Relationship between university brand personality and student behavioral loyalty

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Abstract

The brand personality and status of the university among other universities are important for encouraging students to choose a particular university. This study examines different dimensions of the university brand personality and the effect of brand personality on the student-university relationship, student loyalty, and the moderating role of ethics on the research model. The sample of the first study includes all the students of public universities of Tehran city, and for the second study all the students of University of Tehran. 403 and 399 completed surveys were collected for the first and second studies. The results of an exploratory factor analysis show that the university brand personality has six dimensions with twenty-two scales. The results of structural equation modeling show that the university brand personality has a positive and meaningful effect on student-university relations, the relationship between student and university and the likelihood of students recommending the university to others, and the willingness to continue academic study. Ethics has a moderating role, but its effect and intensity are not meaningful.

Keywords: university, student, brand personality, ethics, behavioral loyalty

Introduction

Today, brands play an essential role in trade and service businesses by paying attention to clients' values. Brands are used for creating competitive advantages in physical and non-physical goods and services, and can be considered very valuable. Some researchers, like Chapleo (2010), believe that higher education institutions, which present non-physical products, require more brand management than trading businesses.

Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold, and Synowka (2009) explain that brand is the variable with the most effect on students' choice of university, because it is the first criteria that students use for comparing their expectations and understandings. Therefore, although researchers have conducted studies on factors affecting the university or higher education institution choice (like the student's personality, location of the university, welfare facilities), there are few studies of higher education branding. However, this has become one of the managerial and strategic subjects for university leadership (Chapleo, 2010; Priporas & Kamenidou, 2011). For example, Chapleo (2010) notes that due to the reduction of states' budget and investment, and the internationalization of the student market, the competition among the universities in England for domestic and international students has increased, which results in more focus on brand by universities. Because a university with a strong brand is able to create the impression that it is an excellent institution at the national level, it will be able to present itself as an excellent and distinguished university at the global level (Priporas & Kamenidou, 2011). Consequently it will be able to absorb elite professors and students and increase its standing in global rankings. Since branding is an important, effective, and valuable strategy for the university (Lee, Miloch, Kraft, & Tatum, 2008; Muntean, Cabulea, & Danuletiu, 2009), further studies of different dimensions the subject are needed, such as providing internal attributes for creating advantages, creating positive perception for students' that it can provide for their needs, gaining students' trust on its capability to present acceptable higher education programs, and guiding potential students to choose wisely (Priporas & Kamenidou, 2011).

Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, and Kurtulus (2010) explain that branding for a "place," such as a campus, is under the control of marketers. They also state that there have been few studies in the field of place brand personality. In addition, consumers prefer to use brands that are more compatible with their self-perception, hence more and special attention to brand personality is to be expected (Kaplan et al., 2010).

In Iran, there are approximately 4.4 million university students, of which about 700,000 are at public institutions. There are 2,276 established universities, of which 465 are public. Thus there is substantial competition between universities in Iran.

Due to increasing competition among the universities globally, there is a need for branding studies. Universities aim to attract elite students and professors, promoting their rank nationally and internationally, and absorb international students, which will provide revenue. Additionally, considering the increase in the

complexity of universities as educational and service organizations, branding could help simplify and reinforce their attraction and loyalty (Chapleo, 2010). Therefore, these elements encourage the leadership to reinforce the brand of their university. Of course, this is only possible by creating and optimizing the personality, internal and external image, and brand identity of the university. Aaker (1996) believes that the main factors of a brand are identity, distinction, and personality. The brand personality of a university wants to create a relationship, symmetry, and concordance between the student and the university, because this concordance creates a positive view about the brand builds loyalty (Liu, Mizerski, & Soh, 2012). Hence, a good brand personality provides a strong sense of union with the brand and amplifies the trust and loyalty (Diamantopoulos, Smith, & Grime, 2005). Of course, the main reason for attention and interest in branding, especially brand personality in recent years, is its role in adding to the net value (Wagner & Peters, 2009). Since potential customers are classified by the brand personality (Merrilees, Miller, & Herington, 2012), creating brand personality should also be applied to promoting the brand of an educational institution (Iversen & Hem, 2008). Considering the importance of branding andthe brand of a university, there has not been enough attention to this topic (Kaplan et al., 2010).

