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## **CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY IN PORTUGAL: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

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**Abstract:** This study, based on the scientific domains of Consumer Behavior (decision-making process) and Brand Reputation perception, aims to check if Tourism is the key influencer or only a part of the set of components in the choice of a university in Portugal. The marketing mix (4 Ps) was the strategy chosen for the construction of the model and the parametric tests and the Logit Model are the statistical approaches suggested in this study. The limitations lie in the scarce literature on the subject and difficulty to access Academic Tourism data in Portugal and its economic representativeness. This knowledge will define the real factors involving choosing a university abroad and complete the literature with a Portuguese experience. The practical result is to present a strategic marketing guide for companies aiming at working with academic tourism, a booming segment in recent years.

**Key-words:** University, Marketing Mix, Foreign Student, Tourism.

## 1. THEME AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Academic Tourism is the matching of a student who leaves their country with the purpose of studying (Taylor, Shanka and Pope, 2006), and a University, one of the most significant service industries that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Mazzarol, 1998); It is a source of revenue and makes a significant contribution to local economy as well as to the host University (Llewlynn-Smith, McCabe, 2008).

The academic importance of this study is to elucidate if tourism is a decisive factor in the choice of a University abroad or just one of its influencers, as well as launch Portugal in the global Academic tourism literature circuit. The practical contribution lays in applying Marketing strategies to both segments, Academic and Tourism, to get an efficient Communication to the audience, enabling thus to attract and get more revenue from the foreign students segment. It benefits all the society: the University, with greater financial funds, has greater breadth to researches and scientific discoveries in all areas; a country with a higher amount of money circulating can enhance its development and sustainability.

Portugal, which has been going through a period of economic crisis, is a country outside the context that some authors as Crick (1989) and Perkins and

Torns (2001) refer to by using the S's in the representations of Tourism (Sand, Sun, Sea, Surf, and Sex). This country was chosen to propose a practical model of performance in the segment of Academic Tourism to all countries wishing to act aggressively in this market, despite not having the natural attributes and the strong economy of the great players in the current Market (USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand - Shanka, Quintal, Taylor, 2005).

This study aims at setting a link between the scientific domains of Consumer Behavior and Brand Reputation perception in the decision-making process of a foreign student while choosing a University in Portugal.

The research problem is to determine which are the main factors taken into consideration in the choice of a Portuguese University by the foreign student; if the tourism of the host country has more impact than others or if it is just another item considered by the students.

## 2. BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

The University, whose core business is provide Educational Services, will be analyzed in an economic perspective as a company which has to attract customers to its business as any other company does in the market; country is a physical place where the University develops its business. In this classification, the Marketing Mix approach was the chosen strategy to analyze which are the most important variables in the attraction of foreign students to Portugal and what weight Tourism carries in this choice.

Yoo, Dontho & Lee (2000), describe marketing mix as marketing efforts; Borden, (1984), discusses the topic as a mix of ingredients, a list of important elements or forces that compose marketing in the formulation of successful strategies; Marketing mix refers to the mixture of elements useful in pursuing a certain market response (Waterschoot, Bulte, 1992).

This study will focus on 4 Ps instead of 7 Ps singled out in the marketing literature, in order to simplify our study.

While referring to goods, the product is the primary brand, whereas in services, the company is the primary brand (Berry, 2000). When a foreign candidate chooses a college he/she does not have the complete set of information that the regular students have; it is what Berry (2000) considers an 'invisible purchase'; the student has to choose something intangible, far from his/her place of origin, just by the image formed in the search process.

Brand Awareness relates to brand recall and recognition performance by consumers (Keller, 1993) and is a guarantee of superior quality (Popescu, 2012). Brand recognition is the Association that the consumer establishes between University and its pattern of quality as well as its reputation.

Reputation deals with the image of the University and is pointed as a perception of quality (Popescu, 2012). It is also considered a strong variable of interest that can impact in the students' decision-making process and promotes

the Universities in order to attract international students (Montgomery, 2002; Mazzarol, 1998; Shanka, Quintal, Taylor, 2006; Moogan, 2011).

