

**„Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați**  
**Doctoral School of Social Sciences and Humanities**  
**Doctoral field: Marketing**



## **DOCTORAL THESIS ABSTRACT**

### **Competitive digital marketing strategies in the higher education system**

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## Introduction

In the current context of digitalization and globalization, brand management has gained significant strategic importance for all organizations, including those in the educational sector. The brand is no longer merely a visual identity or a name associated with a product or service; it represents a complex sum of perceptions, emotions, and associated experiences, reflecting the performance and quality delivered. Specifically, in the competitive environment of higher education, where universities compete to attract and retain top students, brand management becomes a key component of digital marketing strategies. As universities face challenges from global competition, the development and implementation of competitive digital marketing strategies are essential for securing a strong position in the educational market. These strategies not only support student recruitment and retention but also contribute to strengthening academic reputation, fostering a sense of belonging among alumni, and improving relationships with all stakeholders involved, from students and parents to partners and local communities.

The academic brand represents the promise of quality and educational excellence, and its effective management requires an integrated strategic approach that includes elements of branding, digital marketing, and communication. In this context, digital marketing strategies are not merely promotional tools but become fundamental pillars in creating and maintaining a strong academic brand. These strategies aim not only to communicate the university's strengths but also to develop long-term relationships with all stakeholders, based on trust and loyalty.

In the context of rapid technological advancement and the digital environment, higher education institutions are facing unprecedented challenges. Although there is extensive theoretical knowledge in the field of digital marketing, a notable gap exists between the theoretical potential and the practical applicability of these concepts within universities. This paper aims to explore and address this very gap, offering concrete solutions for the effective implementation of digital marketing strategies in the academic setting. Despite the remarkable progress in technology and accelerating digitalization, many higher education institutions remain anchored in traditional paradigms. This resistance to change limits the widespread adoption of digital marketing strategies, which are essential for creating and consolidating a distinct and competitive academic brand. This work stems from personal and professional frustration that, although we have access to the necessary tools and knowledge, they have not been implemented on a large scale within the academic environment. Technological progress has radically transformed the educational landscape, redefining how institutions interact with students, faculty, and external partners. The development of technology, from online learning platforms to artificial intelligence and advanced data analytics, has created new opportunities for personalizing education,

streamlining administrative processes, and strengthening relationships with the academic community. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of traditional university marketing strategies and a reorientation toward practices that fully leverage the potential of emerging technologies. The digital environment has become a critical element in building and maintaining the reputation of higher education institutions. With a strong online presence, universities can reach a global audience, attract international students, and create a strong and recognized academic brand. The evolution of the digital environment is not merely a passing trend but a structural shift that redefines the very nature of competitiveness in higher education.

The academic brand is not limited to a university's external image; it includes its values, mission, and societal impact. Resistance to change and the persistence of traditional mindsets represent major obstacles to adopting digital marketing strategies in higher education. Many faculty members and university administrators view digitalization with skepticism, considering it a threat to traditional academic values.

A strong academic brand not only generates a high level of awareness and loyalty among education consumers but also facilitates the creation of solid, long-lasting relationships with all stakeholders, including students, faculty, industry partners, and the international academic community. The evaluation of current and emerging trends in educational marketing, with a focus on integrating digital strategies; the exploration of the unique characteristics of marketing within the context of higher education and how these influence branding strategies; the clarification of the academic brand concept and its importance in the context of education globalization; the detailing of the marketing mix components applicable to higher education and their relationship with brand equity; the development of a rigorous methodology to enable systematic and valid research on the subject; statistical analysis and data interpretation to construct a robust theoretical model; the creation of a multidimensional conceptual model and the testing of its validity through empirical methods; and the application of the proposed model in real digital marketing strategies within higher education institutions, with the aim of optimizing their performance. To achieve these objectives, the paper is based on an extensive review of the specialized literature, employing a comprehensive methodological approach that will include both a critical review of the relevant literature and empirical research, supplemented by a cross-sectional quantitative study.

From a theoretical perspective, the research explores current and emerging trends in digital educational marketing, emphasizing the importance of integrating modern technologies and innovative methodologies in developing effective marketing strategies. The 5P approach (price, product, promotion, place, and personalization) in the context of digital marketing is analyzed in detail to highlight how each element can be adapted to attract and retain students in



a dynamic and competitive educational environment. The paper emphasizes the central role of digital marketing in defining and consolidating academic brands, demonstrating how the strategic use of online platforms and analytical tools can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

Additionally, the study underscores the importance of accurately defining the customer avatar—the ideal student profile—for personalizing marketing messages and optimizing the user experience across all digital channels. Since digital and educational marketing in Romania is a relatively new field, the focus on efficiently integrating these into higher education institutions' strategies has only become more pronounced in recent years. Research in this area began five years ago, driven by the understanding of the importance of defining the customer avatar and utilizing the sales funnel concept to attract and retain students. During this time, there has been growing interest, both at the European and national levels, in adopting advanced digital techniques in marketing strategies aimed at strengthening universities' academic brands.

The specialized literature in the field of educational marketing is diverse, yet there are still no established theoretical models, with many presented in an abstract manner. The first part of the paper addresses essential theoretical aspects related to building a strong academic brand, analyzing the customer avatar, and implementing the specific sales funnel in the educational context. Additionally, modern digital techniques such as the use of social media, SEO, and email marketing are discussed, which contribute to the efficiency of marketing campaigns and the improvement of student experience. These elements are essential for understanding and developing effective marketing strategies that support universities in attracting and retaining students, thereby strengthening their position in the educational market.

On a practical level, the research highlights the necessity of adopting advanced digital marketing techniques to ensure the competitiveness and relevance of higher education institutions in today's digital landscape. The effective implementation of these strategies can lead to better capitalization of institutional branding, an increase in enrollment rates, and enhanced student satisfaction. The use of analytics and tracking systems such as Google Analytics, Google Tag Manager, and Google Search Console provides critical data that enables universities to adjust their strategies in real-time, maximizing the impact of their marketing campaigns.

This doctoral thesis aims to clarify a series of essential aspects related to digital and educational marketing, with a focus on how these strategies can influence and shape the success of higher education institutions in Romania. Based on in-depth theoretical research, the study explores current and future trends in digital marketing, analysing the use of advanced technologies such as Big Data, Cloud Computing, and neuromarketing within the educational context. The established objectives and formulated hypotheses aim to assess the extent to which

these theoretical approaches are confirmed by Romania's economic and social realities, while also offering practical solutions for adopting efficient and integrated marketing strategies designed to attract and retain students in an increasingly competitive educational market.

