The Impact of a Positive Visualisation Course in Brand Identity on Freshmen Students' Perceptions of University Brand Image

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Abstract
With the rapid commercialisation of higher education (HE) and universities' growing competition over recruiting students, branding is becoming increasingly important for HE institutes. Despite the continuous emphasis on its significance, understanding university branding has received little scholarly attention. Therefore, in order to address this gap, this study examined the impact of a positive visualisation course in brand identity on students' perceptions of university brand image. Employing grounded theory along with an experimental design, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 42 freshmen students of the European University Cyprus. The research findings indicated that the positive visualisation course in brand identity can enhance students' perceptions of their university's brand image. This study contributes to the existing literature by presenting an inductively generated theoretical model that can guide future research on the associations between a positive visualisation course in brand identity and (prospective) students' perceptions of a university's brand image.

Introduction

In the shifting business environment of higher education (HE), branding has become a driver of university success (Robert et al., 2014). Combatting declining enrolment numbers, increasing competition, creating an empowering image and bolstering financial resources represent the principal motivations of branding in HE (Koris et al., 2014; Rutter et al., 2017; Williams & Omar, 2014). Students are increasingly treated as customers, and marketing professionals use various marketing tools and techniques because the competition for recruiting these customers is fierce. Such tools include loyalty schemes (e.g., retaining students in postgraduate programmes), conversion plans (e.g., turning applicants into students) and word-of-mouth (WOM) techniques (e.g., influencing peers to join) (Chapleo, 2015; Manzoor et al., 2020; Rutter et al., 2017). Along with these methods, as a powerful and effective tool, branding in HE has also received considerable attention in recent years by many scholars. For example, Farhat et al. (2020) explored how brand experience creates brand engagement. Dean et al. (2016) and Yu et al. (2016) examined the benefits of internal branding in the university context. Last but not least, Zhu (2019) and Peruta and Shields (2018) investigated the role of social media engagement in international student recruitment

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and the strategic role of content marketing in improving such social media engagement respectively.

Despite their valuable insights, existing studies do not offer an in-depth understanding of how marketing strategies can impact students' perceptions of a university's brand image. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring whether and how a 'positive visualisation course in brand identity' can influence freshmen students' perceptions of the university brand image. To be more specific, a positive visualisation course in brand identity means presenting a brand's history, past achievements, recognitions, awards, values and mission. Addressing the above-mentioned gap is vital because it can help a) advance our theoretical understanding of the impact of such tool on brand image and b) enhance HE institutes' competitiveness in recruiting and retaining students.

By drawing on insights from the literature on the role of a positive visualisation course in brand identity in students' perceptions of a university's brand image (e.g., Bosch et al., 2006; Hulten, 2017; Ward et al., 2020), this study contributes to theory by developing an inductive conceptual model (referred to as the formation of perception - FOP). The FOP model shows how freshmen students formulate a perception of university brand image, the factors that influence this perception and the impact of the positive visualisation course in brand identity. With regard to managerial implications, this model provides university marketing and recruitment managers with a useful and practical toolkit to manage students' perceptions of the university brand image.

The paper is organised as follows. First, a review of the literature on branding in HE is presented. Then, the research setting and methodology are explained. Next, the findings are presented. Finally, the theoretical and managerial contributions are discussed before outlining the limitations of the study and implications for future research.

Literature Review

Branding in HE has received considerable attention in recent years, due to its positive influence on students' willingness to enrol (Aghaz et al., 2015). Branding is a profound term used extensively in the world of business and marketing, although it is considered a relatively new concept in the HE sector (Amzat & Yusuf, 2016). Zhang (2015) defines brand image as the consumers' general perceptions and feelings regarding a given brand, which can influence their behaviour. Alcaide-Pulido et al. (2017) state that a university's brand image derives from the positive or negative perceptions students have of their university. In addition to this, Hulten (2017) and Ward et al. (2020) strongly believe that perception is an important element that must be considered during the branding process. Indeed, brand image is most often defined as consumer perceptions of a particular brand.

Brand identity, brand image and brand perception also have a notable relationship. Wu et al. (2019) suggest that for well-established brands, both brand image and brand identity are essential. Dehdashti et al. (2012) identify that a well-developed brand identity can influence individual perceptions of the brand. In addition, for Yo et al. (2017), brand identity is essential for the development of a bond between a company and its customers. As far as universities are concerned, their brand identity depends on how it is perceived by different stakeholders (Eldegwy et al., 2018). Hence, marketing managers should provide relevant information to affect individuals' perceptions of the brand image. In the creation of a positive brand image, the target audience should receive appropriate communications from marketers (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019).

Branding is the top priority for marketing management department since it has become apparent that brands are one of the most valuable intangible assets that firms have (Alcaide-

Pulido et al., 2017; Wæraas, A & Solbakk, 2008). Building an effective brand image has several benefits. First, it motivates prospective students to apply to the university. Additionally, it allows universities to increase their market shares, which leads to profitability. Being a well-recognised university with a preeminent and unparalleled brand image yields higher enrolment rate and brings about higher levels of students' satisfaction and loyalty (Rutter et al., 2017, Manzoor et al., 2020). The students' positive perception of the university brand image will positively affect the WOM (Herold et al., 2017).

