Correlation Between Student Retention Actions and Brand Resonance in a Higher Education Institution

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Research relating Consumer Based Brand Equity and students' permanence intention in the educative institution, was performed. A descriptive correlational study was carried out, using a non-probabilistic sampling with 453 participants in total, which answered a survey that included the variables used by the Colombian National Education Ministry (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia) to measure permanence actions as well as other variables related with the brand equity model, which were specifically developed for the main purposes of this study. The most important results suggest a positive association between internationalization processes and the permanence intention in the institution; a correlation between perception of the permanence actions and the brand equity in the Superior Education Institution (IES, because of their acronym in Spanish); in the same way, a strong connection between Keller's Brand resonance model and the Institutional Abandonment of Tinto's. This evidenced relationship would allow the strengthening of permanence and lowering of student's abandonment.

Keywords: brand equity, consumer psychology, permanence college, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Recently, with the need for universalization of education, and the immersion of universities in the business landscape, higher education institutions have focused their efforts on keeping and retaining their clients (students).

Towards the end of the 20th century, education started to be more accessible and inclusive than it was (Denegri, Cabezas, Novoa, Peralta & Estrada, 2013). According to the world bank (2017), access to superior education in Latin America raised from 21% in 2000 to 40% in 2010. The access to private universities rose to 50% in 2013. That growth has led universities to consider new strategies in their social, organizational, and quality levels, to avoid students' desertion. This effort comes from the idea of universalization of education, but also comes from the fact that education, in commercial and economical terms, has become an extremely competitive field, and a good business.

As a result, the universities face challenges when it comes to recruiting new students, retaining them (therefore, increasing their permanence), and in the long run, making that their graduates return to their alma mater. That is how more universities aim to develop better relationships with their students and, their perception of the university's brand.

The following section will describe the models to increase student permanence that is used by higher education institutions, what are their characteristics, and their relevance for the present study.

Student Permanence

For the national ministry of education in Colombia (2009) "permanence" is understood as the academic success of the student. It is understood as the successful completion of the study program in which the student started. It involves a sustained behaviour over time, and it has to do with loyalty to the brand or service, a sense of belonging, and projection into the future. The ministry considers some crucial aspects to promote student permanence, and the reduction of students' desertion in higher education: academic tutorship; levelling courses, which aim to estimate and strengthen the previous knowledge from the students; economic support (scholarships, subsidies, and credits); vocational orientation; attitudes, and expectation fulfilling.

On their behalf, Berger, Blanco & Lyon (2012) understand permanence as the desire and the action coming from the students to stay in the higher education system and get their academic degree. They establish a difference between student permanence and student retention. For the authors, retention is the set of actions that higher education institutions design and execute to achieve that their students can stay from their admission to their graduation. Similarly, Hundrieser (2008), cited by Torres (2012) considers that student permanence is the successful completion of the academic objectives. This has to do with the educative, motivational, and social characteristics of the student.

Fonseca & García (2016), say that desertion must be studied from an organizational focus. Doing so shows that the decision about staying is not entirely dependent on the student's will, but also a big deal of it involves exclusively institutional factors. Their model has its bases on Tinto's institutional abandonment model (1987), which assumes that the student's success in an educational institution is mediated by expectations, academic and social relationships inside the university, and the previous factors to the admission into the institution, such as, vocational orientation, learning styles, and interests. These factors can affect the student's adaptation to university life, for example, academic performance during secondary school. Tinto's model affirms that there is a strong relationship between student permanence and the social interactions that involve the student and their institution.

Seidman (2005) posits that a good way to enforce student retention (and therefore increasing permanence), is being able to detect early warning signs, preferably, at the admission time to identify the students' needs and provide the corresponding services and support to satisfy their users. It is necessary to note that the students' permanence is important for the effect it causes in the students, and as mentioned by Greenberg, in García, Núñez, Salas y Suanya (2013), because it implies greater financial benefits for the institution. If the student keeps their process going, the income to the university keeps steady. However, it is important to keep in mind that that involves that the institution investments to ensure academic and technological quality, infrastructure, and personalized services. In consequence, the quality and reputation of an educative institution are some of the main factors that guide the user to choose an institution, do the matriculation, and, in the future, the intention of staying in the institution.

