

The Significance of Reputation in Choosing and Recommendation a University

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Abstract

In the social sciences, many studies have revealed that the reputation as a powerful strategic resource related to the management of the target groups, the providing a competitive advantage and the achievement of sustainable development [1]– [4]. However, there is no in-depth research in the field of education about the role of reputation in forming a successful organizational model. For this purpose, an empirical study was conducted between September and December 2018 through an online questionnaire filled in by 213 students at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, ULSIT, Sofia, Bulgaria. The main task of the research is to outline the role of the university reputation in choosing and recommending university through the case study method. The questionnaire includes world-renowned marketing and organizational consulting methods such as the Net Promoter Score (NPS) of Bain & Company management consulting firm [5], [6] and the Harris-Fombrun Reputation Quotient – RQ [2], [7]. The results from the survey reveal that reputation is one of the key factors determining the behavior of consumers of educational products and services and is among the leading predictors of increasing user base and achieving organizational growth.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Reputation is a subject of study in various professional fields, denoted by different terms – for sociologists it is “prestige”, for economists – “reputation”, for marketing specialists – “image”, for accountants and lawyers – “goodwill”, and for corporate managers – “value”. However, it is gaining popularity mainly under the influence of market mechanisms and research in this direction [8]. Also, reputation is associated with the competitive advantages of the company [9], a resistance in crisis situations [1], [8], the possibilities to increase profitability [3], [5], [6], [10], [11], a complex cognitive-emotional construct that drives consumer behavior [2], [3], hidden asset, strategic resource, intangible value, and capital [1], [4], [8], [12], [13], a foundational component of brand equity [14], [15], etc.

From a conceptual point of view, there are

similarities, but also significant differences between the constructs of “image” and “reputation”, which are taken into account in the design and methodology of the current research. Generally speaking, the image is the ideal image that a person or an organization intentionally strives to form among the public audiences for themselves and the reputation – the real assessment of the activity of a person or an organization by the interested groups. Therefore, organizational/corporate reputation is a valuable resource that is continually being built to deliver valuable positives.

There is a lack of in-depth research in the social sciences that empirically illustrates the role of reputation in the effective organization and administration of business, in particular in higher education – our efforts and contribution of the research conducted. It is no coincidence that the object of this study is the university reputation and

the subject and main research focus is the reputation as a strategic resource and competitive advantage in the university information environment, established through the students' opinions, beliefs, and attitudes as a target consumer group when choosing and recommending a university.

The years of "democratic transition" after 1989 put new challenges on the mission, public functions and governance of Bulgarian universities. Whereas, during the communist regime of 1944-1989, access to higher education was governed by the principles and mechanisms of functioning of the totalitarian political system, in today's neoliberal environment a "higher education" market was created, close to the traditional markets for products and services, characterized by increasing complexity, competitiveness and openness to the global education market. The phenomenon of academic capitalism has emerged, describing the competitive struggle between universities for users of educational services offered, in search of additional sources of funding [16].

The new model of higher education in Bulgaria brings to the fore problems related to the reputation and public opinion of a particular university and the formation and management of its image in the media and at the interpersonal- and organizational levels among target audiences – candidate-students, students, business partners, employers, government institutions, old generations, etc. [17]. In the context of commercialization of higher education and increased competition between its subjects, there is a need to create a ranking system for evaluating the quality of education in higher education institutions in Bulgaria, which considers key indicators related to teaching, research, educational environment, living conditions and administrative services, prestige, and realization and linkages to the labor market [17], [18].

II. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

A. Purpose, Tasks and Hypotheses of the Study

The study aims to present the key role of the reputation for the success of university organizational model, setting out the following specific tasks: 1. To outline the reasons for choosing a university among students – a main target group and consumer of educational products and services, and 2. To illustrate the relationship between reputation dimensions and consumer loyalty through the case study method. The working hypothesis of the research is that reputation is a crucial factor in generating long-term trust and leadership in today's university environment.