Likewise, Mukhtar et al. (2015) emphasise that student satisfaction can have a positive impact on students' perceptions of the university. Student satisfaction levels are closely linked to the students' quality of experience, as well as the performance of the universities when providing educational services. Students who are not entirely pleased are more likely to terminate their studies with the selected university. Hence, students' satisfaction leads to a decrease in student attrition (Al-Sheeb et al., 2018). Student satisfaction has proven to be even more pivotal in terms of freshmen students' experience, which can determine student satisfaction and perception of the university (Navarro et al., 2005).

A plethora of studies has been conducted to identify the factors influencing students' perceptions. Panda et al. (2019) suggest that brand image can be greatly affected by the overall image of the university, the teaching and quality of education, environmental factors, financial factors and sports programmes. Alhaza et al. (2021) concluded that the students' perceptions can be affected by GPA, academic services, administrative services, IT services and student services. According to Zhang et al. (2019), the role of advisors is a determining factor that affects students' perceptions. Furthermore, faculty play a central role in driving students' satisfaction and their overall perceptions of the university brand image (Alhazmi, 2020; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016). Additionally, Gibson (2010) points out nine factors in this regard, namely academic staff/teaching, classes/curriculum, advising support, skills developed by students, preparation for future, service/facilities, social integration, student centeredness/responsiveness and pre-enrolment factors. Furthermore, Karna and Julin (2015), Hysi and Shyle (2015) and Schmidt et al. (2017) indicate that the facilities have a leading role in students' perceptions and satisfaction. Sriyalatha (2019) suggests that image can affect the level of satisfaction and, as a result, students' perceptions. Lastly, William and Omar (2014) emphasise that students tend to perceive the university's image in relation to other universities.

Research Setting and Methodology

Over the years, the education sector in Cyprus has flourished, making it a key area that the country's government is determined to further promote. Universities compete to introduce new programmes and attract more students. Founded in 1989, the University of Cyprus was the first HE institution in Cyprus. Today, the landscape is completely different, featuring eight fast-growing universities, five of which are private. The number of students has increased by more than 80% in the past decade, reaching 47,000 in 2018. In the past five years, the number of international students studying in Cyprus has almost tripled, with students representing more than 60 countries. Undoubtedly, this influx has contributed to the country's transformation into a globally respected centre of education (Busfield, 2020; Siathas, 2020).

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the dearth of knowledge on the topic, grounded theory was used as the main methodology for the study. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that aims to develop a new theory where either there is no pre-existing theory or existing theories do not have the explanatory power to explicate a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This is the case with the present

study because there were no relevant theories to explain how a positive visualisation course in brand identity can affect freshmen students' perceptions of a university brand image. In executing grounded theory, an experimental research design was developed to undertake semi-structured interviews. The rationale for this was to examine the impact of the positive visualisation course in brand identity on freshmen students' perceptions of university brand image. A snowball technique was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling refers to the process during which research participants recruit other participants for the study (Naderifar et al., 2017). In total, 42 students participated in the research, including 25 women and 17 men. A summary of the participants' profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Participants' Profile

Code	Gender	Age	Programme of study	Experimental /Control group
1	Female	20	Accounting	
10	Male	23		
11	Male	20	Business studies	
12	Female	22		
19	Female	19		
18	Male	19		
21	Female	19	Graphic design	
17	Female	19		
20	Female	19		
22	Female	18	Hospitality and tourism management	
24	Male	19	Music	Experimental group
25	Male	19		
27	Female	21		
26	Female	22	Nursing	
28	Female	20		
29	Female	18		
38	Female	18		
39	Female	19	Physiotherapy	
40	Male	19		
42	Male	19	Sport science	
41	Male	20		
4	Male	24		
7	Male	20		
6	Female	18		
5	Female	22	Biomedical sciences	
2	Male	20		
8	Female	23		
3	Female	19		
9	Male	19	Business economics	
14	Male	20	Computer engineering	
13	Male	19		Control group
15	Male	20	Electrical and electronic engineering	
16	Male	19		
23	Male	19	IT	
30	Female	20		
36	Female	27		
31	Female	19		
32	Female	19	Nutrition and dietetics	
35	Female	21		
34	Female	24		
37	Female	19		
33	Female	21		

Participants were divided into two groups (an experimental group and a control group) based on their programme of study. The participants of the experimental group attended the positive visualisation course, whereas participants in the control group did not attend the course. A detailed experimental procedure is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. The Experiment

		Experimental group The participants of the experimental group attended the positive visualisation course in brand identity.	Control group The participants of the control group did NOT attend the positive visualisation course in brand identity.
Stage 1		Pre-course semi-structured interviews	Pre-course semi-structured interviews
Stage 2		Implementation of the course	---
Stage 3		Post-course semi-structured interviews: This stage was comprised of three parts ↓	Post-course semi-structured interviews This stage was comprised of two parts ↓
	Stage 3/part 1	One week after the course	---
	Stage 3/part 2	Four months after the course	Four months after the first interview
	Stage 3/part 3	Eight months after the course	Eight months after the first interview

Stage1: Pre-Course Semi-Structured Interviews

Prior to the implementation of the course, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out to evaluate the students' perception of the university's brand image before attending the positive visualisation course. To this end, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2020. This stage was implemented before the COVID-19 lockdown in Cyprus. All interviews were implemented face-to-face in a private study room.