This study analyzes the dimensions of university personality in Iran by conducting exploratory research. The aim of this research is to explore the dimensions of university personality in Iran, filling the knowledge gap of the university brand personality by applying the Aaker (1996) model. This study also has three secondary questions: (1) What is the effect of university brand personality on student-university relations? (2) What is the effect of the university brand personality, with the mediating effect of student-university relationships, on behavioral loyalty? (3) What is the role of perceived ethical attributes by the students as a moderator variable affecting the relation between the brand personality and student-university variable?

Literature review

The university brand personality

The university brand personality is one of the main parameters of brand identity and image. The brand identity is a way by which the business shows its brand to the target group, and the brand image is the interpretation and perception of the brand identity (Geuens, Weijters, & Wulf, 2009). Lee, Miloch, Kraft, and Tatum (2008) explain that creating and keeping a brand personality reinforces the brand identity and improves the student perceptions of the institution.

Brand personality is one of the most important concepts in current marketing practices, and attracts the attention of researchers (Louis & Lombart, 2010); indeed,

customer satisfaction, which is an important parameter of business success, is influenced by the brand personality (Roper & Davies, 2010). Maehle and Shneor (2010) note that the marketing literature describes many studies in this field, but Martineau (1957) was the first to use the concept of personality for the brand. More recently, Aaker (1997) provided the commonly cited and comprehensive definition if brand personality: "The set of human characteristics associated with a brand." Therefore, the university brand is "the set of human characteristics associated with the university" (p. 347).

Evolution of human characteristics obliges marketers to focus on intangible aspects of branding, like personality and values, more than tangible aspects, such as name and logo (Chapleo, 2005; Hutchinson, 2010; Yoon, 2010). Gutman (1982) argues that personality and value are interrelated concepts, with personality a subset of value. Customers, as sentient beings, are not only looking to satisfy their functional and sentimental needs, but also their spiritual needs (values) in selecting products and services (Kotler, Setiawan, & Kartajaya, 2010, pp. 22—23). The brand personality, by coordinating the brand and needs of the consumers, tries to differentiate the product or the service on a sentimental level as well as using social values, and creates value for the organization.

Beneficiaries assess a brand according to brand promise and evaluate a brand personality according to how it meets their expectations and needs (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Studies show that consumers focus on value (Kotler et al., 2010). Therefore, Dioko and Harrill (2011) explain that destination branding needs identification and structuralization of the location values, uniqueness, signature elements, and personality. Therefore, brands of educational institutions should also be based on the development of the image, positive values, and perceptions of the location (Iversen & Hem, 2008). Yoshida, Fukamauchi, and Ichikawa (2004) believe that the university personality could be applied in studying the mental health of students. However, Kotler, Setiawan, and Kartajaya (2010) state that the personality helps both psychological and spiritual well-being, as well as mental health.

Student-university relationships

Humans communicate with brands in the same way they communicate with other people, and the personalities of both parties affect this relationship (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) explains that an individual's worries and lifestyle affect his or her relationships with others. Therefore, in a highly competitive and resource-constrained environment, and with expenses of recruiting talented students, university leaders have focused on creating and reinforcing long-term relations the students and their universities. Through better relations, universities are more likely to encourage students to further their studies at the same university, thereby removing some recruitment costs. Therefore, a new marketing approach is forming, since the expense of attracting new customers

is much greater than keeping current customers, and retaining them results in more profits for the business. Studies of choice and purchase behavior in the marketing literature show the importance of consumer-brand relations is increasing (Geok & Goh, 2005; Hayes, Alford, Silver, & York, 2006), because if the relationship between the consumer and the brand is reinforced, they will choose the brand more frequently (Akin, 2011) and suggest it to their friends and relatives (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002).

As a result, university leaders should focus on their students extensively, and emphasize the creation of long-term relationships with their students, as this may promote long-term financial health for the university and increase their ability to compete (Marshal, 2010). Therefore, the consumer-brand relation is a competitive necessity (Hess & Story, 2005).