B. Participants

In order to accomplish the objectives of the research, a pilot empirical study was conducted between September and December 2018 among students from the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT – Sofia, Bulgaria). Respondents were recruited through an online questionnaire via Google Forms. 213 people aged 18 to 57 were interviewed ($x=26.46$, $sd=8.78$). The students are representatives of the accredited professional fields at the University: History and Archeology, Public Communications and Information Sciences, Computer Science, and National Security and have studied in Bachelor's degree – 179 (84%), Master's degree – 30 (14.1%) and doctoral degree – 4 (1.9%). There is an even distribution of persons by gender: men are 105 (49.3%) and women – 108 (50.7%). Of those surveyed, 171 (80.3%) have secondary education, 3 (1.4%) have college degree, and 39 (18.3%) have university degree; 159 (74.6%) are living in the capital – Sofia, 22 (10.3%) in district city, 19 (8.9%) in another city, and 13 (6.2%) in village.

C. Methodology of the Study

The questionnaire includes world-proven methods in the field of marketing and organizational consulting such as:

1. Modified questionnaire for measuring corporate / organizational reputation – so-called the Harris-

Fombrun Reputation Quotient, RQ [2], [7]. The original scale is designed to capture the perceptions about an organization of strategic target groups (stakeholders): consumers, employees, business partners and other interested market entities. It consists of 20 statements for assessing reputation, grouped into 6 dimensions: Emotional Appeal (Feel good about, Trust, Admire and respects), Products & Services (High quality products and services, Innovative, Good value for the money, Stands behind products and services), Vision & Leadership (Market opportunities, Excellent leadership, Clear vision for the future), Workplace Environment (Rewards employees fairly, Good place to work, Good employees), Financial Performance (Outperforms competitors, Record of profitability, Low risk investment, Growth prospects), and Social Responsibility (Supports good causes, Environmental responsibility, Community responsibility) (see Fig. 1). In the present study, a 7-point scale of Likert type from 1 – Strongly disagree through 4 – Neither agree nor disagree and 7 – Strongly agree for the assessment of the items is used.

The 6 subscales have high reliability (internal consistency), determined by the Cronbach's coefficient α : Emotional Appeal – $\alpha=0.920$ at 3 items; Products & Services – $\alpha=0.928$ at 4 items; Vision & Leadership – $\alpha=0.859$ at 3 items; Workplace Environment – $\alpha=0.919$ at 3 items; Financial Performance – $\alpha=0.901$ at 4 items, and Social Responsibility – $\alpha=0.901$ at 3 items. The reliability of the whole questionnaire is $\alpha=0.977$ at 20 items (N=213). The obtained psychometric characteristics of the RQ confirm the reliability of this method for business diagnostics.



Figure 1. The Harris-Fombrun Reputation QuotientSM (RQ)

The RQ score is calculated by: [(Sum of ratings of each of the 20 attributes) / (the total number of attributes answered x 7)] x 100. The maximum RQ score is 100. RQ performance ranges are as follows: 80 and above – Excellent; 75-79 – Very good; 70-74 – Good; 65-69 – Fair; 55-64 – Poor; 50-54 – Very poor, and below 50 – Critical. The index of different reputation dimensions is similarly calculated and interpreted [7].

2. The Net Promoter Score (NPS) of F. Reichheld, a partner in the global management consulting firm Bain & Company [5], [6]. It consists of one question, modified for the purposes of the study: “Would you recommend the university, where you are currently studying, to a friend, a family member or a colleague?” This metric distinguishes different user groups and assesses the impact of one of the most powerful communication channels in the marketing on consumer attitudes and behavior – the word-of-mouth. There is a scale of answers from 0 – Extremely unlikely to 10 – Extremely likely. The people, choosing an option from 0 to 6 are rated as “Detractors” – unsatisfied customers, 7 and 8 – as “Passives” or users who like, but have recommendations for improving some aspects of organizational activities and 9 and 10 – as

“Promoters” or loyal customers who are satisfied and would recommend the organization to their relatives and friends.