Stage2: Implementation of the Course

The positive visualisation course in brand identity was conducted with the experimental group only. The course included a presentation of the university's history, value, mission, past achievements, recognitions and awards. Due to the restrictions (e.g., social distancing and absence of face-to-face interactions) imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a 25-minute online presentation was shown to students on 21st March 2020 via the Zoom platform.

Stage3: Post-Course Semi-Structured Interviews

The third stage of the experiment involved post-course semi-structured interviews in the following manner. First, one week after the course, online semi-structured interviews were completed with the participants of the experimental group to identify whether students' perceptions had changed. Then, four months after the course, online semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from both groups. Thirty-six online semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2020. Six participants withdrew from the study prior to attending these interviews. Finally, eight months after the course, online semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from both groups. Following the withdrawal of two further students, thirty-four online semi-structured interviews were carried out in November 2020.

Data was analysed in accordance with the principles of grounded theory. That is, open

coding was used to identify words and ideas appearing in each interview transcript. During the selective coding process, the data was constantly re-evaluated, allowing the researcher to combine the codes and categories into themes. At a subsequent stage, the theoretical codes were used to explain how the substantive codes related to the later form of the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To ensure the accuracy of the analysis, Lincoln and Guba's (1986) proposition was carefully followed, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Ensuring the Credibility of the Study

Research criteria	Actions taken
Credibility (internal validity)	• Respondent validation of interview (Member check) • Data collection and interpretation discussed with other research team members • Use of participant transcripts/abstracts in the emerging theory
Transferability (external validity)	• Thick descriptions
Dependability (reliability)	• Examination of a detailed audit trail by the supervision team
Confirmability	• Examination of a detailed audit trail by the supervision team

Findings

The review of the transcripts yielded five categories of student perceptions of university brand image: (1) negative, (2) no perception, (3) neutral, (4) positive and (5) excellent.

Experimental Group

Figure 1 illustrates freshmen students' perceptions of the university brand image over the experimental period of eight months.
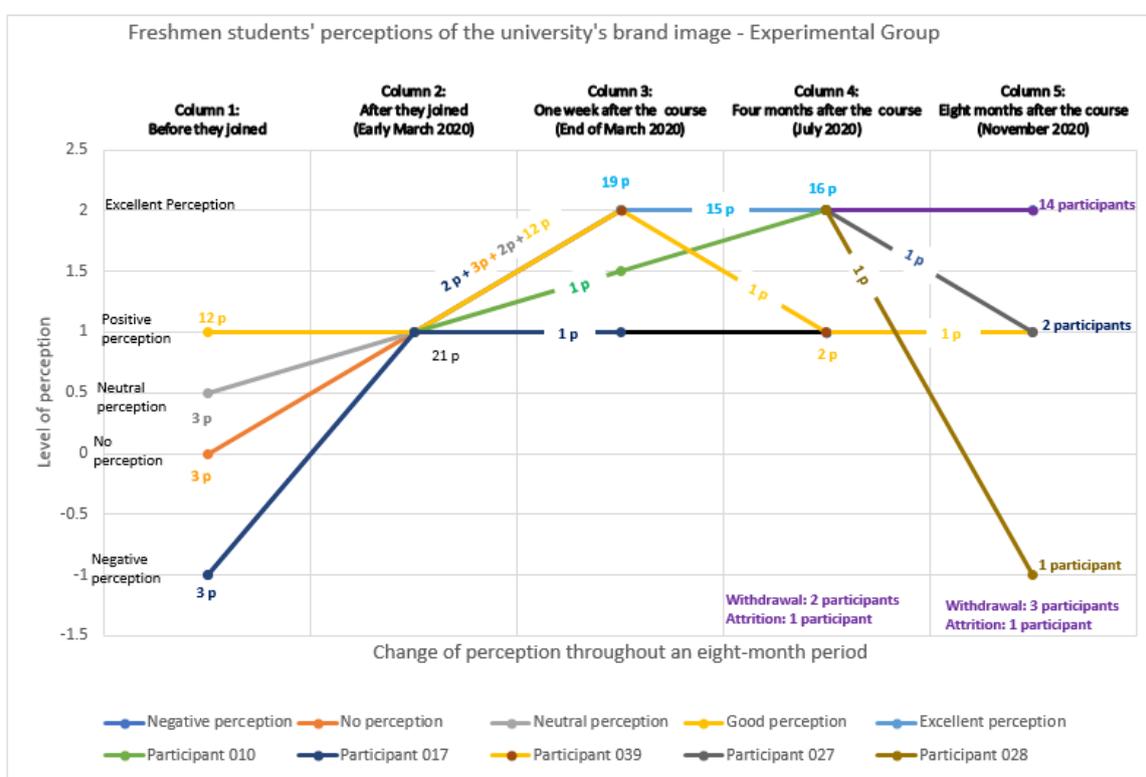