The next section will introduce two theoretical models that are complementary to the model of Tinto of institutional abandonment and that were used in the present study.

Theory of Reasoned Action and Student Permanence (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)

This theory stems from the behavioural model and was proposed by Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975. In their model, they assert that beliefs and attitudes can affect behaviour. Therefore, the decision on whether to desert or staying in the educative institution would be made according to the consequences obtained from similar choices that had happened along with the learning history of the decision-maker. Accordingly, social norms can elicit an intention of behaviour, and new systems of beliefs and attitudes. In the context of higher education institutions, student permanence is an antecedent that can strengthen behavioural intentions.

Keller's Model: Brand Equity Based on the Consumer or Brand Resonance

This model separates in levels regarding brand equity. The first level corresponds to identity, which involves a first contact and affinity between the consumer and the brand to achieve that the brand stays permanently in the consumers' memory and is associated with a specific need. The second level involves brand meaning generation which comes from the tangible and intangible bonds with the brand. The third level corresponds to responses that are associated with feelings and judgments regarding the brand. Finally, in the fourth level is the brand relationship, which is expected to be long-lasting and active on behalf of consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Brand Value in the Institutions of Superior Education

In the context of marketing of educative institutions, brand value is described by Kotler (in Filip, 2012) as the planning, implementation, and careful control that aims to design the institutional programs, considering the demand in the market (in this case, the educative market). In consequence, how the institutional image is formed affects the competitiveness of the company and the labour market. That image includes the active students but also includes the perception that graduates from the institution. Therefore, as Berdivayeba (2013) mentions, is not enough to consider the statistics, but is also necessary to identify stereotypes, social representations, social environment, and symbols existing in the community and that are associated with the institution. The research evidence points out that there are symbolic relationships and brand identity. For example, Kalafatis, Ledden, Riley y Singh (2016) found relationships between permanence actions at the marketing level and the added brand value.

Yuan, Liu, Luo & Yen (2016) conclude that marketing actions get better brand identity processes when those are focused on internationalization; the authors also highlight the importance of studying the social aspects of permanence and institutional image, in terms of social representations, consumption styles, and lifestyles.

Štefko, Fedorko y Bačík (2015) consider that the webpage and virtual classrooms (page design, clarity, contents) are important materials to build a strong and positive image of the university. Accordingly, they recommend e-marketing as a fundamental tool to divulge, build and socialize the brand value. Palmer, Koenig- Lewis y Asaad (2016) suggest that brand value studies should be done in different universities and contexts, as the social environment, culture, and story of every institution, may throw different results regarding the brand value, and therefore, the results are hard to generalize. In the same idea, Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin e Ivens (2016), suggest that studying different universities and considering the social environment in which those are. However, they also highlight the importance of studying brand value as something strongly related to market competitivity and the decision of the students of staying in the same institution.

Girard y Trapp (2013) studied the brand resonance model used by Keller and found that the highest brand value on behalf of the students was the quality of the faculty to which the study belonged. The second factor in importance in the process of brand value was the overall image of the university. Furthermore, they found that emotional factors and brand loyalty were second plane factors. They suggested that studying the emotional factors in the CBBE model from Keller; they also suggest creating a measurement instrument of brand value to study the interactions of the multiple dimensions that comprise the brand value building process.

METHODOLOGY AND INSTRUMENT

The sampling used in this study was non-probabilistic and convenience based. We calculated the sample size considering the total of the undergraduate students in the presential modality in a regional private university (3.415, according to the numbers of the admission and registration office of the university), applying the corresponding formula, with the confidence of .95, the calculated sample was a total of 345 people. The final sample had 453 participants; the total time of data collection was 30 days.

We designed an instrument for this research. It included the variables that the education ministry uses to measure the permanence actions executed by the universities (tutoring services, university wellbeing,

communication with the lecturers, orientation in university life, inclusive education, and economical support). The instrument also included the brand resonance variables from the research of Girard & Trapp (2013). Besides, we included socio-demographic variables. We also included three dichotomic variables in which we asked the students about their permanence in the university (possibility of matriculation on the next semester), the intention of studying a postgraduate program in the same university, and their intention of recommending the university to third parties. We validated the instrument before its use with the corresponding sample.