Preference of the consumer is composed by the association of brand attributes with total utilities of a product; the consumer selects the product that maximizes his/her utility (Cooper and Inoue, 1996). In this context we propose to test the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1. Brand awareness influences the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

A consumer first examines the values of several brands on a particular attribute, then selects another attribute and compares it within a range of several brands again and again, until his list of attributes is finished (Bettman, Parkc, 1986).

In the literature reviewed, the variables "Social Environment" or "Atmosphere" (Shanka, Quintal, Taylor, 2006; Vengesayi, 2003; Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe, 2008; Moogan, Baron, Harris, 1999) are measured through questions referring to "social interaction", "meeting new people" and "social relationship". "Courses Program", in its turn, is represented by "quality and availability of courses and programs", "opportunities not offered in the country of origin of student", "accreditation", "reputation", and "certification of the course and learning" (Mazzarol, 1998; Vengesayi, 2003; Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe, 2008; Moogan, Baron, Harris, 1999). Those are classified as attributes of the university, push factors and/or pull Factors. The hypothesis to be tested is:

*Hypothesis 2. University attributes influence the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

In the University, some variables have more impact than other, as it seems to be the case of tuition (Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2006; Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe, 2008; Montgomery, 2002; Mehboob, Shah and Butto, 2012).

Price is one of the ingredients of marketing mix and exerts great influence on the process of buying a product or service. Depending on the value and importance of the item to be purchased, consumers will spend effort and time on the decision-making process (Sirivasan, Murthi, 1999). Therefore, price involves the influence that it exerts in the purchase and its notion of perceived value. In this point the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 3: The University tuition influences the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

In order to create Marketing strategies, we must know what is on people's minds regarding the place so as to emphasize that image and which images and emotions are evoked by the target (Morgan and Xu, 2009), this knowledge will add a competitive edge for the University and stresses the importance of Academic

Tourism as a segment that contributes to a country's economy: housing, food, clothing, tourism, cultural events, etc.

The choice involves whether students should study abroad, in which country and in which institution (Smith and Pitts, 2010). The final decision depends on the relevance of the institutions (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000) and this can be enhanced by a combination of competitiveness (linked to the economic prosperity of the residents of the country) and the attractiveness found in the destination, vital element in the whole of all tourism process (Richards, 2002) and related to reputation-image-perceived cost of the experience (Vengesai, 2003;). The images of the destination play an important role in the decision-making process of the tourist (Rodrigues, Quelhas Brito, 2009)

As this study intends to insert Portugal into the circuit of the literature on academic tourism and this is a country that does not have the appeals of S's offered by the leaders in this segment (sand, sea, surf, sex), the variables analyzed will be: Culture, measured by the questions regarding cultural attractions, people of the country, learning about the country, knowing a new culture and eventual future gains that might come from this learning experience (Llewellyn, McCabe, 2008; Morgan and Xu, 2009); Language is important to attract students who want to maintain, learn or improve a new language, and do business with countries using the language learned (Llewellyn, McCabe, 2008; Moogan, Baron, Harris, 1999). Economy deals with quality of life, infrastructure (Tinsley, Lynch, 2001), reputation of the country, good social and human development indicators (Vinhas, 2013). Tourism contains natural scenery, lifestyle, desire to travel, international touristic images, tourism infrastructure, price and climate of country (Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008; Morgan and Xu, 2009). In this context, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 4. The Place/Country of the University influences the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

The student who intends to study abroad already knows that he/she will face adverse situations and a large financial impact. The purchase of the educational service, a long/medium term project, 4 to 5 years away from their country of origin, presents an increased risk.

Information search is a necessary condition for rational decision making in mainstream economics, especially when the decision is associated with high financial or psychological risks (Menon, Saiti, Socratous, 2007). In the purchase of products or services, consumers try to avoid or reduce the alternatives of high risk perceived by undertaking further efforts in the decision-making process through of opinions of others, looking for increased options searches, giving preference to well-known brands with good reputation (Mello, Leão, Neto, 2005).

Promotion involves all forms of communicating a product or service to the market/consumer. The literature points out Institutional Advertisement, Mass Media Communication, and WOM Communication as important influencers in the choice process made by the foreign student.