## Structure of the doctoral thesis

In the first chapter, entitled **Conceptual approaches to digital marketing**, I provided a detailed presentation of the concept of university marketing, emphasizing its importance in establishing effective strategies for promoting the educational product. This chapter highlights the need to align all elements of the marketing mix to achieve the objectives of higher education institutions.

I analysed the evolution of digital marketing in the modern educational context, focusing on current and future trends, as well as the necessity of using advanced technologies to attract and retain students connected to the online environment. Thus, higher education institutions are encouraged to adopt an integrated approach, utilizing various channels and digital technologies to promote their brand and respond to the needs of the educational market.

Chapter two, **Educational marketing – realities, trends, and perspectives**, delves deeper into the analysis of educational marketing, exploring the importance of market segmentation and the need to develop educational products and services tailored to the specific needs of students. In this context, I emphasized the functions and capitalization of university branding, highlighting the strategic benefits of a well-thought-out educational marketing strategy. Furthermore, I discussed the diversity and quality of the products and services offered by universities as essential factors for the long-term success of academic institutions.

The third chapter, **The digitalization of university marketing – theoretical and practical perspectives**, focuses on the analysis of essential digital techniques and tools for promoting institutional branding and attracting students. I explored the use of advanced technologies such as neuromarketing and social media data analysis to gain a deep understanding of student behavior and preferences. The case study presented in this chapter, based on the applications Neurosinc and Sociality, demonstrated the impact of using neuromarketing technologies and social data analysis on marketing campaigns, underlining the importance of a holistic and integrated approach in the digital marketing strategy of higher education institutions.

Chapter four, **Evaluating digital marketing strategies in higher education: a dual analytical approach**, offers an in-depth analysis of student engagement through the application of the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method. The research results

indicate that efforts to define institutional branding and performance marketing campaigns positively influence student perceptions and intentions. Moreover, the fsQCA analysis highlights the complexity of institutional success, stressing the importance of adopting specific and tailored strategies for each institution.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the importance of digital and educational marketing in the context of higher education, highlighting the necessity of adopting integrated strategies and using advanced technologies to attract and retain students. Higher education institutions must fully embrace these trends to remain competitive in the global educational market. Future research should continue to explore the complex relationships between various marketing strategies and institutional success, using advanced methods to develop a deeper understanding of academic performance and effective institutional management.

## **Summary of the Thesis Chapters**

### **Chapter 1 – Conceptual approaches to digital marketing**

In the last decade, digital marketing has become an essential element for companies and institutions, evolving significantly due to the development of a wide range of tools and technologies, such as search engines, social media, email marketing, affiliate and online advertising. At the same time, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality have opened up viable new business opportunities within digital marketing. These technologies have allowed companies to optimize their strategies by using diversified digital channels and specific tactics, adapted to the behavioral changes of consumers, who are becoming increasingly connected to mobile devices. This transition to the predominant use of mobile devices has imposed a major shift in the way companies approach digital marketing, highlighting the importance of creating an optimized experience for users of these devices.

In this chapter, a detailed analysis of the evolution of digital marketing in the context of the technological revolution was carried out, highlighting the importance of data and its analysis to understand consumer behavior and improve marketing strategies. The use of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, allows companies to gain a competitive advantage by personalizing customer experiences and optimizing marketing campaigns based on user behavior. Digital marketing, which emerged with the development of the internet in the 1990s, has evolved rapidly, integrating activities such as search engine optimization (SEO), content marketing, and social media marketing (SMM). This has been driven by technological changes and the increase in internet usage globally, which have made online

marketing an essential component for accessing a wide audience. The use of cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, allows companies to offer personalized and immersive experiences, thus strengthening the relationship with customers.

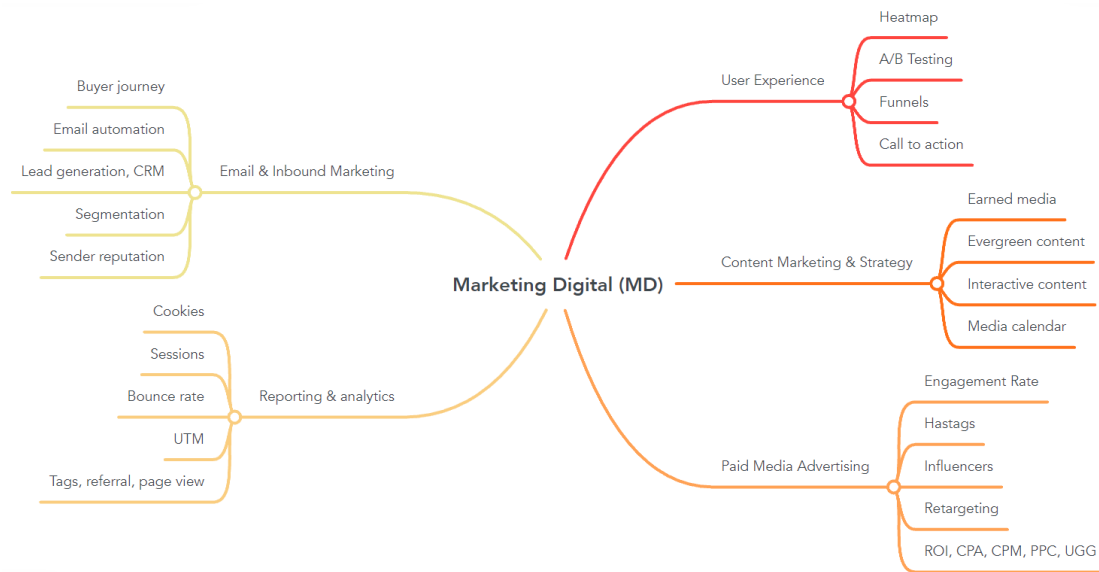
Digital marketing also differentiates itself from traditional marketing by its flexibility and efficiency, giving businesses the ability to accurately measure the impact of campaigns and adjust strategies in real-time. In the educational context, digital marketing plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining students, improving the visibility of higher education institutions and promoting educational programs and services. This continuous evolution of digital marketing emphasizes the importance of adapting to new technological and behavioral trends in order to maintain relevance and competitiveness in the market.

Digital marketing has seen significant growth in recent years, amid technological development and the widespread use of the internet. According to a report by eMarketer, global digital advertising spending exceeded \$389 billion in 2021, marking a 17.9% increase from the previous year. This evolution has been supported by the increase in the use of mobile devices and social networks, leading to a rapid adaptation of digital marketing concepts to new market requirements and technologies.