The validation process included expert validation, pilot testing, and statistical validation. After the validation, the resultant Cronbach's alpha was 0.89, which is an indicator of the internal consistency of the instrument. This study used a quantitative, descriptive correlational design. The main objective of this research was to find the relationship between brand value variables in Keller's model, brand equity based on the consumer, and intention of student's permanence in the university.

The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 21. The analysis included: Cronbach's alpha coefficient, descriptive statistics, normality tests, frequencies, a test of Chi-squared, and Spearman's correlation tests.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research was planned and developed according to the parameters contemplated in the law 1090 of 2006, which regulates the professional exercise of psychology in Colombia. We acted in concordance with article 20, of the mentioned law, which specifies the need for impartiality when the researchers have contraposing interests.

To gather the data, it was necessary to address an authorization from the institution. The director of the institution signed the document that stated that he agreed to assess the students in the presential programs to participate in the study. In the documents, was also clear that the director agreed with the incentive that the students will be receiving for taking part in the research. We incentivize the participants by offering them to take part in a raffle.

We put special attention to the articles: 50., which ensure following ethic guidelines of ethics and dignity and keeping the well-being and the rights of the participants; 51., literal c., that asks to guarantee that at the end of the research, all the participants have access to the full objective and variables of the research; and 56., in which it is stated that every professional in psychology has intellectual rights over the work developed individually or collectively, accordingly with the copyright legislation existing in Colombia.

We followed the confidentiality and anonymity guidelines and gave to the participants the e-mail of the researcher, in case they wanted to get full information on the results of the research via e-mail.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Chi-Squared Test

To study the relationship between the variables included in Keller's model of Brand equity based on the consumer, we crossed tabulated the answers to every item corresponding with the phase of the model (identity, meaning generation, and responses) and the answer to the three dichotomous questions in the study (intention of permanence, the intention of doing postgraduate studies in the same institution, and recommending the university to third parties). We wanted to assess which elements of Keller's models were correlated with the variables. The statistically significant values are shown in the following table.

TABLE 1
CROSSED TABULATION OF THE VARIABLE IDENTITY DIMENSION OF THE BRAND AND INTENTION TO RECOMMEND THE INSTITUTION TO THIRD PARTIES

			Would you recommend to third parties to study in the institution in which you study/ are studying?		Total
			No	Yes	
The university has national prestige	Not very important	count	0	21	21
	Important	count	3	127	130
Total	Very important	count	25	277	302
Total		Count	28	425	453

The asymptotic value for significance was 0.003 in this case. Source. Own elaboration with the SPSS output.

Table 1 displays the statistical differences in terms of the frequencies of the variables of interest (p=0.05); it shows that people that are interested in recommending their institution, consider it important that the institution has good prestige at the national level.

Table two displays the results of studying the dimension of meaning generation. In this analysis, we crossed the question regarding permanence intention and the existence of internationalization programs in their university. We found that is there a greater amount of people that consider as a "very important" the existence of internationalization programs and that this frequency is related to the intention of matriculation on the next semester. We consider that this might be the brand element that would be contributing in greater amount to student permanence and to the brand resonance, which seems to confirm the hypothesis of this study.

TABLE 2
CROSS TABULATION ON THE VARIABLE'S INTERNATIONALIZATION OPPORTUNITIES AND PERMANENCE INTENTION

			Am I going to renew my matriculation on the next semester?		Total
			NO	YES	
The university offers internationalization programs	Not very important	Count	2	4	6
	Important	Count	21	75	96
	Very important	Count	37	314	351
Total			60	393	453

The asymptotic value for significance was 0.005 in this case. Source. Own elaboration with the SPSS output.

Table 2 shows that in the present research, only the internationalization programs are related to the intention of permanence. We crossed all the items corresponding with the phases of Keller's model and we found that only the internationalization processes (that belongs to the dimension "brand meaning") have a statistically significant relationship with the intention of keeping their studies in the same institution, in comparison with the other variables measured with this instrument.

Spearman's Correlation Coefficient

A Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to study the relationship between permanence actions and brand value, and we found a strong relationship ($\rho = 0.997$, $p < 0.0005$).