The student's first contact with the University is usually through Communication from the Media/Market or from the University Institutional Communication via prospectus or website with information about the entrance requirements and photos of the University in general with the list of courses offered (Moogan, Baron and Harris, 1999) as well as Advertising and Promotion material (Mazzarol, 1998), where the position of the university in several rankings is stated (Long, 2003; Cantwell, Luca, Lee, 2009), which is directly related to "Brand Reputation" and "Accreditation", to how it is perceived by the market and how important those factors are to the student's final choice.

Institutional Communication from Universities in Educational fairs, communication vehicles and dedicated websites encourage local players to go regional or global (Henderson, 2004). Advertisement proves to be a good vehicle for educational marketers to communicate a good image and build strong brand recognition among students in an effective way (Mehboob, Shah, Bhutto, 2012). Therefore, some hypotheses to be tested are:

*Hypothesis 5. Promotion made via Institutional Communication influences the choice of a University by a foreign student;*

*Hypothesis 6: Promotion made via Mass Communication influences the University choice;*

Opinion about the image of a given product is formed by Word-of-Mouth (WOM) past experience and marketing activities (Lam, Ariffin, Ahmad, 2011). The reference group appears as an important source of information. Here we can consider it as WOM Communication, where the opinion of leaders (family, friends or significant others) can influence the student in his/her decision process (Moogan, 2011; Michael, Armstrong, King, 2003; Moogan, Baron, Harris, 1999; Shanka, Quintas, Taylor, 2005).

The WOM, as spoken above, is pointed out in the literature as a way to reduce the perceived risk in choosing (Mello, Leão, Neto, 2005; Menon, Saiti, Socratous, 2007) and is a strong influencer in the final decision (Lam, Ariffin, Ahmad, 2011; Michael, Armstrong, King, 2003). WOW activity is often high preceding a customers' choice of a doctor, attorney, automobile mechanic or college professor (Berry and Parasuarama, 1991). With this information we develop the hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 7. Worth-of-Mouth Communication influences the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

In our model, the student is contextualized as a customer of the University. Students often pay Universities for education, services and ultimately their degrees (Ivy, 2008 in Musa, Trapp, Girard, Boyt, 2011) and it is important to analyze his/her socio-demographic background, whose components could include items such as gender, age, income, major and country of origin (Srinivasan, Murthi,



1999; Montgomery, 2002). Besides that, the student in his/her personal profile has Academic and Tourism expectations, or can have some Ancestry influence. All these elements are described below:

Better educated consumers are more likely to engage in evaluation or extended evaluation during their decision-making process (Srivasan, Murthi, 1999); Gender and socioeconomic status, occupation and educational level of the students and their parents impact on the final decision (Menon, Saiti, Socratous, 2007). Student social demographic background is important to identify the target audience of those who are applying for Academic opportunities abroad in this research, as well as to have the updated information about this segment. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*Hypothesis 8. Socio demographic context influences the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

The student has Tourism/Social Expectations (Menon, Saiti, Socrates, 2007; Gonzáles, Mezanza, Mariel, 2011). They make up for about 20% of international travelers and this number has been increasing dramatically. In the category “Study First” or in the category “Tourist First”, Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) argue that both constitute a valuable market for hosting countries and universities. Then, the hypotheses below are proposed to be tested:

*Hypothesis 9. The Academic Expectations of the student ultimately influence the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

*Hypothesis 10. The Tourism Expectations of the student influence the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

Portugal has gone through several periods of emigration, with large contingent of Portuguese citizens today in different continents. McCain and Ray (2003), describe Heritage Tourists as those who have a personal connection with their heritage beyond a general relationship of collective ancestry; they also indicate the lack of marketing strategies for this market niche. Such factors lead us to the hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 11. The Heritage of the foreign student influences the choice of a University by the foreign student;*