The essential terms of digital marketing have evolved significantly, reflecting technological changes and consumer behaviour. Since its inception, when "web marketing" and "search engine marketing" (SEM) became fundamental terms, digital marketing has continued to develop, integrating concepts such as "social media marketing" and "content marketing". Social media marketing has become an essential component of digital marketing, using social media channels to create and share relevant content with the aim of attracting and interacting with your target audience. In parallel, content marketing focuses on creating and distributing valuable content to maintain audience interest and generate sales, using tools such as blogs, videos, and infographics.

Current trends point to an increase in influencer promotion, an effective strategy that involves working with public figures to bring specific products or services to the public's attention. Along with this method, other concepts such as search engine optimization and mobile marketing have emerged, all of which focus on creating and promoting content that is relevant to the target audience and using digital channels to reach the widest possible audience.

This rapid evolution of digital marketing underscores the importance for businesses to stay up-to-date with new trends and understand relevant terms to maintain their competitiveness in the market. Classifying terms according to areas such as user experience, content marketing, paid advertising, email marketing and reporting is a must for any digital marketing campaign, in an ever-expanding landscape.



**Figure 1.1. List of terms used in marketing campaigns**

*Source: author's contribution*

Of course, the terms listed above are just an essential selection from the vast vocabulary specific to digital marketing. Although they are not exhaustive, they constitute the fundamental pillars necessary to understand and apply the central concepts discussed in this paper. In this context, these terms are particularly relevant to build a solid theoretical foundation and facilitate an in-depth exploration of digital marketing strategies and tactics to be detailed in subsequent subchapters.

Digital marketing, defined as a complex set of promotion strategies and techniques through digital platforms and online channels, is distinguished by specific characteristics, such as the ability to quantify and control marketing campaigns, thus providing a high level of precision and personalization (Constantinides, 2004). One of the key features of digital marketing is the ability to measure and analyse campaign results in real-time, which allows for quick adjustments to optimize performance (Bonfrer & Drèze, 2009).

Also, the use of data and technology facilitates the personalization of marketing messages, adapting them to the specific preferences and behaviours of consumers. As rapid technological developments require constant updating of marketing strategies to remain effective (Constantinides, 2004), among the advantages of digital marketing is the ability to interact directly with the audience through online channels, thus improving customer relations and brand loyalty. Accessibility is another major benefit, as it allows even businesses with small budgets to create a significant online presence.

As the use of data increases, privacy and ethical concerns are becoming increasingly important. Regulations such as GDPR in Europe and privacy legislation in other regions require

businesses to handle consumer data with transparency and accountability. Ensuring informed consent and protecting personal data are fundamental aspects for maintaining consumer trust.

The concept of marketing is not a new concept since, for thousands of years, production has taken place in artisanal artisan workshops, offering a limited number of products on the market although there was a huge demand for them.



**Figure 1.2. The evolution of the concept of marketing**

*Source: processing after Neetika Sharma - Marketing Concepts and its Evolution*

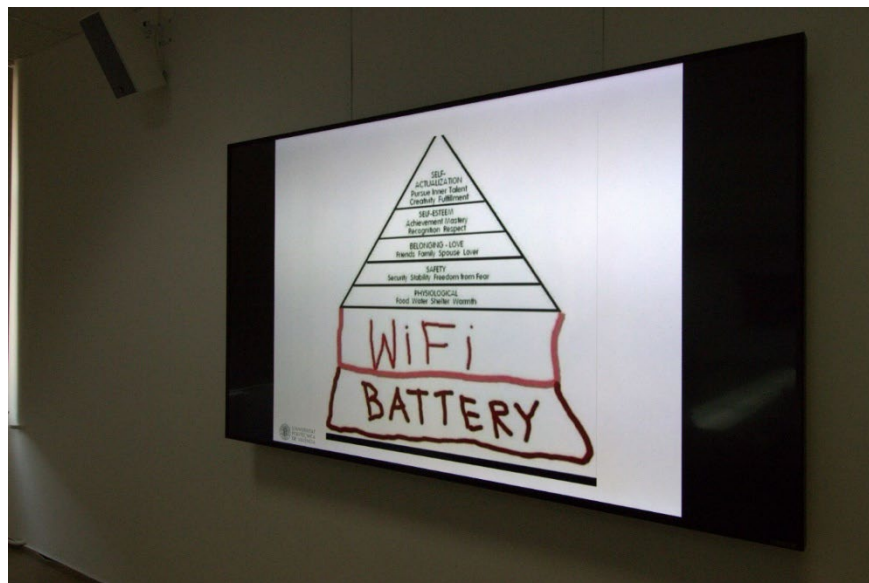
Next, the prospects of digital marketing were highlighted, which have evolved in parallel with technological advancement and consumer involving changes. The use of artificial intelligence and automation has greatly improved the effectiveness of marketing campaigns, allowing for more precise segmentation and personalization of messages (Zaman, 2022). Virtual and augmented reality have also become essential technologies in digital marketing, providing innovative opportunities for showcasing products and creating engaging content.

Partnerships between companies and influencers have gained traction in digital marketing strategies, having a significant impact on the purchasing decisions of consumers, who are often influenced by the recommendations of these content creators (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). These trends reflect the importance of constantly adapting to new technologies and consumer preferences to maintain relevance and success in the digital marketplace. By understanding these benefits and using digital marketing tools and strategies effectively, businesses can improve the performance and effectiveness of marketing campaigns and build stronger relationships with customers, this phenomenon of digital marketing becoming an essential component in modern business strategy, precisely because of these strengths. A study by Hootsuite and We Are Social showed that the number of internet users globally has increased to 4.66 billion, and the trend is upward (Kemp, 2021).

Marketing, although practiced for thousands of years, has evolved significantly since the Industrial Revolution, which created an environment conducive to the development of specialized economic fields. In this context, marketing has been defined and redefined over time, adapting to social and economic changes. Important contributions to the understanding of human behaviour,

essential for marketing, were made by Abraham Maslow, who proposed a hierarchy of human needs, arguing that people are motivated by psychological and cognitive needs, not just mechanical stimuli. Maslow introduced the concept of self-actualization, the stage at which individuals realize their full potential, being aware of both their own abilities and the potential of humanity. However, Maslow's research has been criticized for its lack of scientific rigor, being based on isolated case studies.