The difference in the percentage distribution between promoters and detractors gives the Net Promoter Score. The greater proportion of promoters compared to detractors leads the higher NPS and it is a significant indication of good reputation, financial success, and competitiveness of an organization and vice versa [5], [6]. Often, the NPS question is accompanied by another, open-ended question related to the respondent’s reasoning for the choice made. Strategic analyses also apply the relative NPS – the difference between the leader’s NPS and its competitors.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey data were entered and processed with the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analysis were used for data processing.

Educational motives and attitudes. In Table 1, the main students’ reasons to choose a concrete university in Bulgaria, obtained by a question with multiple answers, are presented.

Table- I: Motives for choosing a university (N=213)

	<i>Respo nse s</i>	<i>% (Bas ed on respo nses)</i>	<i>% (Base d on respo ndent s)</i>
Offers market-oriented specialties	135	14.8 %	63.4 %
Provides good professional preparation for students	102	11.1 %	47.9 %
Has a highly qualified teaching staff	93	10.2 %	43.7 %
Offers favorable financial terms (semester fees, scholarships, etc.)	85	9.3%	39.9 %
Prestigious university with good reputation in society	78	8.5%	36.6 %
Has effective management	72	7.9%	33.8

(rector, deans, heads of departments)			%
Offers specialties in part-time / distance learning	70	7.7%	32.9 %
Issues legitimate diplomas, recognized in the European Union / worldwide	59	6.4%	27.7 %
Convenient location / destination	62	6.8%	29.1 %
Has good facilities (campus, libraries, study halls, etc.)	54	5.9%	25.4 %
Friends are studying / will study there	52	5.7%	24.4 %
Has a long tradition in education	41	4.5%	19.2 %
Parents / relatives urged to study there)	5	0.5%	2.3%
Other (recommendations, concern for students, etc.)	7	0.8%	3.3%
<i>Total</i>	915	100 %	429.6 %

The complex character of the motivated choice as a result of the high criteria and requirements of students in contemporary highly competitive educational environment makes an impression. Among the dominant beliefs and motives are the market-oriented specialties offered – 63.4%, followed by the opportunities for effective professional training – 47.9%, the availability of qualified teaching staff – 43.7%, the favorable financial conditions – 39.9%, the good reputation of the university in society – 36.6%, etc. In other words, among the leading motives for choosing a university in Bulgaria are the vocational training of students, reputation and market-oriented specialties offered at higher education institutions in the context of young people’s professional realization and achievement of life success, as the reputation (prestige) is among the key components in the educational attitudes, motives and life strategies of the youths.

The majority of respondents fall in the age range 18-29 years (N=140, 65.7%), which in the perspective of personality and development psychology are defined as emerging adults. Among the characteristics of this age group are the increased pursuit of independence and self-assertion, which

reflected in the striving of individual goals, oriented towards personal and professional development [19], [20]. It is not by chance that the choice of university and/or specialty is dominated by intrinsic motives, self-assessment, and self-determination behavioural intensions [21], [22]: 175 (82.2%), as the influence of the reference groups as family (parents and relatives) has much less weight – 16 (7.5%), as well as friends and classmates – 10 (4.7%), teachers and directors – 3 (1.4%), and information from the Internet – 9 (4.2%).

The most important sources of information that play a decisive role in choosing a university can be traced in Table 2.

