

THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENTS ATTACHMENT IN THE RECOMMENDATION OF A FEDERAL PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

The attachment and the recommendation of the brand are subjects explored in marketing. However, only few studies aimed to measure this connexion, especially in the educational context. This paper, attempting to supply the deficiency, analyzes the influence of attachment to a public higher education institution in its recommendation by the students. Therefore, we carried out a descriptive and quantitative survey with the participation of 87 students at a public university in southern Brazil between January and April 2014. The data were tabulated and treated via structural equation, and the resulting modeling revealed a strong influence of emotional attachment in the recommendation. In this case, the conclusion is that the emotional attachment is a strong component to generate the recommendation, even in federal public IES.

Keywords: *Higher Education Institutions; Attachment to the brand; Recommendation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The recommendation of a brand is a kind of informative comment that the consumer of a brand makes to other people (Fitzgerald Bone, 1992; Harrison-Walker, 2001; East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008). It occurs through word of mouth, which is a form of personal interaction (Zhang, Craciun, & Shin, 2010).

The word of mouth marketing has become an important fact for many organizations, including service organizations (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012). Universities are also included in this context, as students of Superior Education Institutions (IES) tend to recommend the institution where they study (Mitsis & Foley, 2012).

Thus, university administrators must create actions that encourage students to recommend their IES. These actions are part of a strategic marketing that aim a return to college (Mitsis & Foley, 2012). Kotler and Fox (1994) complement, warning that the IES need to define their marketing strategies and actions properly, to achieve a better market position.

It is to note that the recommendation may be a consequence of personal characteristics (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009; Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011). That includes the emotional attachment that the customer perceives to have for a particular brand (Vlachos et al., 2010). Dwayne Ball and Tasaki (1992) emphasize that a high level of emotional attachment demonstrates a perception of emotion by the consumers.

The attachment to the brand is a researched topic in marketing that shows how people can feel emotionally connected to a brand (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011). This emotional connection denotes an involvement of the consumer with the brand, and the closer it is to the company, the higher his involvement (Tuškej, Golob & Podnar, 2013). When consumers are emotionally attached to a particular brand, it becomes part of their lives so that they tend to uphold and defend it (Dwayne Ball, & Tasaki, 1992).

Hur, Ahn and Kim (2011) warn that when there is a commitment to the brand, there is a high probability that it would be recommended. Van Hoyer and Lievens (2009) say that the greater the emotional ties, the more efficient the word of mouth. Vlachos et al. (2010) emphasize that when a high level of emotional attachment occurs, there is a positive word of mouth by the customer.

Based on the statements of these authors, this paper aims to investigate the following question: the emotional attachment of students from a public IES positively influence their recommendation?

Even with this theoretical finding in the literature, it is observed that the results of Vlachos et al. (2010) occurred in the retail sector. There is still a lack of assertion about the fact that emotional attachment positively influences the recommendation in educational settings, especially in public IES. It is to note that higher education is a concern of the federal government in Brazil. It, in many different designs, encourages their development (Souza, 1999; Neves, 2002; Santos; Cerqueira, 2009; Almeida, 2010).

An exciting aspect of the study is that in general, the studies about attachment to the brand are performed in the private sphere. There are very few studies that figure out the attachment to the brand in public institutions. Therefore, this essay aims to verify if students of a public IES tend to recommend it when they are attached to it.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework is divided into three subsections. The first presents an overview of public universities in Brazil; the second, an approach on emotional attachment, and the third emphasizes the recommendation.

2.1 Public Universities in Brazil

The history of the Higher Education in Brazil is included in the circumstances of construction and development of the country itself. The different scenarios, with their actors, contingencies and laws, permeate the Public University in the country.

The first Brazilian University was created in 1912, by the government of Portugal (Souza, 1999). In 1927, two Law Schools were settled, one in São Paulo and another in Olinda (Santos & Cerqueira, 2009). Mendonça (2005) concludes that the first universities in Brazil were created with the participation of government, and initially for the elites.

Afterwards, a model of an aggregated and non-integrated university, changed its design in Brazil (Souza, 1999). The isolated courses were reunited, and the connexion between them was the Council and the Rectory, and not academic or administrative actions. That was the basis for many Brazilian universities. In 1932, the USP was created and broke this aggregated model of isolated courses reunion, by bringing together the existing higher education courses in the State of São Paulo. This model broke up with the isolation of the existing universities, both physically and academically.

To Neves (2002) the reform, that took place in the late 60's, revealed the intentions of the military government in modernizing the system. At this occasion, the chair system was abolished by introducing a new administrative unit: the department. The teaching system is now in full-time and post-graduation becomes part of higher education, fostering research.