In continuation of this line of thought, E. St. Elmo Lewis developed a theoretical model that describes the client journey, based on two main cognitive systems (Mind Architect). These systems learn through repetition and association, forming subcortical structures that influence our behaviour and reactions to positive or negative stimuli. Thus, our brain, learning through repetition and association, creates a status quo that leads us to seek experiences similar to those that brought us pleasure in the past, while avoiding situations that generated discomfort. This primitive learning process, metaphorically referred to as the "Elephant," is responsible for our unconscious reactions to everyday situations. For example, repeated criticism of ideas can generate stress and fear, due to the release of cortisol, the stress hormone, which associates pain with creative effort.



**Figure 1.3. Maslow's hierarchy of needs**

*Source: interpretation by Dr. Pablo Ferreiros Bennett, Seminar on neuromarketing held at FEAA Galati*

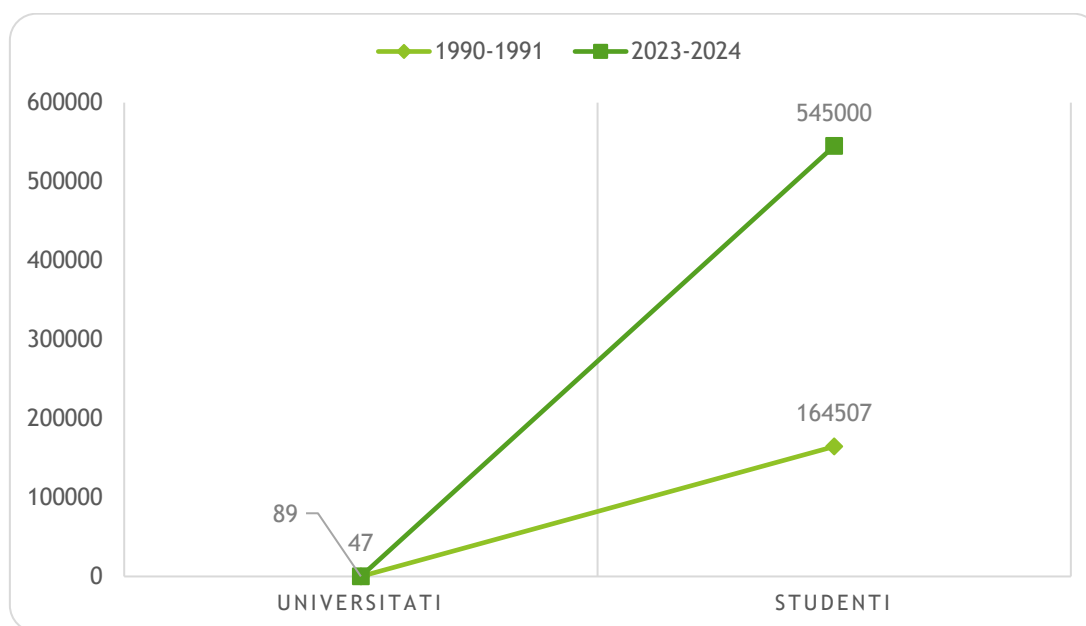
To counteract this effect, it is essential to provide rewards and appreciation not only at the end of a process, but also at each step in between, thus contributing to healthier and more effective motivation. Thus, Maslow's theory needs to be updated to reflect new understandings of how the human brain functions in the context of the demands and challenges of the 21st century.

## The Importance of Digital Marketing in Approaching Educational Marketing

The global higher education market size is estimated at \$736.80 billion in 2023, with a compound annual growth rate of 12.1% projected by 2030, reflecting a growing demand for education worldwide, particularly in countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, and India.

This growth is fuelled by an expanding population and the trend towards continuous learning and development. In the US, the number of students enrolled in higher education reached 19 million in 2023-2024, with over 4000 active higher education institutions. In Romania, the sector has experienced significant growth from 1990, when there were only 47 universities and 164,507 students, to 2023, with 89 higher education institutions and 545,000 students.

This expansion has led to fierce competition between universities as they struggle to attract an increasing number of students.



**Figura 1.4. Evoluția educației superioare în România**

*Sursa: author's contribution*

Educational marketing has distinct particularities, being oriented towards satisfying the needs and expectations of customers in the field of education. To achieve this goal, educational institutions must effectively apply the 5Ps of marketing: product (educational service offered), price, placement (mode of access to educational services), promotion and staff. These elements are essential for the development and optimization of marketing strategies in the educational context.

The evolution of the concept of marketing, which began with the 4Ps proposed by McCarthy in 1960, culminated in the addition of the fifth P's – the staff – in the 1980s, thus



recognizing the importance of the human factor in the process of service delivery. In educational marketing, the 5Ps are critical to build an educational offer that effectively responds to market demands and ensures the success of the institution. The 5Ps are key elements of the marketing mix in the field of education and can be used to develop effective strategies for higher education institutions. An integrated approach, considering all 5Ps, can help increase the competitiveness of higher education institutions and improve the satisfaction of students, employees and other stakeholders.

In this regard, it is important to adapt marketing strategies to the specific needs of higher education institutions and the socio-economic context in which they operate. In addition, it is essential for higher education institutions to assume social responsibility and pay particular attention to the quality of students' education and academic training. By applying marketing principles in the field of education, higher education institutions can strengthen their position in the market and provide quality education that meets the needs and expectations of students and other stakeholders.

## **Chapter 2 - Educational marketing - realities, trends, and perspectives**

This chapter explores the process of marketing higher education, focusing on its current state, the determinants of commercialization, the defining elements of the university brand and how it is perceived and valued by students.

It also emphasizes the role of educational marketing in shaping the profile of the ideal candidate and highlights the benefits of segmenting the educational market, both for attracting the right students and for gaining competitive advantages.

The chapter also analyses the creation of a customer avatar, a semi-fictional character based on demographic, psychographic and behavioural data, which represents the ideal audience segment for the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEAA) in Galati, emphasizing its importance in the digital marketing strategy.

In recent years, the perception and promotion of higher education have undergone significant transformations, with universities becoming not only academic institutions, but also brands that need to actively promote themselves on the educational market. This change has led to the "marketing of education", a process by which institutions adopt marketing strategies similar to those in the commercial sector, in order to attract and retain students.

The concept of educational marketing, developed by authors such as Kotler and Fox, emphasizes the importance of the exchange of values between institutions and target groups, evolving towards a holistic marketing that involves the cooperation of all actors in the educational

process. In this approach, every element of the educational service contributes to the efficiency and value perceived by students. In addition, educational marketing is influenced by both external macro-environment (economic, social, technological) and internal micro-environment (students, graduates, partners). This transformation requires a balance between maintaining traditional academic values and the need to compete effectively in the globalized educational market.