Behavioral loyalty

Marketing researchers believe that customers' loyalty and satisfaction are integrals goal of marketing (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Loyalty means creating customers' tendency to follow the business or brand (Khanyapuss, Alan, & Heiner, 2009). Loyalty is an element in analyzing the competitiveness of businesses, because a loyal customer decreases marketing expenses. Loyalty to the brand is defined as customers' positive disposition toward the brand, and repurchasing its products or services (Aaker, 1991). This explains two different concepts: trademark preferences, described later as approach loyalty; and market share, subsequently termed behavioral loyalty (Fullerton, 2003; Guest, 1955).

In recent years, the concept of student loyalty has attracted much attention, becoming one of the most important aims of higher education institutions (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Elliott & Shin, 2002; Koilias, 2005). In recent decades, the competition among the universities has increase, so universities have paid more attention to satisfaction, commitment, and loyalty of their students as a competitive advantage (Lam, Shankar, Erramilli, & Murthy, 2004). Moreover, Henning-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen (2001) explain that universities need an appropriate relationship with students to create loyalty and provide for the further financial needs of the university.

Ethics

In recent years, consumer perception of ethical practices and its effect on the performance of businesses have received increasing scholarly attention, since a business can strengthen its competitive advantage through ethical values (Chabowski, Mena, & Gonzalez-Padron, 2011). Marketing ethics is the systematic study of moral standards that will be applied in the decisions and behaviors of

businesses (Abela & Murphy, 2008). There is a strong relationship between ethical business and business reputation and competitiveness (Brunk, 2012). Ethical behavior of businesses plays a vital role in shaping and maintaining long-term relationships between businesses and their customers (Roman & Ruiz, 2005). Therefore, compliance with ethical traits is the one of the major factors affecting customers' perceptions of service businesses (Thomas, Vitell, Gilbert, & Rose, 2002).

Brand personality & consumer-brand relations

The brand personality is a fundamental element affecting the consumer-brand relationship (Hayes et al., 2006). Fournier (1998) explains that dimensions of brand personality have a relationship with development of consumer-brand relationships. Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) studied the effect of various brand-related violations on two dimension of brand personality: sincerity and excitement. They found that violations have negative effects on sincerity, but no effect on excitement. Hayes et al. (2006) analyzed the relation of brand personality dimensions and partners' quality, and found a positive and meaningful relationship among the three dimensions of excitement, sincerity, and ruggedness, and partners' quality. Jean-Ruel (2008) analyzed the relationship between brand personality and consumer-brand and found that the competency dimension affected the consumer-brand relationship.

Consumer-brand relationship and loyalty

Being loyal to a brand is one of the important components of a strong brand, and customer loyalty is the main parameter in consumer-brand relations (Hess & Story, 2005). Moreover, the goal of relationship marketing is to attract loyal customers for the business (Assel, 2001). Aaker (1991) introduces the relationship between a consumer and a brand in five levels, with loyalty as the last and the strongest level of that relationship; she defines loyalty as the consumers' confidence in the brand (Horppu, Kuivalainen, Tarkiainen, & Ellonen, 2008). The consumer-brand relationship is used to improve the brand perception and loyalty, deepening the company's knowledge of consumers' needs, and helping it better develop products and improve marketing activities (Breivik & Thorbjørnsen, 2008).

In this study, word of mouth (WOM) and intent to continue academic study in the future are two dimensions for assessing the behavioral loyalty of students. Arndt (1967) characterized WOM as oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service. An intention materializes when an individual makes a proposition that connects him- or herself with a future behavioral act (Soderlund & Ohman, 2003).