Figure 1. Experimental Group- Freshmen Students' Perceptions of the University Brand Image

Freshmen Students' Perceptions Before Joining the University

The findings show that 14% of the participants in the experimental group (three students) had a negative perception of the university before joining the program. These negative perceptions of European University and other private universities in Cyprus stemmed primarily from the fact that students underestimated the universities level.

> Participant 038: To be honest, before I enrolled, I underestimated its level… I believed that public universities were much better.

Another 14% of participants (three students) had no perception of the university's brand image, a further 14% (three students) had a neutral perception (neither positive nor negative) and 57% (twelve students) had a positive perception, shaped and influenced by other students' feedback.

> Participant 001: I had a positive perception since other students had recommended the university. Therefore, I decided to register.
> Participant 010: From what I heard from other people, I knew it was a respectable university, but I had a neutral perception.
> Participant 021: I had no perception. I liked the course, and so I decided to enrol.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions After Joining the University (Beginning of March 2020, Prior to the COVID-19 Lockdown)

Students' perceptions of the university brand image changed after enrolling in the university and interacting with it. In particular, the initial negative perceptions of three students became positive after exposure to the facilities, the amicable environment and the punctual support they received from professors and advisors.

> Participant 038: When I came here and saw the rankings and how organised it is, I changed my mind. Indeed, students who did not come to the European University now regret it.

The three students who had reported no perception as well as the three students with a neutral perception reported a positive perception after entering the university, reflecting their shift from having no experience with the university to having positive experiences in the university environment. Regarding the 12 students who had a positive perception prior to beginning their study, their perceptions remained stable as they were already aware of what to expect from the university, and the university met their expectations (i.e., modern facilities, welcoming environment and positive staff behaviour in general).

> Participant 001: I am satisfied. The staff is very supportive. I am very pleased with my professors as well. This is a great environment to start your student life.
> Participant 022: My perception is positive. The professors are very professional. The environment is wonderful and very supportive.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions One Week After the Course (End of March 2020, During the COVID-19 Lockdown)

Findings show that students' perceptions were positive one week after the course with only two exceptions (i.e., 19 out of 21 students had positive views). Students whose perceptions changed commented that their perceptions were improved after the completion of the course. Participants were initially unaware of the university's achievements, awards, recognitions and history, and their perceptions improved after receiving the relevant information.

> Participant 038: My perception has changed because I thought that this is a private university and there is nothing special about it. Now, I know that it is not as I thought… My perception has definitely changed; it has been improved.
>
> Participant 026: My perception has been improved, going from this to this (hand gestures). To me, this is the best university in Cyprus after everything I have heard.
>
> Interviewer: What are the reasons that would discourage you from recommending the university to other students?
>
> Participant 011: No reasons. The presentation managed to change my entire perception.

Participant 017 stated that their perception was uninfluenced by the course. However, an analysis of the specific interview revealed that the participant had not been completely focused on the presentation, as they were unaware of the university's brand identity.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions Four Months After the Course (July 2020)

Four months after the implementation of the course, 71% of the interviewees (15 students) maintained an excellent perception, 5% of the interviewees maintained a positive perception, while 5% (Participant 039) of them had an excellent perception that underwent a slightly negative change from excellent to positive because the university did not seem to handle the COVID-19 lockdown properly. Conversely, Participant 010 mentioned that their perception slightly improved (excellent perception) because they appreciated the way the university handled the COVID-19 lockdown. Overall, at this stage, 9.5% reported a positive perception, while 76% reported an excellent perception.

> Interviewer: Does your current overall perception differ from the one you had in our previous interview?
>
> Participant 010: I think it is very close; actually, I believe that now it is a bit better after experiencing how the university handled the situation with COVID-19.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions Eight Months After the Course (November 2020)

Eight months after the course, 67% (14 students) of students maintained their excellent perception, while 5% (Participant 039) maintained a positive perception. Additionally, participants 028 and 027 (9.5%) mentioned that their perception was negatively influenced. Hence, students' negative, positive and excellent perceptions were 5%, 9.5% and 67%, respectively.

Participant 028 had a negative perception before joining, which altered to positive after enrolment. After the course, her perception of the university was excellent, and it remained so four months later. Eight months after the course, however, Participant 028 reported a negative perception. The university's refusal to reduce tuition fees for online education was the main factor contributing to this change. It seems that this participant was sensitive to financial concerns, as she commented on financial aspects in every interview and was distressed by the financial situation.