Since the image plays a defining role for the concept of university marketing, it is necessary to review both the main image categories and their components.

- The desired image represents the position that the university would like to have among stakeholders, having different particularities depending on the objectives pursued.
- The real (transmitted) image represents the image that the university transmits to the stakeholder (it goes without saying that there should be no major discrepancies between the desired image and the real one).
- The received image - everyone passes the image through his or her own thinking filter, on this occasion the personal opinion about the institution is also formed, regardless of whether it corresponds to personal needs or not.

The market of a higher education institution is determined by the services or classes of services in a defined geographical space. For example, for the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati (UDJG), the main market is represented by the South-East region of Romania, the Republic of Galati (UDJG). Moldova and Ukraine, being one of the most important higher education institutions in the area.

**Table 2.1. Configurația piețelor în cazul universităților**

Current market	The institution's current market	Related stakeholders	Absolute stakeholders
	Potential market of the institution		
Current specialized market			
Potentially specialized market			

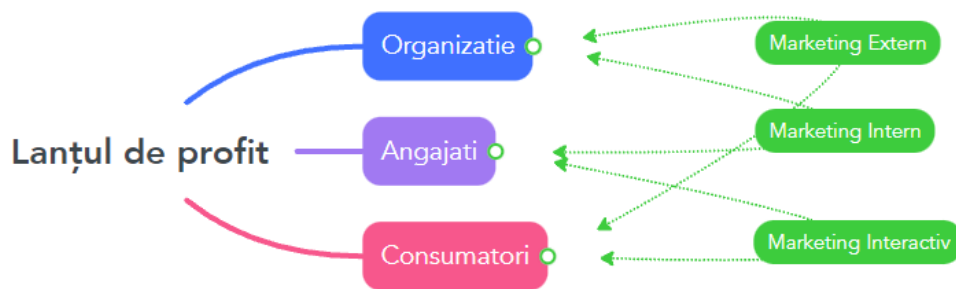
*Source: author's contribution*

Table 2.1. highlights the interaction between the organisation and consumers, as well as the ways in which consumers engage in the work of employees and the organisation, serving as an example to illustrate the degree of congruence mentioned above. The potential market describes the possible audience sizes, extreme limits on which the audience is conceived.

Regardless of the position from which the situation is approached, the market assumes the existence of the following elements specific to the university environment:

- study programs - bachelor's, master's, doctorate, post doctorate, continuing education;
- economic and social framework, location.
- periods - registration, enrollment, admission, etc.;
- payment - fees.

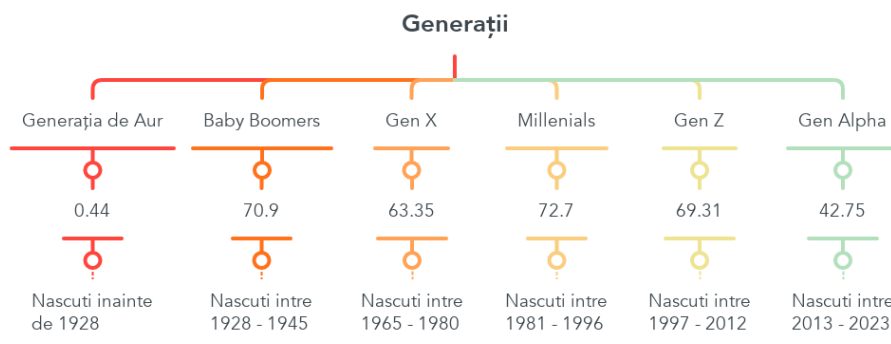
The consumer, especially the student, is central to the process of providing university educational services, being subject to constant mental stimulation. University marketing, based on service marketing, requires a broad and sophisticated approach, which includes the development of solid relationships between all parties involved, thus highlighting the complexity and importance of these interactions.



**Figure 2.1. Services profit chain**

*Source: own contribution, adapted from Kotler and Armstrong*




The rapid development of technology and the advancement of society represent a major challenge for the Romanian education system, which requires continuous adaptation to remain competitive. In Romania, reforms in higher education began in the 90s, and the demand for university programs increased significantly, which led to the expansion and diversification of the educational market. However, the system has not yet reached its peak and requires changes to effectively connect with Generation Z. This generation, characterized by limited attention span and the need for persuasive interactions, can become a powerful ally for universities if they manage to adapt technologically and respond to their real needs, possibly through the use of neuroscience techniques. Thus, the marketing of higher education could turn graduates into brand ambassadors of institutions, strengthening the link between the curriculum and future market demands.



**Figure 2.2. Graph of the difference between generations**  
*Source: processing after Dorsey, 2018*

State universities have so far used traditional promotion techniques, but they require modernization to align with current and future developments. Although digital marketing offers numerous advantages, its adoption by universities has been slow and insufficient to keep up with technological progress. If universities don't ramp up their use of digital marketing, they risk losing their competitive edge. An effective marketing strategy requires not only a good idea, but also proper implementation within the organization.

Next, we have highlighted a series of statistical data and information regarding the way in which universities have used the social media platform, Facebook, in their institutional promotion process. This analysis focuses on the use of the platform by five universities, four in Romania and one in the UK, between 01.01.2024 - 30.06.2024. The analyzed universities are "Dunărea de Jos" in Galați, "Transilvania" in Brașov, de Vest in Timișoara, "Babeș-Bolyai" in Cluj-Napoca and The London School of Economics and Political Science - LSE. The comparative study, conducted with the help of the Sociality.io platform, examines essential parameters for social media marketing, such as the number of fans, published posts, interactions and engagement rate, highlighting the differences and similarities in the way of institutional promotion between these universities.