Conceptual model

Figure 1 presents our conceptual model. The brand personality of a university is the independent variable; student-university relations and ethical attributes are moderating variables, and behavioral loyalty (WOM and intent to continue academic study) are dependent variables.
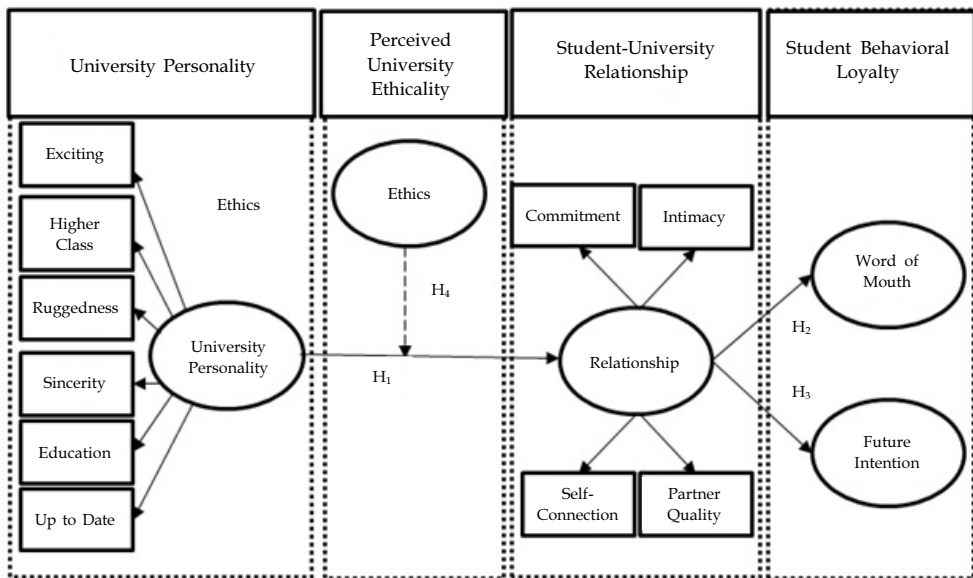

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Methods

Study 1

In this descriptive study, we administered a survey to 500 bachelors, masters, and doctoral students of public universities within Tehran, using a clustering sampling method. We used a closed-ended, standard questionnaire. First, we translated Aaker's (1997, p. 352) scales from English to Persian, and then asked marketing professionals and professors to verify that we had translated the questions accurately. The survey responses were on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree." Survey questions included 42 indices of the Aaker (1997) model (fidelity with 11questions, excitement with 11 questions, competency with 9 questions, evolution with 6 questions, and ruggedness with 5 questions). We then used LISREL software version 8.5 to conduct an exploratory factor analysis.

We tested the research model by smart-PLS software without considering the moderating variable. Then, by testing change in R2, we assessed whether the ethical attributes variable is a moderator. After testing to confirm this moderating role, we examined its intensity and effect on the relationship between the university personality and the student-university relationship by applying PLS structural models.

Study 2

In the second study, we examined the relationship between the university personality, the student-university relationship, and loyalty creation at the University of Tehran. We distributed 450 surveys to bachelors' degree and master's degree students, using convenience sampling. The survey included: 22 questions about the university personalities, obtained in study 1; 21 questions on the student-university relationship, taken from work by Jean-Ruel (2008); seven questions on ethical specifications of the organization, from work by Leonidas, Kvasova, Leonidou, and Chari (2013), and four questions regarding WOM and intent to continue academic study, from Maxham and Netemeyer (2002) and Garbarino and Johnson (1999), respectively. The survey responses used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "totally agree" to "totally disagree," and was administered face to face. After we translated the survey questions, the accuracy of the translations were verified by colleagues.

Results

Participants

In Study 1,403 students provided usable responses to the survey, for a response rate of 80%. Approximately 384 responses would allow for statistical significance (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Participants were students at: University of Tehran (99), Shahid Beheshti University (83), Sharif Industrial University (81) students are from, Allameh Tabatabaei University (63), and Amirkabir Industrial University (77). 57.1% were male; 59.1% were 19-22 years old, 35.7% were 23-25 years old, and 5.2% were older than 25 years old. 46.6% were undergraduates (bachelors), 48.7% were earning their master's degree, and 4.7% were earning their doctorate. 89.8% were unmarried.