TABLE 3
SHOWS THE OUTPUT OF THE MENTIONED RELATION

			Permanence Actions	Brand Value
Spearman Rho	Permanence Actions	correlation coefficient	1	0,997
		Sig (bilateral)		0,000
		N	454	454
	Brand Value	correlation coefficient		
		Sig (bilateral)	0,000	
		N	454	454

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to study the relationship between brand value according to Keller's model, brand equity based on the consumer, and the students' intention of staying in the university they were currently studying. Our results show a statistically significant correlation ($\rho = 0.99$) between permanence actions performed on behalf of the university (individual and grouped psychosocial intervention, sports and culture courses, economic subsidies, academic tutoring with peers or with lecturers, inclusive education processes, and other activities oriented to promote wellbeing in the university life) and the importance that the brand has for the student and their subsequent decision of staying and continuing their studies in the same institution. The better appraisal about the permanence actions executed on behalf of the university, the most important the brand starts to be to the students.

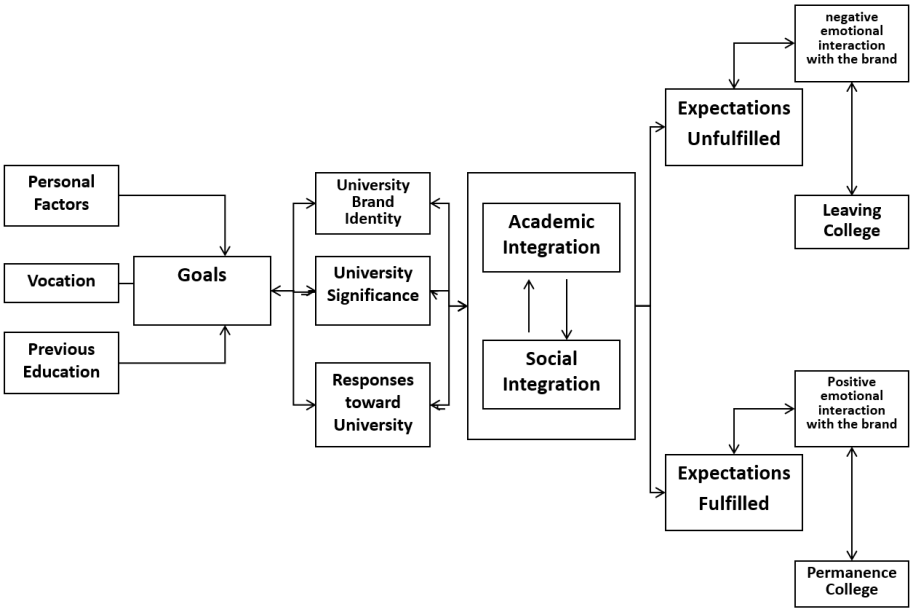
Our results are coherent with the findings of Kalafatis et al. (2016), in their research they reported that student permanence actions strengthen the construction of brand value in the higher education institutions. Accordingly, Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos y Bourlakis (2016), found that the student's retention is strongly related to brand variables.

In this research, we also found that the internationalization processes contribute to the emotional link between the student and the university, and therefore, their intention of staying in the same institution. This supports the findings of Yuan et al. (2016), who reported that brand identity is strengthened when the marketing has a special focus on the internationalization processes of the university. In our study, we also found that the meaning generation phase also adds up to the brand resonance process.

Our results are concordant with the models of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and the model of institutional abandonment by Tinto (1987); particularly because the relationships that happen inside the

institution that the students can get either positive or negative feedback to their expectations and, in consequence, to decide if they would like to stay or to leave the institution in which they are currently matriculated. In this relationship, the elements of Keller's model brand value that are important are identity, meaning generation, and interactions between the brand and the students. The concrete elements regarding this relationship are the academic, and wellbeing actions performed on behalf of the university to try to ensure student's permanence. These results provide an important element that can be understood as transversal in the institutional abandonment model. Therefore, in this article, we suggest a new model approach to students' permanence. (Figure 1)

FIGURE 1
MODEL OF STUDENT PERMANENCE AND BRAND RESONANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



Source: own elaboration based on the results of this research and the basic theoretical models.

In our model, the dynamics of the academic and social interactions that the student has inside the institution shape the brand value of the institution. This is capital in the process of strengthening the identity and meaning of the institution to the student, and in consequence, the future emotional link with the brand.