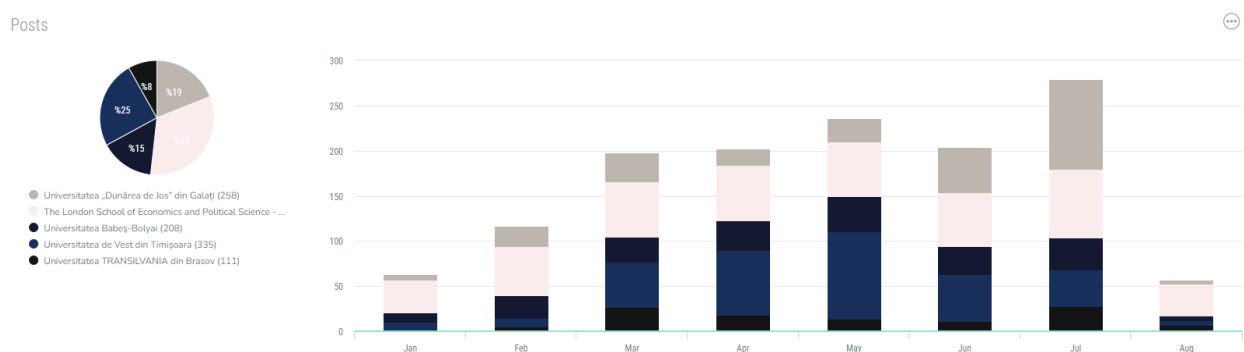
	Fans IT	Fan Growth IT	Posts IT	Total Interactions IT	ER per post IT
 The London School of Economics and Political Science - LSE	686.573	5.328	242	13.785	%0,08
 Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai	73.824	447	131	16.081	%1,67
 Universitatea de Vest din Timișoara	48.856	368	271	17.170	%1,3
 Universitatea TRANSILVANIA din Brașov	45.799	604	70	5.562	%1,75
 Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos” din Galați	39.137	146	126	22.833	%4,64

**Figure 2.3. Fans, posts, and engagement report**  
*Source: Output software sociality.io, author's analysis*

The graph indicates a significant number of monthly posts made by the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati, comparable to The London School of Economics and Political Science - LSE. Although this high frequency suggests a competitive positioning on social media, a deeper analysis of the content of the posts reveals that they do not provide relevant and useful information for the target audience. By reallocating efforts towards creating more focused and relevant content, the University of Galati could significantly improve the impact of its communication and attract a more targeted audience.

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**Figure 2.4. Amount of marketing content published / month**  
 Source: author's contribution

To improve their approach in the digital environment, higher education institutions need to adapt the voice and tone used to address their target audience and avoid using overly academic language that can alienate the audience. It is important that the voice used is adapted to the specifics of the social media channel used and the needs of the target audience. The "Dunărea

de Jos" University of Galati made an error in exposing irrelevant information to the public, which led to an increase in the number of interactions with the posts, but most of them came from employees, friends of employees and collaborators of the university and not from the real target audience. This situation shows that the university needs to review its digital marketing strategy and focus on providing relevant information tailored to the needs of the target audience.

To deal with similar situations, it is necessary to train and prepare specialized marketing personnel. The content must be adapted to each type of audience targeted by the institution. For example:

- Students: informative materials adapted to their needs (admission, accommodation process, curricula and subjects, tutors, extracurricular activities, etc.);
- TESA professors and staff: statistical information about their activities, research reports, positions in international rankings, aspects that can increase their self-esteem, thus encouraging their involvement and dedication in fulfilling the University's mission;
- Collaborators: research reports, student results in various competitions, alumni who can become potential employers, etc.;
- Management: it is necessary for a brand not to remain present only with the title in the digital environment, but also to highlight the fact that it is successfully coordinated by specialists in the positions it is in. A car needs not only the engine to move forward, but also a driver to guide it to the point where it needs to go.

In order to develop effective marketing strategies within universities, it is crucial to deeply understand the needs and preferences of various audiences. In this context, the use of the customer avatar becomes an essential tool. The creation of precise avatars for students, teachers, collaborators and management allows the adaptation of messages and informative materials according to the specifics of each group. For example, the client avatar can guide the development of specific content for students, such as information about admissions and extracurricular activities, or for professors, by highlighting research results and the university's positioning in international rankings. This approach not only optimizes communication, but also increases the involvement and satisfaction of all stakeholders, contributing to the fulfillment of the institution's mission.

The customer avatar is a semi-fictional representation of the ideal customer, created by combining demographic, psychographic and behavioral data, being essential for optimizing marketing strategies. In tourism, this methodology helps to deeply understand customers, facilitating the development of inbound marketing strategies. In the restaurant industry, although less used, the customer avatar allows SMEs to plan marketing campaigns more effectively. In the

automotive sector, the customer avatar is vital for competitiveness in the used car market, involving detailed research to create accurate customer profiles. Digital ethnography and analysis of the buying process are methods proposed to refine customer avatars, contributing to a better understanding of their interactions and preferences. Thus, the use of the customer avatar supports strategic decision-making and improves customer engagement in various industries.

### **Customer avatar creation methodology**

Customer avatar creation is an essential strategic process for defining the ideal customer profile, based on a complex analysis of demographic, psychographic and behavioural data. This process involves gathering information through various methods, such as online surveys, one-on-one interviews, social media data analysis, and feedback from sales teams. After the data is collected, it is synthesized and interpreted to build a coherent profile that includes the client's goals, challenges, and motivations. Validating the avatar through testing campaigns and evaluating feedback ensures its relevance, turning it into a practical tool for customizing and streamlining marketing strategies. This iterative process helps to better align the organization's objectives with the real needs of customers, contributing to the success of marketing campaigns.

In the following, I will structure and break down the activities and needs that a potential FEAA candidate is looking for online:

#### **Demographic**

- Age: 18-25 years old (most undergraduate students);
- Gender: relatively balanced distribution between men and women;
- Location: most of them come from the Galati region, but also from other parts of Romania and internationally (the Erasmus+ program also attracts foreign students).

#### **Educational and professional**

- Level of education: high school graduates (for bachelor's programs), bachelor's graduates (for master's programs);
- Areas of interest: economics, management, finance, marketing, economic informatics, business administration, accounting;
- Career aspirations: management positions, specialists in marketing, finance, economic IT, entrepreneurs, consultants.

### **Behavioural**

- Preferred communication channels: facebook, instagram, tiktok, the official website of the faculty;
- Preferred type of content: social media posts, educational and informative videos, articles about events and career opportunities, information about programs and courses;
- Frequency of interaction: constant activity on social media and on the official website, participation in online and offline events organized by the faculty.

### **Psychographic**

- Interests and hobbies: interest in entrepreneurship, international business, finance and technology, involvement in extracurricular activities and volunteering;
- Lifestyle: passionate about personal and professional development, looking for networking and career growth opportunities;
- Values and motivations: quality education, professional recognition, international career opportunities, the desire to contribute to economic development.