In study 2,399 students provided usable responses to the survey, for a response rate of 88%. 48.1% of respondents were male; 49.1% were 19-22 years old, 45.6% were 23-25 years old, and 5.3% are older. 55.9% were undergraduates and the rest were master's students. 91.7% were unmarried. Based on the factor loadings in Table 1, the final structure of personality dimensions is summarized in Figure2.

Table 1. Reliability of conceptual model variables

| Variable	Component	Questions	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR	Resource
University personality	Exciting	5				
	Higher class	4				
	Ruggedness	3	.82	.53	.87	Aaker (1997)
	Sincerity	2				
	Education	6				
	Up to date	2				
Student-university relationship	Commitment	5				
	Intimacy	5	.85	.69	.89	Jean-Ruel (2008)
	Self-connection	5				
	Partner quality	6				
Behavioral loyalty	Word of Mouth	6	.73	.55	.83	Maxham & Netemeyer (2002)
	Future intentions	6	.71	.53	.82	Garbarino & Johnson (1999)
Ethics		7	.72	.38	.8	Leonidas, Kvasova, Leonidou, & Chari (2013)
Ethics + university personality		-	.943	.3	.946	-
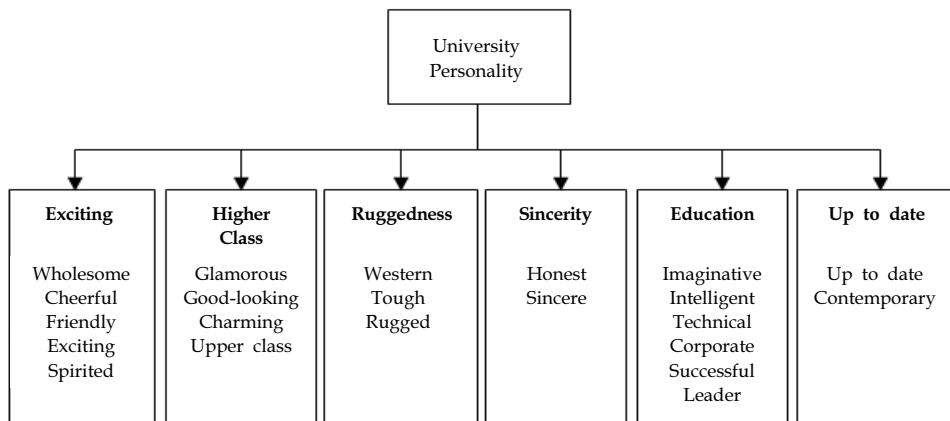
Figure 2. Component of university personality

Table 2 shows factor loadings above 0.5 (upper and medium levels). Indices are classified into six elements, and 22 indices have factor loadings above 0.5. 20 indices with lower factor loadings are omitted.

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis of university personality

Variables	Exciting	Higher class	Ruggedness	Sincerity	Education	Up to date
Honest				.646		
Sincere				.644		
Wholesome	.580					
Cheerful	.723					
Friendly	.627					
Exciting	.626					
Spirited	.628					
Imaginative					.621	
Up to date						.632
Contemporary						.629
Intelligent					.633	
Technical					.586	
Corporate					.711	
Successful					.590	
Leader						
Upper class		.634				
Glamorous		.674				
Good looking		.744				
Charming		.738				
Western			-.573			
Tough			-.805			
Rugged			-.725			