> Participant 028: My initial perception was positive, but now because of the COVID-19 situation, things are more complicated. We do not attend lectures on site, and we do not use the university facilities like air conditioners… most of the lecture rooms remain closed, and therefore the tuition fees should be reduced.

Participant 027 had a positive perception before entering the university, maintained a positive perception after joining, had an excellent perception after the course and maintained

this perception four months after the course despite the occurrence of some problems. Eight months later, however, due to these problems, their perceptions shifted slightly from excellent to positive.

> Participant 027 (four months after the course): I have not received any support with some issues that I have faced… I raised this topic, and nothing was done to help me… I started my practice in the last few months, and although I was told that it is okay to complete it at Larnaka Hospital, I was told that I needed to complete it at the Nicosia Hospital.

> Participant 027 (eight months after the course): I previously had a better perception compared to my current perception; this is because of the circumstances I explained in the previous interview. However, my perception regarding my studies has not changed at all.

> Participant 027: I had an issue with the university, and I did not receive any support at all and was frustrated, but now I am over it. I have a positive perception. I am not saying that the university has low standards, but it should provide students with greater support.

During this stage, it became apparent that Participants 028 and 027 were friends and had discussed the problems they faced. Hence, a social influence was at play, which, as Luan et al. (2017) note, can seriously affect customers' perceptions of a brand.

Control Group

Figure 2 presents freshmen students' perceptions of the university brand image over the experimental period of eight months.
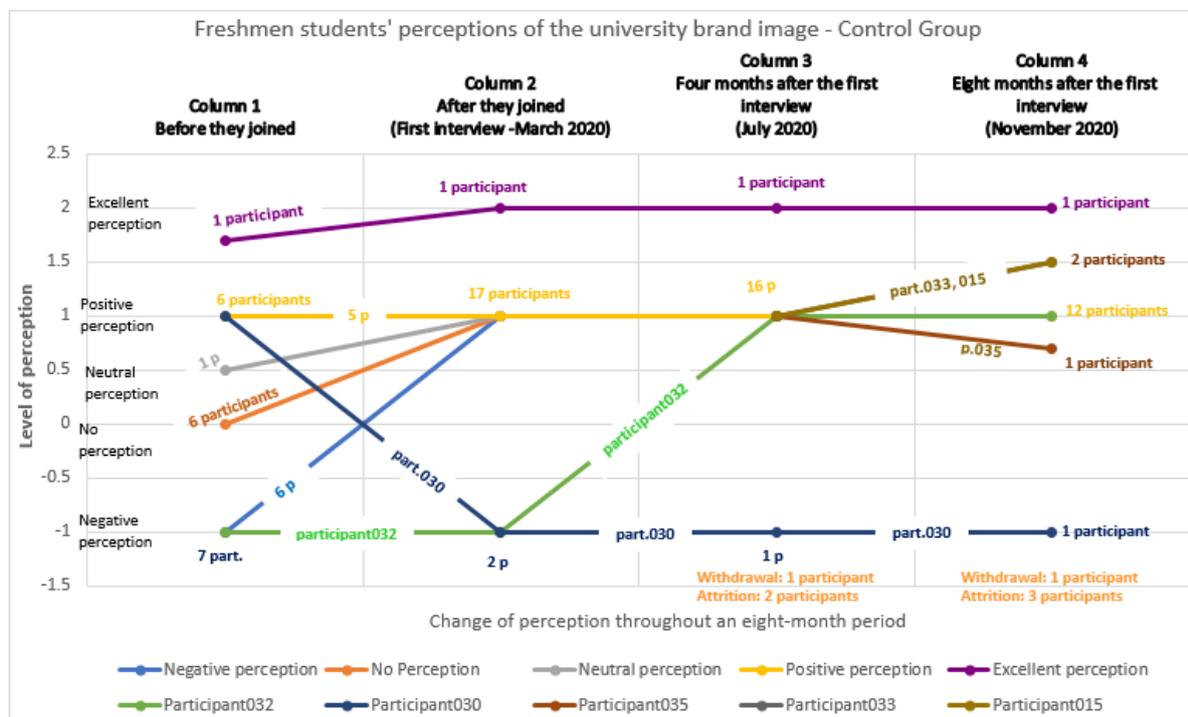

Figure 2. Control Group- Freshmen Students' Perceptions of the University Brand Image

Freshmen Students' Perceptions Before Joining

The results indicate that seven students in the control group had a negative perception prior to enrolment, primarily because they underestimated the standards of the university.

> Participant 036: I had a different perception in mind. I was biased by preconceived notions about the European University, and I was worried because I didn't know if the university could provide us with the appropriate education.
> Participant 033: Basically, before I joined, I had heard some stereotypes about private universities in Cyprus; private universities are underestimated.

Additionally, six students had no perceptual awareness, one student had a neutral perception (neither positive nor negative) and another six students had a positive perception because other students had recommended this university to them. Similarly, one student had an excellent perception (Participant 002) because they were familiar with the university's brand identity.