Our model combines educative marketing, the behavioural perspective of student permanence and keeps the most relevant elements from the organizational model of institution abandonment. This model is an integrated alternative to strengthen the relationships that can be created between the students and every instance of the university, to accomplish their expectations and objectives. In this model, we consider that the subject's experience inside the university context is key for the global brand and the continuity of the subject's studies.

We suggest keeping in mind the factors that are originally considered in the institutional abandonment model, such a students' history and personal learning process, and vocational orientation. According to these, the candidate looks for the institution in which they would like to study according to the recognition or positioning of the university in the national context (brand identity), the associations of the institution (brand meaning), and the responses to the brand (which involves all the possible previous interactions that the subject or someone related had to have with the brand or any instances of the institution.

According to the previous aspects, the applicant makes the decision of studying in the institution and once admitted and matriculated, becomes a student. At that moment, the student gets inside the processes

of academic and social integration that Tinto (1987). Social interactions between classmates and teachers, academic performance, and extracurricular activities (usually the ones that involve university wellbeing) have a capital role in accomplishing the previous expectations of the student, and therefore, giving feedback on the three phases that correspond to consumer-based brand equity.

Then, using as antecedents the experienced consequences in the academic and social interaction, the student can make the choice of staying or deserting, which simultaneously generates an emotional link with the brand (brand resonance). If the student's expectations are fulfilled (in other words, is positively reinforced), it can lead to a positive emotional link with the brand. This leads to students' permanence and in consequence, increases the probability of the student recommending the university to other potential students or the student continuing their studies in the same institution after their graduation. On the contrary, if the expectations are not fulfilled, and the social and academic integration have a negative valence, the consequence is interpreted as a punishment, and in consequence, the possible emotional link with the brand will be negative and will increase the risk of desertion and a lower probability of recommending the institution to other people in the future.

After our presentation, we would like to bring some considerations that are necessary for the application and future research using this model.

First, the correlation that was found between brand value and permanence actions, can constitute a relevant element to take into account in the strategies that are designed in the educational institutions and that aim to strengthen student permanence. The inclusion of brand value elements suggests that this type of action can complement educative marketing to consolidate processes of emotional linkage with the brand, and with the expectation, fulfilment to increase student's permanence. Furthermore, finding that positive perception of permanence actions increases the perceived brand value, allows us to recommend that the units or departments in charge of permanence actions use their area names only in the context of internal processes of the institution; in other words, we recommend that the university identity is enforced as a brand, to avoid that the good emotions are linked exclusively to the unit that is offering the service (for example, student welfare office or graduates office).

In the light of the current results, these actions would allow that the meanings and the responses to the brand strength and in consequence, extended to the emotional link that is aimed to create inside the brand resonance proposed here. However, it is necessary to be cautious, given that our results come from a single educative institution. Even when the results are coherent and related to previous research in the field, we suggest that future research must collect samples from more than one institution, to establish if the results can be generalized to other institutions or if they are a particularity of the institution in which the current research was performed. In relationship with the previously said, our sample corresponds with an educative institution in a regional context, the characteristics of the region and the psychodemographic profile of the context may affect the responses and permanence intentions. This would lead to different results in capital cities. This comes from the observations from Palmer et al (2016), who suggest that the social environment in which the university is located, as well as cultural and historical factors, could affect the perception and brand value of the institutions. Accordingly, we suggest that future studies consider other actors of the institutions that could provide a wider view of the importance of the brand value in the students' permanence, for example, parents, deserter students, absent students, and graduated students.

Our research used a non-probabilistic, convenience-based sampling in a single educative institution; however, the obtained results are far from being a marketing study for the participating institution. On the contrary, this research provides general aspects found in other universities around the world (brand identity, internationalization processes, social and academic integration, meaning and responses associated with the brand value, permanence intention, and probability of recommending the institution to external people). As a general conclusion, the observation that our results coincide with the result of previous research can provide solid support of the conceptual contribution of the present research to the strategies of student permanence in superior education institutions and, can be used also as theoretical grounding to study retention from an institutional perspective that helps to provide feedback the educational service constantly, to fulfil and satisfy specific needs and expectations from their users.

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