Model without the moderator variable

Figure 3 shows the relationships between variables, analyzed using *t*-values. Since *t*-values are more than the absolute value of 1.96, all research hypotheses are confirmed. Figure 4 explains the path coefficients and factor loadings, all of which are above 0.5.
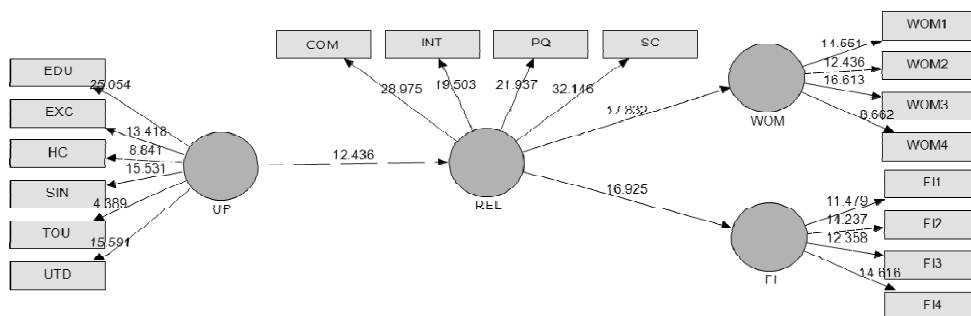
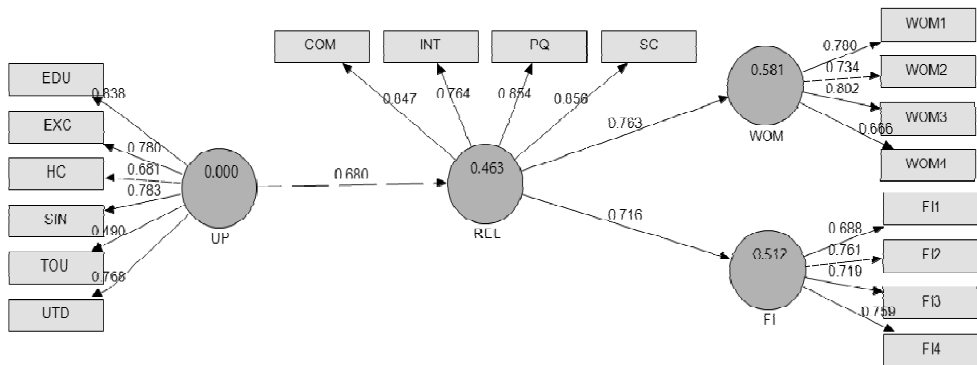Figure 3. *t*-value of model (without moderator variable)

Figure 4. Factor loading and path coefficient of model (without moderator variable)

Testing the moderator variable. As shown in Table 3, ethical attributes have a moderating effect on the relationship between university personality and the student-university relationship: $F(1,395) = 3.257$ and Sig. $\Delta F = 0.072$ show that ethical attributes are a moderator at a level of 10%.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Change statistics				
				R^2 Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.742[a]	.550	.548	.550	241.853	2	396	.000
2	.744[b]	.554	.550	.004	3.257	1	395	.072