The Law of Guidelines and Bases of Higher Education (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Superior - LDB) No. 5,540 / 68 turned the university into the preferred model of higher education. Since then, the isolated educational establishments are an exception. That means breaking up with the aggregations, and design universities, especially the federal ones as a model integrating education, research and extension (Brazil, 2014th).

From the 70s, the political repression promoted the growth of higher education, both public and private, unlike other Latin American countries (Santos & Cerqueira, 2009).

During the Collor government, from 1990 to 1992, many private institutions have been created, encouraged by the governmental tendency to minimize public participation in direct education investments (Almeida, 2010).

The (LDB), although dating back the year 1986, was enacted in 1996, during the FHC government, and is in effect until today. This Law establishes many determinations. Among them, two stand out. One is the abolition of field universality, that is, authorizing specialized universities by area of expertise. The other is the expansion of the right to autonomy for higher education institutions which proved to be highly qualified for teaching or research (BRASIL, 2014b).

The Law Nº 10,861/14.04. 2004, sanctioned by President Lula, defines ways to monitoring the quality of learning (Brazil, 2014c). The Lula government creates access to higher education programs, both in scholarships to private schools and study places in public universities (Saraiva & Nunes, 2011).

Recently, the federal public universities in Brazil adhered to a government policy aiming at the expansion of higher education. This system, named REUNI, Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais (Support to Plans for Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities). This program, established by Federal Decree N° 6,096/2007, aims to increase access and permanence in higher education. It is one of the actions that are part of the Education Development Plan - PDE (Brazil, 2014d).

2.2 Attachment to the Brand

Attachment is defined as an emotional condition of mankind. People, in general, are born attached to others, especially mothers, and later, they attach to relatives, teachers and spouses (Bowlby, 1980). The attachment has an emotional meaning to the extent that the greater the attachment to something, the greater the emotional involvement of the person with it (Dwayne Ball & Tasaki, 1992).

This affection may also occur in the relationship between customers and organizations (Dwayne Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010; Guo, Hao, & Shang, 2011; Jahn, Gaus, & Kiessling, 2012). That is a subject mainly explored by marketing, aiming to analyze the attachment to a particular brand. The attachment to the brand derives from the emotional ties that customers have with a particular brand (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011).

The consumers attachment to brands provides advantages to the organizations, and the customers close relations with the brand protects the organization against ethical lapses and mitigates the effects of negative information (Schmalz & Orth, 2011). The closer the relationship between customer and company, the greater the involvement of the consumer, as well as their attachment to the brand (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013). All that contribute to the loyalty of the brand worshipers (Fournier, 1998; Vlachos, Theotokis, Pramadari, & Vrechopoulos, 2010; Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011; Webber, 2011; Schmalz & Orth, 2012; So, Parsons, & Yap, 2013).

The attachment to the brand can reflect the satisfaction that the consumer has enjoying it (Kressmann et al., 2006; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2001; Louis & Lombart, 2010; Mugge, Schifferstein & Schoormans, 2010; Vlachos et al., 2010). Therefore, in addition to the satisfaction, managers must work aiming an intense consumers attachment to their organizations brands (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011), as getting the users involved with them is a major goal of relationship marketing (Schmalz & Orth, 2012).

As seen, the attachment to the brand is a major condition for a positive perception by the consumer. When it takes place, not only people feel satisfied, but the organizations profit from those effects.

However, Vlachos et al. (2010) found out that organizations are still unable to create emotional bonds with consumers. That fact strengthens the need for this research, especially in a sector in which the attachment to the brand was little studied.

2.3 Recommendation

The recommendation of the brand occurs when consumers perceive to have strong ties that motivate them to do word of mouth, taking as starting point a positive perception (Wirtz et al., 2013). The word of mouth is a form of personal interaction (Zhang, Craciun, & Shin, 2010).

Word of mouth can be defined as "a group phenomenon of exchanging of individual comments, thoughts, and ideas among people who are not a source of marketing" (Fitzgerald Bone, 1992, p. 579). "The word of mouth marketing is an informal advice that circulates among consumers. It is usually interactive, fast and without a commercial bias" (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008, p. 215).

Harrison-Walker (2001, p. 63) defines word of mouth as "an informal communication between a non-commercial communicator and a given receptor, related to a brand, a product, an organization, or a service."

It is a powerful influence on the consumer's behavior, and it can ally to direct marketing and advertising to make a more efficient communication (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008). It influences the consumer's judgment, both in short and long-term (Fitzgerald Bone, 1995).

The positive word of mouth advertising tends to lead the listening customer to want buying the product (Martin & Lueg, 2011). Harrison-Walker (2001) showed the potential of word of mouth. According to him, it is up to seven times more efficient than magazine ads, four times more than personal selling, twice as much as radio announcements. It is nine times more effective than the advertising aiming to convert neutral or unfavorable customers on favorable clients.

