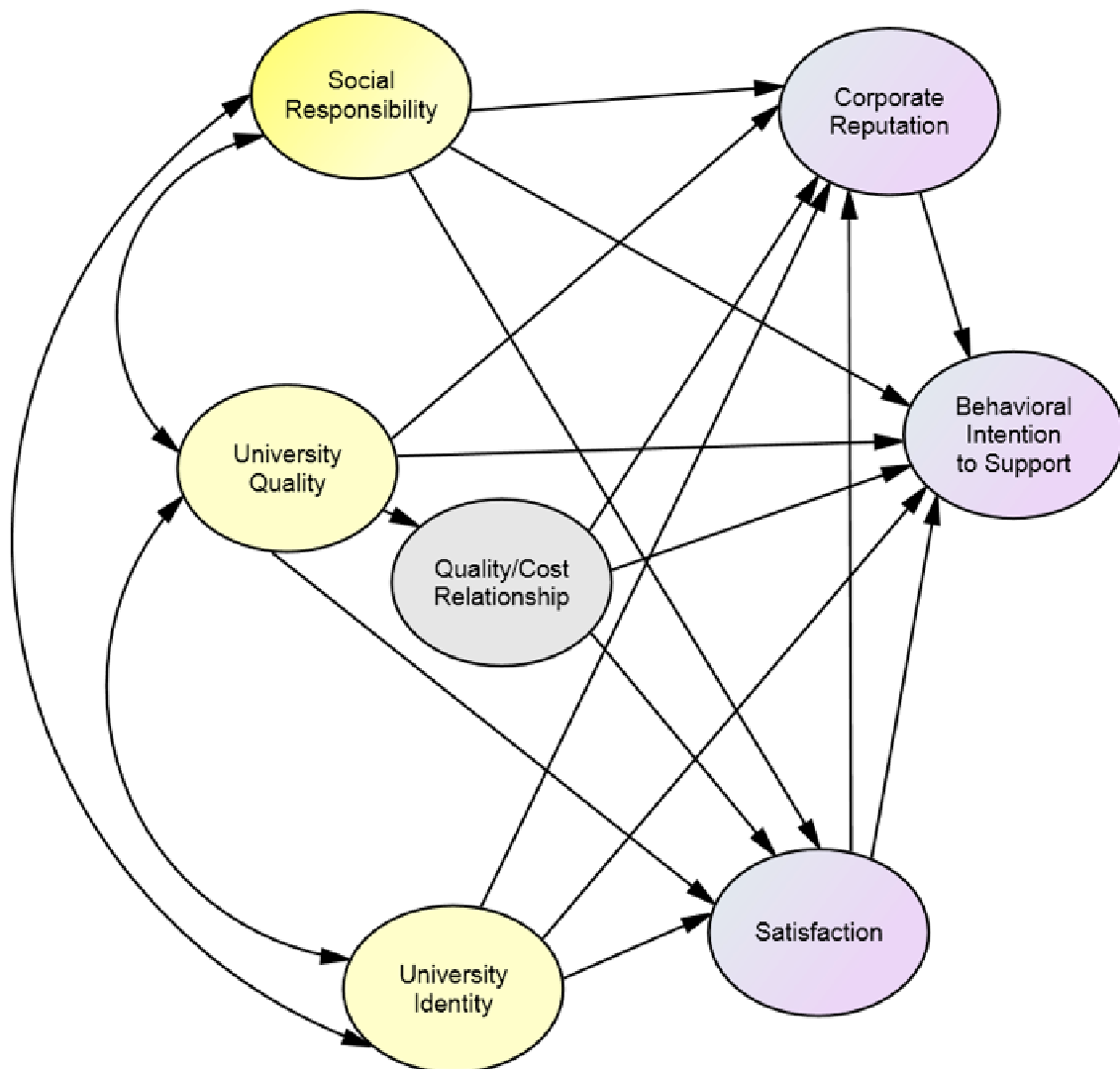
- HE perceived quality as a hierarchical multidimensional scale (Pereira-Puga and Carreras-Franco, 2012).
- Satisfaction, as an overall HE experience (Pereira-Puga and Carreras-Franco, 2012).
- Quality-Price relationship (Harris and Goode 2004 and Lam et al. 2004).
- Social responsibility and ethics (Suchmann 1995).
- University reputation using the items developed by Highhouse (2009) and Ponzi et al. (2011).
- Intentional supportive attitude: Items obtained from Ajzen and Fishbein (2005).

Design of the survey

We carried out a probabilistic survey via internet, supported with telephone calls in order to enhance and control the rate of return of the respondents. The sample was picked out of a population of 2300 graduates in 2008 at the University of A Coruña. The sample size was n=750. The survey instrument was the one used by Pereira-Puga and Carreras-Franco, 2012. We have analyzed the data by means of Structural Equation Models (Bollen, 1989; Kline, 1999). Accordingly, we did test the measurement model, convergent validity and discriminant validity of the items on its dimensions (Bagozzi y Yi, 1988; Anderson Gerbing 1988), as well as the convergent validity, reliability indexes and “AVE” by Fornell and Larker (1981) and the discriminant power (Anderson Gerbing 1988). The impacts have been tested using nesting techniques and models comparasion (Kline, 1999).

The Model and the underlying hypotheses

As shown in the next Graph, there are three levels in the model (a) Antecedents: perceived quality, social responsibility and University identity; (b) Mediator processes: quality/cost, satisfaction and reputation, and (c) Focus variable: the behavioral intention to support.



The specific hypotheses can be stated as follows:

H1: The antecedents represent different realities:

- H1a: Social responsibility is a component of HE institutions quality.
- H1b: Social identity is an element different from the two other antecedents: perceived quality and social responsibility.

H2: Perceived quality has a direct effect on focus attitude.

H3: Testing the quality-price mediator effect:

- H3a: Quality-cost relationship has an effect on reputation.
- H3b: Quality-cost relationship has an effect on satisfaction.
- H3c: Quality-cost relationship has an effect on the behavioral intention.

H4: Social responsibility affects both directly and indirectly on intentional attitude:

- H4a: Social responsibility affects on the reputation.
- H4b: Social responsibility affects on the satisfaction.
- H4c: Social responsibility affects on the behavioral intention.
- H4d: Social responsibility is related to quality.

H5: Satisfaction affects on intentional attitude both directly and indirectly.

- H5a: It has a significant impact on behavioral intention.
- H5b: It is a mediator variable on perceived quality.
- H5c: It is a mediator variable on reputation.

H6: Reputation has a direct effect on behavioral intention.

The empirical testing of these hypotheses will help us to find out the origin of the graduates supportive behavior which will be useful for managers to make strategic decisions in order to raise their institutions' social attraction.

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