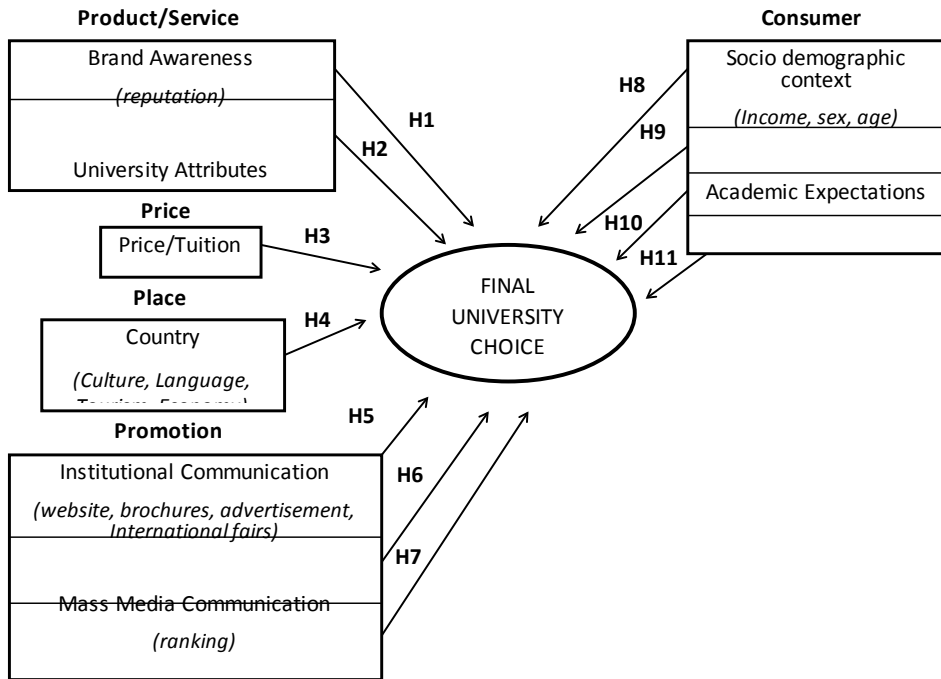


Figure 1: Conceptual model

The variables in the rectangles refer to concrete issues and Likert scales will be used to rank agreement and/or importance of the variables; the dependent variable is in the circle, though it results of analysis of the data of others must be weighed in.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

The study will start with a descriptive study in order to give a clear picture of the phenomenon before the data collection (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009) and an exploratory study are carried out, in order to generate demand for new insights (Saunders, Lewis and Thornill, 2009) using the quantitative approach.

Ordinary Logit model will be used in order to estimate the different weights of the dependent variables expressed in a Likert scale, while binary Logit regression will be used to identify the most important variables that explain the choice for the university abroad.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The instruments used will be firstly a thorough revision of the literature for the meta-analysis and later a 7 Likert-style rating scale with a closed standardized questions questionnaire delivered to foreign students enrolled in a Portuguese University, using a random sample for inferential reasons, asking about the motivation for the candidate having made his/her College choice. The questions use variables obtained in the underlying theory and start with filter questions to classify the demographic data from the respondent followed by questions whose answers will be divided in categories from '1. strongly disagree' to '7. strongly agree'. This procedure aims to validate the questions across variables from literature review, with some "check questions included" to test its reliability probably by 'alternative form' or other method to verify the internal consistency. It will be self-administered by internet to ensure that the respondent who will complete it is a target member, what improves the reliability of data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). The possibility to generalize the study for a wider population of foreign university candidates in the same universities and countries is heavily based on the random sample.

## 4. LIMITATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The limitations involve the impossibility to get a random sample, the scarce data from Portugal in Academic Tourism literature and the number of participating universities in the survey.

The academic contributions are to introduce Portugal in the Academic Tourism literature, the development of a research model which applies for all countries with or without "Ss" appeals offering a 4Ps study of the theme.

The practical contributions are the development of a refined marketing mix by the companies involved to attract more students (Mello, Leão and Souza Neto, 2005; Vrontis, Thrasson, Melanthiou, 2007) and that the conclusions of this study could be expanded to all players in this segment as Airlines or Travel Agencies in order to better promote and support this market (Taylor, Shanka, Pope, 2004);

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