a. Predictors: (Constant), UP,PUE
b. Predictors: (Constant), UP,PUE,UPPUE

In Figure 5, intensity and level of ethical attributes are studied as moderator variables affecting the relationship of university brand personality and student-university relations. t-values show that, although in preceding sections the moderator role of ethical attributes was confirmed, the intensity of ethical attributes on the relationship between university personality and student-university relations is not meaningful, since its is less than the absolute value of 1.96. Therefore, in this case, the effect of ethical attributes as a moderating variable is dispensable.
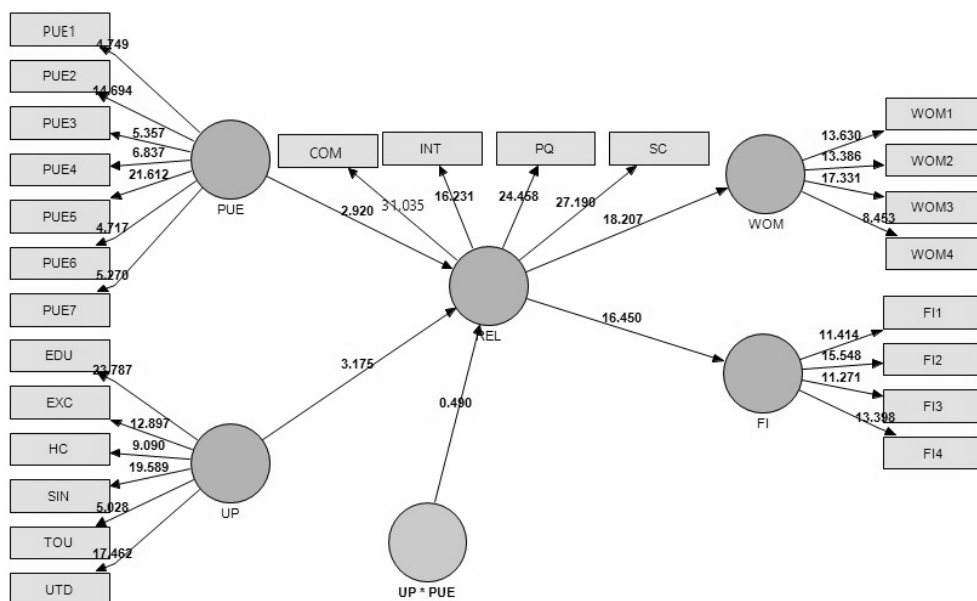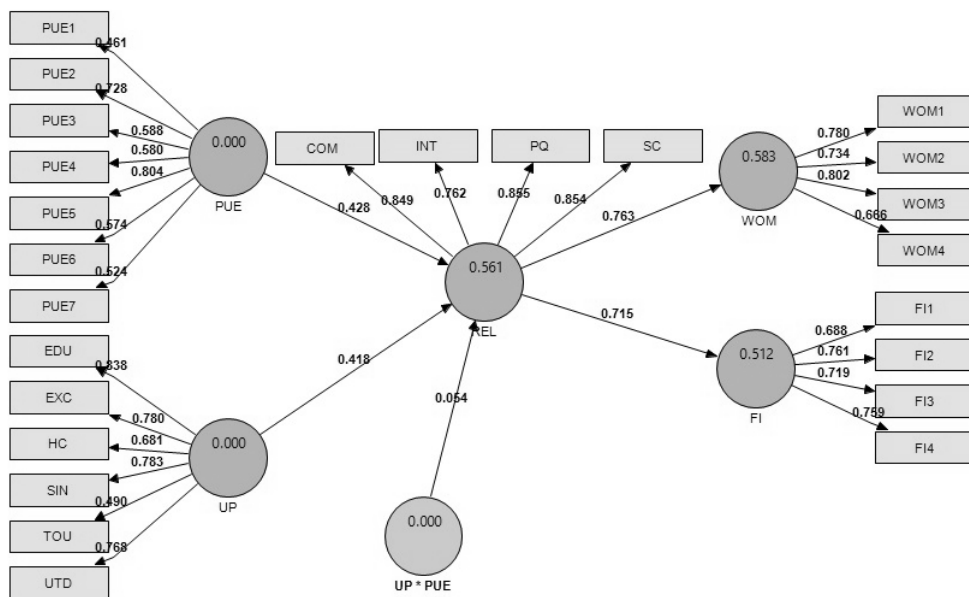
Figure 5. *t*-value of conceptual model

Figure 6. Factor loading and path coefficient of conceptual model

Relationships of variables

In structural equation modeling, the effect of each independent variable, directly or indirectly, on any of the dependent variables can be measured. The calculation of these effects is shown in Table 4 (using the factor loadings of Figure 6). WOM shows the greatest effect on student-university relations (0.763); this is only a direct effect. The second most important variable is ethics (0.326) which has an indirect relationship with WOM. Student-university relations (0.715) appears as the most effective variable for intent to continue academic study, and it is only a direct effect. After that, ethics has the most effect on WOM with an indirect relationship (0.306).

Table 4. Effect of independent variables on dependent variables

Dependent variables	Independent variables	Effect		
		Total	Indirect	Direct
Word of Mouth (WOM)	University personality	0.318	(0.418×0.763) = 0.318	--
	Student-university relationship	0.763	--	0.763
	Perceived university ethicality	0.326	(0.428×0.763) = 0.318	--
Future Intention (FI)	University personality	0.298	(0.418×0.715) = 0.298	--
	Student-university relationship	0.715	--	0.715
	Perceived university ethicality	0.306	(0.428×0.715) = 0.306	--
Student-University Relationship (SUR)	University personality	0.418	--	0.418
	Perceived university ethicality	0.428	--	0.428

Discussion

Branding is one of the most important tools for creating competitive advantage for higher education institutions. By creating a brand with a personality that suits that of students, the university is able to improve the relationship and develop satisfaction, trust, and loyalty in the students, which is one of the main and long-term goals of the university in developing student-university relations.