Table- II: Sources of information (N=213)

	<i>Respon se s</i>	<i>% (Bas ed on resp onse s)</i>	<i>% (Base d on respo ndent s)</i>
Website of the respective university	133	36.8 %	62.4 %
Parents, friends, and relatives	111	30.7 %	52.1 %
Guides for students, brochures, and flyers	35	9.7%	16.4 %
Online educational platforms, websites of educational institutions	23	6.4%	10.8 %
Forums, blogs, and online interest groups	20	5.5%	9.4%
Social networks – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.	17	4.7%	8.0%
Pedagogical staff (teachers, educational experts, directors, etc.)	17	4.7%	8%
Media such as radio, television, and newspapers / magazines	3	0.8%	1.4%
Other	2	0.6%	0.9%
<i>Total</i>	361	100 %	169.5 %

The multiple-choice question indicates that young people prefer to search and receive information about a university and the specialties it offers from

the university's website – 62.4% and from their parents, family, and friends – 52.1%. Other information sources, such as brochures, educational platforms, forums, social networks, etc. are of much less importance (Table 2). Based on the results obtained, it can be said that the way a university presents its activities and the formed media image among the key audiences is a powerful determinant of commitment of both loyal and potential users of educational products and services. It is no coincidence that a number of studies have highlighted the important role of online reputation management and online word-of-mouth in building long-term trust, satisfaction, loyalty and commitment to the organization's activities [13], [23]–[25], especially among the younger generations.

Measures of reputation. As the “good name” of a university is among the leading reasons for its choice of target consumer groups (see Table 1), it requires a more analytical look at the issue of reputation and its dimensions.

Table- III: Correlation matrix between the components of the RQ (N=213)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Emotional Appeal (1)	x					
Products & Services (2)	0.860 *	x				
Vision & Leadership (3)	0.799 *	0.855 *	x			
Workplace Environment (4)	0.791 *	0.834 *	0.848 *	x		
Financial Performance (5)	0.750 *	0.819 *	0.828 *	0.819 *	x	
Social Responsibility (6)	0.777 *	0.804 *	0.806 *	0.798 *	0.816 *	x

From Table 3 it is clear that among all dimensions of the RQ, measured by the model of Harris & Fombrun, without exception, there is a strong positive correlation with statistically significant

correlation coefficient of Pearson – r , at $p < 0.01$. In other words, the good reputation of an organization is contributed by a number of factors acting on the principle of “communicating vessels” and supports the thesis about the complexity and multidimensionality of the construct under study [1]–[3], [12]. ULSIT’s reputation indices are an example in this direction.

The students give excellent grades to the university they study at – over 80 in 5 of the 6 RQ dimensions: Emotional Appeal – 85.31; Products & Services – 84.36; Vision & Leadership – 82.07; Workplace Environment – 81.13, and Social Responsibility – 81.09. The overall reputation of the University is also excellent – 81.76. Only Financial Performance – 77.26, which is probably not a crucial factor in young people’s perceptions of an organization’s reputation, is rated lower compared to other dimensions – Very good (index between 75-79) and positioned last in importance.

It can be said that emotional experience, direct product and service experience and personal impressions are the cornerstone on which to build a positive organizational reputation with a long-term effect on consumer behavior [3] and act as a powerful strategic resource, related to consumer management base, providing competitive advantages and achievement of financial success [1], [2]. Reputation management also addresses effective organizational communication and coordination with stakeholders such as customers, employees, investors, governments and social responsibility towards public as a whole [1], [9], [26]–[29], and its’ survival [30], as shown by data from the study.

Reputation among the target groups. The relationship between the reputation of the organization and the strategic management of its audiences can be traced in the example, presented below with ULSIT. As a first step, the NPS metric identifies the types of user groups and the degree of customer loyalty to the organization. The results reveal that the Promoters prevail – 124 or 58.22%,

followed by the Passives – 67 or 31.46%, and the Detractors – 22 or 10.33%. The NPS is 47.89. The mean of the scale is $x=8.55$ and standard deviation – $sd=1.87$, which once again confirms that the University is preferred and recommended by its students.

It could be assumed that, on the one hand, that students are active users of educational products and services (decision makers), but on the other hand, they connect to other key audiences in society such as business and government institutions, having a significant impact on their policies and practices and acting as influences. The social-psychological mechanism is similar to that described in the social sciences by the Thomas theorem of W. Thomas, that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences [31] or the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy of R. Merton, that a belief or expectation, correct or incorrect, could bring about a desired or expected outcome [32].