> Participant 022: To be honest, I did not have any perception in mind.
> Participant 016: I had a positive perception of a good university that would offer us a high level of education.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions After Joining the University (First Interview: March 2020, Prior to the COVID-19 Lockdown)

At this stage of data collection, Participant 002 still had an excellent perception of the university's brand image, firstly due to the university's brand identity, followed by its excellent educational quality, largely up-to-date facilities and communication with both academic and non-academic staff. Among the six students who had a positive perception before they joined the university, five of them stressed that their perception remained constant, while one student (Participant 030) reported a negative perception because they believed that the university was disorganized.

> Participant 030: My perception is not that positive [laughing nervously]. The majority of the teaching staff is very organised, but there are some exceptions.
> Interviewer: What were your expectations before joining the European University?
> Participant 030: Ah, because I studied in the UK, I came with an idea in my mind that the university is very organised. In the UK, I had an application on my phone, and I had a full timetable whereas here they do not have this… For instance, if there were a lecture change, we would know weeks beforehand. I could also see it on the calendar that they had on the application.
> Interviewer: Does the university meet your expectations so far?
> Participant 030: Not really [laughing nervously].

The student who had a neutral perception before joining the university mentioned that their perception became more positive after entering. The six students who reported no perceptual awareness commented that their perception became positive after joining the university. Of the seven students who had a negative perception before joining, six stated that their perception was improved because they had become more familiar with the university, but one student (Participant 032) expressed a negative perception, i.e., they did not like the environment.

> Participant 036: My perception was not positive. I was not aware of the university's level as I did not have a clear image of it. I was worried about its

level, and I didn't know if they could give us the proper academic knowledge, but by getting to know the university better, I realised that it has a respectable level. After entering the university and meeting people, advisors and professors, I realised that everyone is excellent. So, my actual experience was the main factor which managed to change my opinion about the university.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions Four Months After the First Interview (July 2020)

Four months after the first interview, Participant 002 maintained the same excellent perception, 15 other students had consistent positive perceptions, Participant 030 had the same negative view, and Participant 032's negative perception improved. A possible explanation for this change could be that Participant 032 was initially pessimistic. In their second interview, they explained that they were trying to find ways to feel confident and pleasant in the environment since they would spend four years at this university. At this stage of the data collection, 5% of the participants had a negative perception, 76% had a positive perception and 5% had an excellent perception.

> Participant 032: At the beginning, I didn't like it, but after interacting with the university, I really liked it. Initially, my perception was negative.
> Interviewer: What are the factors that managed to change your perception?
> Participant 032: …Since I will spend three more years of my life at this university, I want to be more positive and try to find things that I like about the university.
> Interviewer: Have you noticed anything about the university that managed to affect your perception?
> Participant 032: No, it is something personal.
> Participant031: I have the same positive perception.
> Participant 030: My perception is not good. As I mentioned in the previous interviews, the university is disorganised… especially now due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lectures are held online, and I am not satisfied. Therefore, I have the same negative perception.

Freshmen Students' Perceptions Eight Months After the First Interview (November 2020)

Eight months after the first interview, 12 participants maintained a positive perception. Likewise, Participant 002 maintained an excellent perception, while Participant 030 also maintained their negative perception. Participant 035's perception became slightly negative, whereas Participant 033 and Participant 015's already positive perceptions were further enhanced. Participant 035's opinion changed negatively as a result of the university's handling of the COVID-19 lockdown. In sum, at this stage of the data collection, 5% of the participants had a negative perception, 71% had a positive perception and 5% had an excellent perception.

> Participant 035: My perception was more positive before.
> Interviewer: Would you like to explain to me what influenced your perception?
> Participant 035: We were not properly informed about online courses by the university. Some students received emails about attending lab classes and I realised after registering that I did not have any lab courses this semester. I also had to rent a house, and it wasn't necessary in the end. I just needed proper guidelines.

Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups

The following table offers a comparison of the experimental and control groups over the eight-month study period.

Table 4. Comparison of the Experimental and Control Groups

		Experimental group	Control group
Before joining Students' perceptions of the university brand image	Negative perception	14%	33%
	No perception	14%	28.5%
	Neutral perception	14%	5%
	Positive perception	57%	28.5%
	Excellent perception	0%	5%
After joining Students' perceptions of the university brand image	Negative perception	0%	9.5%
	Positive perception	100%	81%
	Excellent perception	0%	5%
One week after the course Students' perceptions of the university brand image	Negative perception	0%	---
	Positive perception	9.5%	---
	Excellent perception	90.5%	---
Four months after the course Students' perceptions of the university brand image	Negative perception	0%	5%
	Positive perception	9.5%	76%
	Excellent perception	76%	5%
	Attrition	5%	9.5%
	Withdrawal	9.5%	5%
Eight months after the course Students' perceptions of the university brand image	Negative perception	5%	5%
	Positive perception	9.5%	71%
	Excellent perception	67%	5%
	Attrition	5%	14%
	Withdrawal	14%	5%

Students' perceptions of the university's brand image before entering the university varied from negative to excellent. Most participants' perceptions were positively affected after entering the university environment. Notably, the main contributing factors for this change were the pleasant environment, friendly faculty, outstanding teaching methods and the presence of modern facilities. The difference between the groups' perceptions became evident after the experimental group completed the course. In general, it can be concluded that the positive visualisation course succeeded in positively influencing the students' perceptions in all but two cases. (90.5% positively influenced).