However, the effect of word of mouth advertising depends on personal relationships. The more relations someone has, the greater this effect will be (East, Hammond, & Wright, 2007). The more significant the emotional ties, the more efficient the word of mouth advertising (Van Hove & Lievens, 2009), since it reflects a behavioral intention (Lee & Min, 2013).

The word of mouth marketing has become an important fact for many organizations, including service organizations (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012). The satisfaction with the service leads the customer to recommend the organization. (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2012, Tam, 2012).

The word of mouth has a greater impact on attributes that are not precisely known or reported (Lim & Chung, 2011). It is often the case in federal universities, once it is a public service that does not compete equally with capitalist organizations, which aim media campaigns.

The recommendation advertising derives from individual values influenced by the social environment. In this case, the word of mouth comes from students attending the university environment (Mitsis & Foley, 2012).

The quality of the educational services positively affects the satisfaction of the students (Chang Jeng, & Hamid, 2013).

3. METHOD

This empirical study is characterized as being descriptive and quantitative, through a survey along with academics from a federal university in southern Brazil.

The attachment to the brand was measured by Louis and Lombart scale (2010), who measured the level of attachment to a soft drink brand among French young people. The recommendation was measured by the scale used by Vlachos et al. (2010). The work proved that the recommendation occurs when retailer consumers are attached to the brand. The scale was adapted to the educational context, in which the term "store" was replaced by "university".

The scales were measured by Likert scale with five points (1: strongly disagree ... 5: strongly agree), the same range used by Louis and Lombart (2010).

The questionnaire was adapted to the educational context and translated into Portuguese, and afterward, a reverse translation was performed. In order to validate the model, it was subjected to a translator. After that, a pre-test was performed on 01.05.2014, with the participation of eight students of the university, the target audience of this research.

At this stage, an issue related to understanding problems was observed. It referred to the second question that measures the attachment. The question in the questionnaire was: "I feel connected to my university". The issue was a doubt about the interpretation of the word "connected". As this word refers to the attachment, the word "attached" was included, to a better understanding. In this case, the question was described as follows: "I am connected/ attached to my university"

For a better preparation of the questionnaire header, other suggestions were made. After the agreed adjusting between the authors, the final version was electronically distributed via Google Docs. This tool allows users to create and edit documents online while collaborating in real-time with other users. The questionnaire was then made available to all students of the Course of Technology in Business Processes of a Brazilian public university, totaling up 199 students.

The data collection occurred between January and April 2014, contemplating a return of 87 respondents, from a total of 199 questionnaires available to all students of the course. The data treatment, after tabulation, was performed by using the SPSS software, version 21.0 and AMOS 21.0. The data were analyzed by simple average and confirmatory factor analysis.

4. RESULTS

The first analysis was a verification of the respondents profile. From the 87 responders students, 55.2% were men and 44.8% women. Regarding to age group, 32.2% were 41 years old and above, 19.5% were between 21 and 25 and 30 years old, 13.8% were up to 20 years old, 10.3% were between 31 and 35 years old and 4.6% were between 36 and 49 years old.

As regards to income, 33.3% have a family income between R \$ 1,001 and R \$ 2,000, 27.6% have a monthly income in between R \$ 2,001 and R \$ 3,000, 19.5% is in the monthly income range above R \$ 4,000, 11.5% with a monthly income between R \$ 3,001 and R \$ 4,000, and 8% earning up to R\$ 1,000.

The next step was verifying the impact of the recommendation on the word of mouth. This analysis was made by means of confirmatory factor analysis, highlighted in Figure 1. Initially, the reliability of the dimensions was tested by means of the average variance extracted and the composite reliability, shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Composite reliability and extracted average variance

Construct	Composite reliability	Extracted average variance
Attachment	0,85	0,50
Recommendation	0,75	0,51

Source: Research data

Table 1 shows the Composite Reliability and Extracted Variance Average. The composite reliability has desirable results (values above 0.7), as recommended by Hair et al. (2005). The extracted variance showed rates close to the desirable limit (above 0.5, according to Hair et al., 2005). However, nothing considerably below the expected. That means that no item is substantially weak and interfering with the construction of the model. That indicates their permanence and giving representativeness to the constructs.

The next step was the analysis of structural equation modeling, as shown in Figure 1.