The application of linear regression analysis using the Enter method with independent variables the 6 dimensions of reputation and the dependent variable “NPS” shows that $R=0.682$; $R^2=0.465$; Adjusted $R^2=0.450$ and model adequacy $F(1,211)=32.121$ at $p=0.000$. Therefore, the mathematical-statistical model is appropriate and reveals a strong relationship between the studied variables with a good percentage explained variance – 47%. In other words, there is a causal relationship between the components of reputation and the likelihood of recommendation of the organization to the people in the reference groups. However, only the influence of Emotional Appeal ($B=0.542$, $t=3.476$ at $p=0.001$) and the quality of Products and Services ($B=0.377$, $t=2.049$ at $p=0.042$), which have the highest indexes as well, are statistically significant.

Using a linear regression model with an independent variable “overall reputation” and a dependent variable “NPS”, the results are identical – $R=0.656$, $R^2=0.430$, Adjusted $R^2=0.450$, $F(1,211)=171.203$ at $p=0.000$. The regression coefficient $B=1.104$ is

statistically significant – $t=13.084$ at $p=0.000$. Hence, there is a close relationship between the organization's "good name" in public attitudes and the sustainable development of its business model through the most powerful communication channel – word-of-mouth.

The robust relation of reputation with positive associations in consumer attitudes, trust, leadership and perceived quality of products and services offered is confirmed in other studies [1], [2], [8], [9], which consider reputation as the result of sustainable collective perceptions of the reliability of organizational activity in relation to the consumer needs of stakeholders on the basis of past and current observations. On the other hand, the reputation as a fundamental element of brand equity, adds psychological value to the organization's activities, provides recognition and competitive advantage, enhances consumer loyalty, offers resilience in crisis situations, increases the chances of marketing success, etc. [4], [8], [9], [14], [15].

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the results from an empirical study, conducted in September – December 2018 among 213 students from the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies on the university reputation as a strategic resource for the functioning of a competitive business model, some important conclusions and recommendations can be made. The reputation is a complex motivational construct with emotional and cognitive component [2], which, along with other key factors such as the presence of market-oriented specialties, the quality of vocational training, the opportunities for student professional realization, and so on activates young people's behavioral intentions when choosing and recommending a university and/or specialty. The university reputation is a powerful strategic resource related to managing key audiences, securing competitive advantage and achieving sustainable development. The findings support the hypothesis that the university reputation generates trust and

leadership that can be implemented in strategic decision making.

The organization's reputation is built on its expertise, responsibility, and social commitment to gain public trust, support, and loyalty, especially in times of crisis [1], [8]. On the basis of the findings of the study, complex initiatives can be outlined for reputation building and strategic management in a university information environment. Some of them are related to the widespread promotion of the activity of the university with an emphasis on its competitive advantages through candidate-students campaigns, conducting educational events in primary and secondary schools, organizing "open doors" days, developing an attractive and informative website, reflecting academic events in social and professional networks, active presence of members of the university management in mass media, lectures by well-known leaders from cultural, political, and economic life of the country in front of the student audience, organizing alumni meetings with successful realizing professionals, etc.

In other words, the continuous dynamics and uncertainty of the environment poses its challenges to activity, identity, culture, and communication of contemporary organization [9]. From the perspective of the university, it can be speculated that the constant efforts to improve the quality of educational products and services, offering market-oriented specialties, innovative and interactive forms of teaching, effective leadership, highly qualified teachers, functional material base, smart technologies, implementation of complex communication strategies, strategic business partnerships and initiatives, and many others are among the leading factors that foster a positive reputation, build long-term confidence and achieve competitiveness and sustainable development in the higher education.

In another empirical study among various target groups, the link between the organization's reputation with image, communication, culture and

identity, decisive in strategic management in the contemporary university environment, will be analysed.

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