Four months later, 76% of the students of the experimental group had an excellent perception and 9.5% had a positive perception. In the control group, 76% of participants held a positive perception, 5% retained an excellent perception and 5% still had a negative perception.

Eight months after the course, 67% of participants in the experimental group maintained their excellent perception, while 9.5% had a positive perception. However, perceptions became negative for 5% of the group. In the control group, 71% retained a positive perception, 5% still held an excellent perception and 5% maintained a negative perception.

Emergent Theoretical Model

The FOP model presented below has been designed to explain how freshmen students formulate a perception of university brand image, the factors that influence this perception and the overall impact of the positive visualisation course in brand identity.
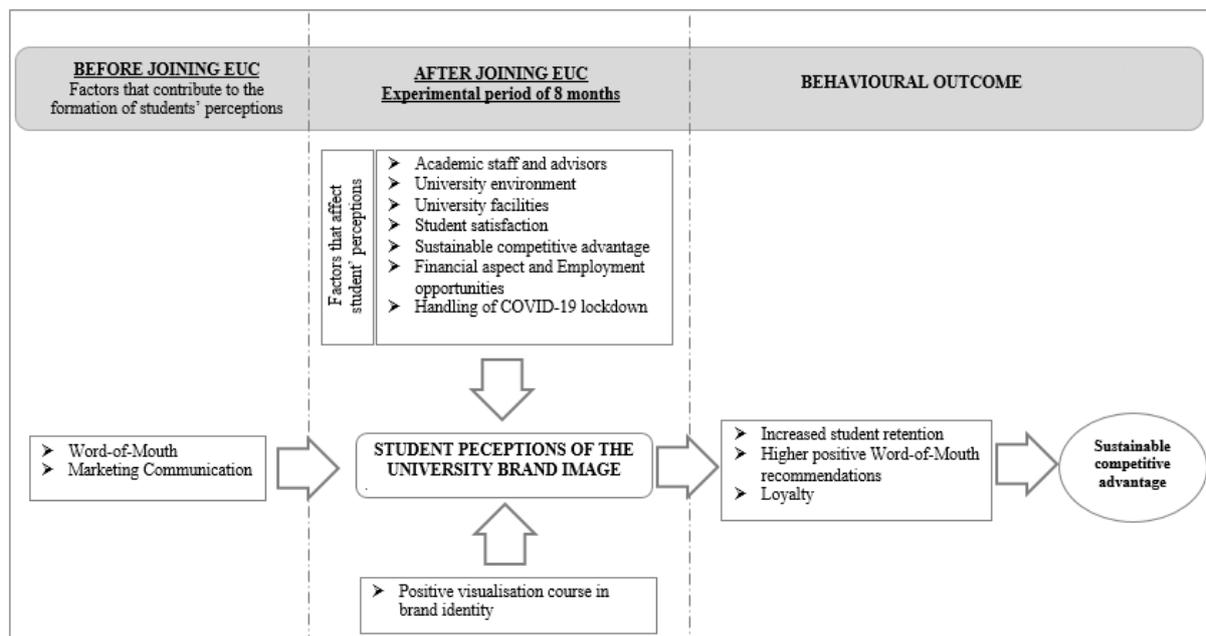
Figure 3. Emergent Theoretical Model - Formation of Perception Model (FOP MODEL)

Formation of Perception Before Student Enrolment

The findings reveal that before students entered the university, they had one of the following perceptions: negative, no perceptual awareness, neutral perception, positive and excellent. The way students formulated their perceptions was affected by either positive/negative WOM or marketing communication activities. Based on the analysis of data, the following categories of perception are presented along with the explanations of how perceptions were formed.

Excellent perception: Intentionally exposed to information related to the university (achievements and awards) and positive WOM.

Positive perception: Marketing communication activities or positive WOM.

Neutral perception: The marketing message did not reach students, students did not pay attention to the message, the marketing message was too weak to allow students to shape a perception or no WOM was identified.

No perception: The marketing message did not reach students, students did not pay attention or WOM had no impact on students' perceptions.

Negative perception: Negative WOM.

Formation of Perception Subsequent to Enrolment and During an Eight-Month Period

After students entered the university, their perception altered either positively or negatively due to the following factors:
- facilities, including the cafeteria, library, labs, sports centre, technology and parking places;
- academic staff and advisors, including professors and advisors' reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, quality of teaching, communication and friendly approach;
- financial aspects/employment opportunities: tuition fees, financial issues and employment opportunities;
- environment, including the university environment, physical environment/buildings, social environment and learning environment;
- sustainable competitive advantage: in comparison with other universities;

- satisfaction in terms of pre-service expectations vs post-service experience; and
- the handling of the COVID-19 lockdown, especially how the university responded to critical related events, for example the transition to online teaching.