In the first study, through an exploratory factor analysis, dimensions of the university brand personality were analyzed among well-known public universities in Tehran, by applying the Aaker (1996) model. We found that university brand personality consists of six dimensions (exciting, higher class, sincerity, ruggedness, education, and up to date) with 22 scales. The exciting and up to date dimensions from this study are consistent with the exciting dimension in Aaker's scale. Ruggedness and sincerity appear in both ours and Aaker's scale, and competency in our study is consistent with the sophistication dimension in Aaker's scale. In the second study, we studied the relationship of university brand personality with the student-university relations and loyalty creation. The results confirm the

relationships among the variables. There are comparisons between the results of this study and the results of Jean-Ruel's (2009) study. An appropriate brand personality for a university improves and reinforces the relationship between the student and the university, and has a positive effect on students' behavior. Our results also align with those of Yoon (2010). The results of the hierarchical regression test show that the ethical attributes variable plays a moderating role of 10% in the relationship between university brand personality and student-university relations. However, the path analysis shows that the intensity and rate of effect of the ethical attributes moderating variable on the relationship of university brand personality and student-university relations is not meaningful. Therefore, university leaders could adopt policies for improving and reinforcing brand personality dimensions to improve their relationship with students and create a competitive advantage, even in the presence of tenacious rivals or a decrease in student applications. This could lead to universities admitting talented students and hiring experienced professors, thereby embarking on a long-term relationship with them. We also found that although the effect of ethical attributes as a moderating variable is not meaningful, it has a positive effect on reinforcing student-university relations. This means that the universities could have a positive effect on student perceptions by observing ethical frameworks, improving the relationship between them and their students, and improving students' behavioral loyalty. The student-university relationship variable has the most effect on two dimensions of behavioral loyalty, so university leadership could deduct most of expenses of recruiting new students and advertisement by improving their relations with students.

In addition, the factor loadings show that "educational quality," honesty, and sincerity have the most importance in brand personality, respectively; partner quality and self-connection have the most importance for student-university relations, and in ethics, "sense of responsibility of the university for the students" has the most importance. The results of WOM show that students like to transfer their positive experiences and encourage others to study at their university; the results of educational intention show that the sample undergraduates intended to continue their academic study at their current institution.

Conclusion

To increase competition between universities, institutions should identify students' perceptions of their university, and then they use influence these perceptions to attract better students. Then, universities should try to maintain institutional loyalty by creating a better relationship with these students. In this context, the concepts and principles of marketing, like brand and relationship marketing and their associated practical steps, can help the university market itself better. Institutions should identify the things that the student population finds

important to perform better operational planning.

To create a positive WOM and future educational intention by elite students in their universities, administrator need to have a more intimate, higher quality relationship with more commitment and greater communication methods with their students. We found that the expected personality of an institution can improve the university-student relationship. Given the dimensions of personality, universities must improve WOM and future educational intention of students by trying to provide the newest facilities and the latest educational and laboratory equipment. In addition to the academic environment, universities should endeavor to make their campuses environment vibrant exciting so that students are proud of being a part of that institution. This can lead to the strengthening of the student-university relationship, which in turn will ultimately create loyalty in the student body. Student perceptions of university ethical behavior can be a significant indication of the institution's values and culture, as well as a sign of university commitment to its relationship with the students and the community.

Future research in this direction can survey the positioning of universities in terms of brand personality or investigate the gap between performance of specific universities and the expectations of their target population. Another consideration can be the relationship between student satisfaction and the student-university relationship and its impact on student behavioral loyalty.

The main limitation of this research is that it examines the university brand personality just in public universities in Tehran. Another limitation is that the research did not investigate public universities in different cities. Another limitation is that the translation of Aaker's brand personality scale to Persian may have altered the meaning, despite the input of multiple colleagues in this respect.

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