### **Online Attendance Analysis**

- Facebook: the official page is active, providing information about events, admission opportunities and student activities;
- Instagram: frequent posts with images and videos promoting student life at FEAA, events and achievements of students and teachers;
- Tik Tok: used for short and attractive videos showcasing the campus, student activities, and various aspects of the curriculum;
- Website: provides detailed information about bachelor's and master's programs, research opportunities and projects, international relations, and academic collaborations.

Organizational image management in higher education institutions must integrate both the cognitive and affective components of the image, focusing on student satisfaction and loyalty. The customer avatar created for FEAA Galați, based on demographic, psychographic and behavioral data, illustrates the profile of an ambitious young man interested in economic and administrative fields. To maintain the relevance of this avatar, it is essential that it is regularly evaluated and adjusted according to market developments and changes in student preferences. Constant monitoring of online interactions and feedback collected through surveys and interviews allow the avatar to be adjusted, ensuring the effectiveness of marketing strategies. In conclusion, the analysis of higher education marketing emphasizes the importance of a well-defined



educational marketing strategy that meets the needs of the market and optimizes the products and services offered by universities.

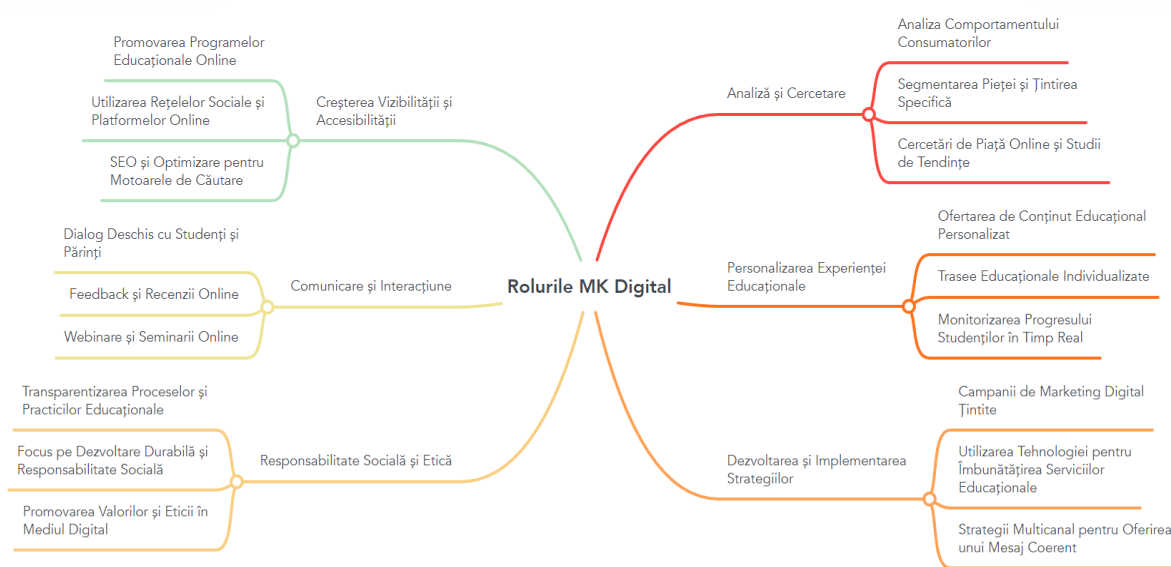
### **Chapter 3 - Digitalization of university marketing – theoretical and practical perspectives**

Chapter 3 clearly emphasizes that the digitization of university marketing is not just a temporary trend but has become an essential component of modern institutional strategies in higher education. In an increasingly competitive and globalized educational environment, the adoption of advanced technologies and digital analytics tools is no longer optional, but imperative for the long-term success of universities. These technologies allow for a much more nuanced and detailed understanding of student behavior, giving institutions the ability to develop personalized and effective marketing strategies that not only attract new students, but also contribute to their retention and loyalty.

The digitization of university marketing also facilitates a rapid adaptation to changes in student behavior and expectations, allowing institutions to proactively respond to the emerging demands of the educational market. Institutions that fully embrace these digital innovations strengthen not only their online presence but also their academic reputation, securing a favorable position in the global educational landscape. In this context, an institution's ability to integrate digital technologies into its marketing strategy becomes a determining factor of its competitive success. Therefore, digitalization not only optimizes marketing processes, but redefines the very way in which higher education institutions build and maintain their relationships with students. As universities continue to invest in technology and develop their digital skills, they will be able to amplify their impact, expand their influence and become leaders in global education. Marketing in the economic field is a polysemic concept, with multiple definitions and interpretations in the literature and in business practice. One of the recognized definitions is the one provided by the American Marketing Association (AMA), which describes marketing as a set of institutional activities and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging valuable offers for consumers, partners and society. In the educational context, marketing borrows elements from traditional marketing, being centered on the relationship between higher education institutions and stakeholders, such as students, parents, and the community.

The concept is seen as a holistic management process, oriented towards meeting the needs of stakeholders and adapting educational offers to their requirements. Educational marketing emphasizes the importance of an integrated management system, focusing on the

consumer, adapting to market requirements and maintaining a constant exchange of values between institutions and stakeholders. Universities that apply effective digital marketing strategies, including the use of SEO, social media, and personalized analytics, can improve the visibility, accessibility, and quality of the educational services offered, thus contributing to institutional success and meeting the educational needs of students.



**Figure 3.1. Roles of Digital Marketing**  
 Source: author's contribution

In the context of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Galati, organizational effectiveness can be seen as a vital skill in adapting to changes in the socio-economic environment, involving a constant and rigorous evaluation of resources and goals. Effective collaboration between departments, as well as choosing the right strategies, contributes to the achievement of educational and research objectives, thus strengthening the institution's position in the academic landscape. In this framework, organizational effectiveness is not just a theoretical matter, but a practical tool that supports innovation, excellence in education and commitment to the institution's mission. Organizational culture in the higher education environment plays an essential role in determining the performance and effectiveness of universities, involving a complex of values, norms, expectations and habits that govern the way in which the members of the organization interact with each other and with the outside world (Schein, 2010).