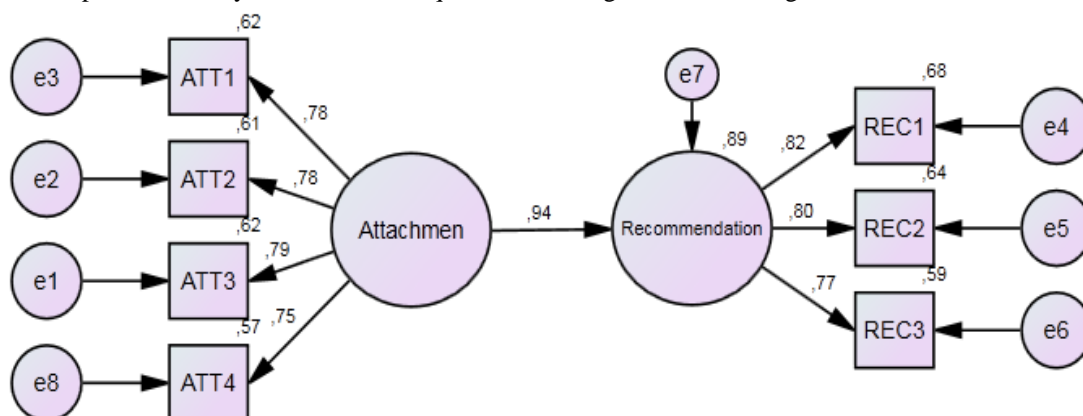


Figure 1: structural equation modeling
 Source: AMOS 21 screen

Figure 1 shows the attachment relationship in the recommendation by the modeling of structural equations. Initially, good model fittings were observed: IFI: 0.956, TLI: 0,926, CFI: 0.954 (desirable values are higher than 0.9 according to Kline (2011)). The RMSEA was 0.111. Desirable values are between 0.05 and 0, 08 (Kline, 2011).

Hair et al. (2009) consider that there is no need for all indicators to present desirable indices for the model validation. The authors claim that if some of the models are within the standard, it is acceptable since the index fluctuations are predictable, given the specificity of the sample.

The model (Figure 1) shows desirable factor loadings, all above 0.60, which indicates that the items can represent the investigated constructs (attachment and recommendation). The standard load factor of the relationship between attachment and recommendation is high (0.94 in a scale from 0 to 1). That means that the attachment exerts considerable influence on the recommendation. The confirmation of this relationship is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Relationship between Attachment and Recommendation

Tested Relationship	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Attachment → Recommendation	0,977	0,145	6,760	***

Source: research data

Table 2 shows the relationship between attachment and recommendation. The values correspond to the estimates of the structural equation. The value of P is zero, so, up to the level of 0.01, it is confirmed that the attachment influences the recommendation, confirming the studies of Vlachos et al. (2010).

The result can also be supportive of the evidence of Hur, Ahn and Kim (2011). They emphasize that the existence of a commitment to the brand increases its recommendation probability. In this case, this commitment can be represented by attachment. Similarly, it is possible to confirm the findings of Van Hoyer and Lievens (2009), who affirm that the greater the emotional bonds, the more efficient the word of mouth. Here, the emotional bond can be the attachment.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This essay aims to verify that students of a public IES recommend it when they are attached to it. Van Hoyer and Lievens (2009), Hur, Ahn and Kim (2011) show that the recommendation by the customer occurs when he realizes the existence of an emotional commitment to the brand. Vlachos et al. (2010) emphasize that when there is a high level of emotional attachment, there is a high probability that the customer recommend the brand.

A survey conducted with degree students from a public university showed that the evidence of Vlachos et al. (2010) can confirm in this sector. The presented results show a strong relationship between attachment and recommendation; i.e., the attachment to an IES strongly influences its recommendation by the students.

According to the study, there is a direct relationship between attachment and recommendation. The greater the attachment, the more likely the students are to recommend their IES. Those evidences make room for an important insight: Federal IES students are attached to it and recommend it.

This finding reinforces the idea that higher education institutions, even the public, have a brand awareness similar to what occurs in the segment of private companies. It supports the belief of Kotler and Fox (1994) that indicates the IES need to develop strategies and marketing initiatives, such what happens in other segments.

Regarding the scientific contributions, this article shows that, in fact, the attachment to the brand influences its recommendation by the customer. In this case, the student. In terms of managerial contribution, there is an opportunity for the diffusion of IES in society. For this purpose, higher education managers must look for ways to stir up their students emotional attachment. That may produce a positive recommendation of the IES, making it well regarded and even reducing the need for advertising investments, and therefore attracting more students in the future.

This study, while filling an unexplored gap, has some limitations. First, it was carried out only in one university and course, and the results can not be subject to generalization. The fact that the participants were chosen by convenience, and random samples are more appropriate, is a restriction to be considered.

The limitations of the study, although somewhat reduce the effect of research, make room to similar studies in other places, institutions and courses, about ways to confirm, or not, the present results.

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