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## **Examining the role of sports practice in the purchasing intention of university branded products – The case of “Lyon 1” (France)**

*S. Champely<sup>1</sup>, B. Lardiere<sup>1</sup>, M. Gaubert<sup>1</sup>, S. Fuchs<sup>1</sup>, N. Chanavat<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>*Cris, Sports, Villeurbanne Cedex, France*

champely@univ-lyon1.fr

# **Background**

As a result of the increased competition within higher education, universities are now considering branding marketing operations (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). In this context, Finch and Clopton's findings (2009) provided several insights into the role of sports in the education branding. France is clearly not at the forefront of these innovations. Yet, at the conjoint request of the President and the students association, a branding marketing survey was launched in January 2010 at Lyon 1 university. The main goal was to determine to what extent students intent to buy university branded products. Lyon 1 has 34'500 registered students located in four different areas. It is a scientific-oriented university including many disciplines and particularly a sports sciences department.

# **Objectives**

The hierarchy of effects model of Lavidge and Steiner (1961) was used. The intention to buy university branded products was predicted using cognitive components (images associated to the university), affective components (attachments to the university and to the university department) and sociological variables. It was assumed that the practice of sports could influence the purchasing intention.

# **Method**

Within the framework of the qualitative stage, students ( $n=50$ ) were asked to develop a list of associations related to the university (cognitive component). A semi-structured design was used for the interviews and each participant was asked the same questions to ensure consistency (Patton, 2002). An inductive analysis resulted in a final list of 25 items.

The internet was used to conduct surveys during the quantitative stage which was favoured for those students with high internet access. From the administrative register of the university a sample frame of 11'382 students with known e-mail addresses was built. The sample size was 2'519 (response rate=22%).

The web questionnaire was tested using 25 interviews and a pilot study ( $n=10$ ). It comprised 56 questions. First, administrative data regarding the students were asked. Second, attachments to the university and to the student department were measured using the multi-items scale of Lacoeyuilhe (2000). Third, the 25 items depicting the image associated to the university were presented. Fourth, reactions to buy and to offer branded product were measured (Spears and Singh, 2004). Fifth, sociological information (e.g. geographical origin or competition sports practice in the university) was determined.

The image items were factor analysed. Intent to buy (Yes/No) was predicted by a logistic binomial model. Independent variables comprised the reduced images items; the two attachment scales and five sociological and university variables. A descending method based on the Akaike's information criterion was used to select the best model. The marginal interest of each retained variable was studied by the likelihood ratio test.

## Results

The image items were reduced to four dimensions: university academic quality (5 items,  $\alpha=0.8$ ), university leisure offer (3 items,  $\alpha =0.81$ ), university within-students relationships (3 items,  $\alpha =0.78$ ) and university size (3 items,  $\alpha =0.6$ ). Four more items were retained by considering the literature: career prospect on graduation, geographical accessibility, allowing student autonomy and university administrative efficiency.

The overall fit of the intent-to-buy model was satisfactory:  $X^2=2203$ ,  $df=2159$ ,  $p=0.25$ . By decreasing order of importance, the corresponding significances were: university department, diploma level, university and department attachment ( $p<0.001$ ), sports practice ( $p=0.005$ ), university size ( $p=0.03$ ) and academic quality ( $p=0.05$ ).

## Discussion

Intent to buy branded products appeared to be highly positively linked to both attachments indicating that the affective aspects of the brand were more important than the cognitive ones.

Considering the university department variable, there were clear differences between all medical courses and the other disciplines. In addition, these students seemed fairly more attached to their own training than to the whole university leading to the idea of a co-branding. Besides, the level of diploma was negatively linked to purchasing intention.

Finally, the respondents practising sports and the sports department students showed more intention to buy. University sport competitions are more prestigious in United States than in France. Nonetheless, communicating about sports represents a fruitful and strategic idea.