Formation of Perceptions After Completing the Positive Visualisation Course in Brand Identity

The findings strongly suggest that perceptions improved among students who attended the positive visualisation course in brand identity. Therefore, the course had a strong impact on freshmen students' perceptions of the university's brand image.

Students' Perceptions of University Brand Image Can Affect Their Behaviour

The findings show that students' overall perceptions can affect their behaviour. Students who attended the positive visualisation course in brand identity were more likely to complete their studies (5% student attrition rate), compared to those who did not attend the course (14% student attrition rate). In addition, students who developed a positive or excellent perception of the university's brand image were more willing to continue their postgraduate studies at the university (loyalty). They were also more inclined to recommend the university to other students (WOM). In contrast, students who formed a negative perception were more likely to terminate their studies at the university and spread negative comments about it.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate whether and how a positive visualisation course in brand identity affects freshmen students' perceptions of university brand image. The study contributes to theory in two ways.

Firstly, it furthers the existing literature by presenting an inductively generated theoretical model (FOP model) which sheds light on the relationship between a brand identity positive visualisation course and freshmen students' perceptions of the university. As already discussed, over the past years, branding in the HE sector has received considerable attention (Chapleo, 2015; Farhat et al., 2020; Manzoor et al., 2020; Rutter et al., 2017). However, attempts to understand freshmen students' perceptions of the university brand image have been scarce. Specifically, the existing literature does not theoretically explain how these students' perceptions of the university brand image can be affected by marketing strategies. By addressing this gap in the literature, this study offers first-hand insights into the students' perception formulation, i.e., how their perceptions about the university brand are formed. The FOP model is significant because it demonstrates how freshmen students formulate a perception of university brand image.

The second contribution concerns the factors that govern students' perceptions of university brand image. The findings advance our understanding of how students formulate perceptions before joining the university, the factors that influence these perceptions over an eight-month period and the influence on their behaviour. Numerous studies have been conducted to determine what influences students' perceptions (Alhaza et al., 2021; Alhazmi, 2020; Panda et al., 2019; Sriyalatha, 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). This study provides up-to-date insights in this regard. More specifically, the empirical results indicated that their perceptions prior to enrolment were affected by positive/negative WOM and/or marketing communication activities. In addition, the following seven factors were found to play a determining role in influencing students' perceptions after entering the university: (1) academic staff and advisors, (2) university environment, (3) university facilities, (4) student satisfaction, (5)

sustainable competitive advantage, (6) financial aspects and employment opportunities and (7) the handling of the COVID-19 lockdown. This study contributes to and expands the existing literature be presenting new insights into freshmen students' perceptions.

In addition to the theoretical contribution, the findings of this research entail relevant managerial implications. Firstly, the FOP model provides universities with a thorough understanding of how freshmen students formulate a perception of university brand image, the factors that influence this perception and the impact of the positive visualisation course in brand identity. By considering the different stages of this model, university marketers can positively influence students' perceptions. Secondly, this study addresses how universities can reduce the student attrition rate and retain their students. The findings suggest that the attrition rate was higher within the participants in the control group who did not attend the course (14%) compared to the attrition rate of the participants in the experimental group (5%) who attended the course. Consequently, the positive visualisation course in brand identity can positively affect freshmen students' perceptions and reduce the attrition rates. Thirdly, the FOP model displays how universities can gain the competitive advantage. As shown in the FOP model, combining the positive visualisation course with the seven factors successfully leads to students' retention, positive WOM and loyalty, all of which provide a competitive advantage. Fourthly, via the course of this research it became apparent that a portion of the students underestimated the university before joining it because of some stereotypical ideologies about private universities being undervalued. For this reason, the university marketers should promote a positive visualisation course in brand identity to the external community in order to influence their perceptions. Lastly, university marketers can benefit from the FOP model since it presents the factors that affect prospective students' perceptions before any interaction with the university (i.e., marketing communication, WOM). Therefore, they can target potential students (high school students) and organise a positive visualisation course to inform them about the university's brand identity.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic arose at an early stage in the experiment and affected the data collection. While the pre-positive visualisation course interviews were conducted face-to-face, the rest of the interviews were carried out virtually. This might have influenced participants' overall mood, feelings and attitude, which might have consequently affected the quality of the participants' responses. In addition, this virtual communication limited the researchers' reading of participants' body language and the interpretation of their responses. Secondly, since eight participants withdrew from the study, the insights that could be potentially derived from more interviews became limited. Thirdly, given the exploratory nature of the study and the fact that the sample size was limited to freshmen students at the European University Cyprus, findings cannot be readily generalised to other HE institutes. Therefore, future research can use deductive methods (both qualitatively and quantitatively) to examine the conceptual model proposed in this study. Besides, it would be interesting to investigate the impact of the positive visualisation course on prospective students (e.g., high school students) to evaluate whether this course can influence their choice of HE institutes.

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