**Table 3.1. The digital marketing plan used in FEAA Galati campaigns**

Zi	Data	Tip continut	Canal de comunicare	UTM	Continut postare	Creativ postare	Hashtags	Observatii	Status
					<b>SERIOASE</b>				
joi	01.06.2023	Diverse	Instagrar		Copilaria este o perioada de care multi dintre noi au dorit sa se lipseasca insa dupa care tanjesc, rascolind cu nostalgie in sertarul cu amintiri frumoase 🥰 Astazi sarbatorim suflurile inocente si ne uitam cu drag la cei care peste ani vor aduce schimbări notabile in societatea noastra. Imprastind in jur energie si zambete fara de care lumea ar fi un loc gri si rece. Sa nu uitati dragi copii sa va bucurati de fiecare moment si sa nu renuntati la curajul de a visa! 🥰 **Testimonial	<a href="#">Link</a>	#FEAAGalati #Iunie #Zuainternationalaascopliului #happy #childhood #smiles		Publicat
vineri	02.06.2023	Testimonial	Instagrar		M-am inscris la FEAA fara sa stiu cum este viata de student. Ulterior am aflat pe propria piele ce inseamna sa fi cu adevarat student si pot spune ca nu regret acest lucru. Comunicarea si receptivitatea profesorilor a facut ca orele de curs sa fie mai interactive si astfel am reusit sa ma descurc la examene. Activitatea de voluntar m-a facut sa imi cunosc si mai bine sinele, reusind sa ma integrez rapid in colectiv. Studentii de anul III cunosc sentimentul.	<a href="#">Link</a>	#StudentaFEAA #FEAAGalati #admitere #admitere2023 #admitereLicenta #oportunitati #romania #galati #FinantesiBanci #Studentlife		Publicat
			Faceboo		Spuneți-ne în secțiunea de comentarii în ce stadiu sunteți cu licența. De peste 25 de ani Facultatea de Economie și Administrarea Afacerilor din Galați este anual gazda seminarilor și conferințelor de perfecționare în domeniu, atât pentru corpul profesoral cât și pentru comunitatea studentescă. Pentru că ne place să asigurăm un mediu prielnic pentru învățare și dezvoltare, studenții noștri au oportunitatea de a afla toate secretele mediului economic de la specialiștii ai Băncii Naționale Române, Autoritatea de Supraveghere Financiară și Institutul de Studii Financiare. Alătură-te nouă și descoperă cum este să poți învăța și pune întrebări celor mai importanți piloni ai economiei naționale.	<a href="#">Link</a>	#StudentaFEAA #FEAAGalati #admitere #admitere2023 #admitereLicenta #oportunitati #romania #galati #economy #Studentlife #study		Publicat
sâmbătă	03.06.2023	Oportunitati FEAA	Faceboo		Spuneți-ne în secțiunea de comentarii în ce stadiu sunteți cu licența. De peste 25 de ani Facultatea de Economie și Administrarea Afacerilor din Galați este anual gazda seminarilor și conferințelor de perfecționare în domeniu, atât pentru corpul profesoral cât și pentru comunitatea studentescă. Pentru că ne place să asigurăm un mediu prielnic pentru învățare și dezvoltare, studenții noștri au oportunitatea de a afla toate secretele mediului economic de la specialiștii ai Băncii Naționale Române, Autoritatea de Supraveghere Financiară și Institutul de Studii Financiare. Alătură-te nouă și descoperă cum este să poți învăța și pune întrebări celor mai importanți piloni ai economiei naționale.	<a href="#">Link</a>	#StudentaFEAA #FEAAGalati #admitere #admitere2023 #admitereLicenta #oportunitati #romania #galati #economy #Studentlife #study		Publicat
		Umor	Tk Tok		O zi obișnuită din viața unui student la FEAA Galați. 🥰	<a href="#">Link</a>	#viatadestudent #StudentaFEAA #FEAAGalati #funny #umor #life		
duminică	04.06.2023	Viata de student	Instagrar		Pentru mulți studenți campusul devine a doua casă iar membrii comunității FEAA știu cum să transforme orice cameră de cămin în "acasă" 🥰 Studenții facultății noastre pot beneficia de cazare în unul din cele 7 cămine ale Campusului Alexandru Ioan Cuza, unde tarifele pentru cazare și mâncare sunt potrivite pentru portofelul oricărui student. 🥰 Pentru a afla cât mai multe despre admiterea la FEAA Galați, accesează <a href="https://bit.ly/3N8rz94">https://bit.ly/3N8rz94</a>	<a href="#">cam.in_G_si_H_jop</a>	#StudentaFEAA #FEAAGalati #Studentlife #campusstudentesc #home #party #fun		Publicat
					Îndrumătorul de licență: Și când ai de gând să îmi trimiți capitolul 2?	<a href="#">Sesi</a>	#StudentaFEAA #FEAAGalati #licenta #stress		

*Source: author's contribution*

The role of digital marketing in defining the identity of educational marketing is a vital and complex topic within the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Galati. Modern digital marketing techniques and strategies not only shape how the institution presents itself to its target audience, but also contribute to creating a distinct and coherent profile of the organization. The organizational culture reflects the values, beliefs and norms that govern the way in which the members of the organization interact with each other and with the outside, digital marketing becoming an extension of the organizational culture, promoting and strengthening the values of the institution in the online environment, and facilitating a constant and constructive dialogue between the members of the academic community and society.

In the 1980s, organizational effectiveness became a well-defined concept, focused on the ability of organizations to access and integrate resources to achieve their goals. The literature proposes various approaches to assess the effectiveness of organizations, including system resources, goals, strategic constitution and internal processes, all of which are also applicable in the educational environment. In the context of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Galati, organizational effectiveness is essential for adapting to socio-economic changes, involving collaboration between departments and the choice of appropriate strategies. Organizational culture plays a necessary imperative role in determining the performance of universities, influencing the way professors teach, students learn, and the entire academic community collaborates and innovates. A strong organizational culture can improve student satisfaction and retention, contributing to a distinct identity and the fulfillment of the institutional mission. Cameron's model (1978) provides a framework for assessing organizational effectiveness in universities, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the external environment,

achieving objectives, optimizing internal processes, and responding to stakeholder expectations. In conclusion, educational leaders must cultivate an organizational culture that is aligned with institutional strategies, thus ensuring superior academic and administrative performance.

Developing a coherent strategy for the development of organizational culture at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Galati is essential to align institutional aspirations with the needs of students and the academic community. In a competitive and dynamic educational context, identity and organizational culture can become essential differentiators, contributing to strengthening the reputation and attractiveness of the faculty. The proposed strategy capitalizes on the active involvement of student volunteers, using their diverse skills and perspectives to promote an authentic image of the faculty. The approach combines traditional and digital initiatives, integrating academic events and social responsibility activities with online communication through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. These efforts not only promote the faculty but also improve the student and employee experience, contributing to the development of a strong and attractive organizational culture.

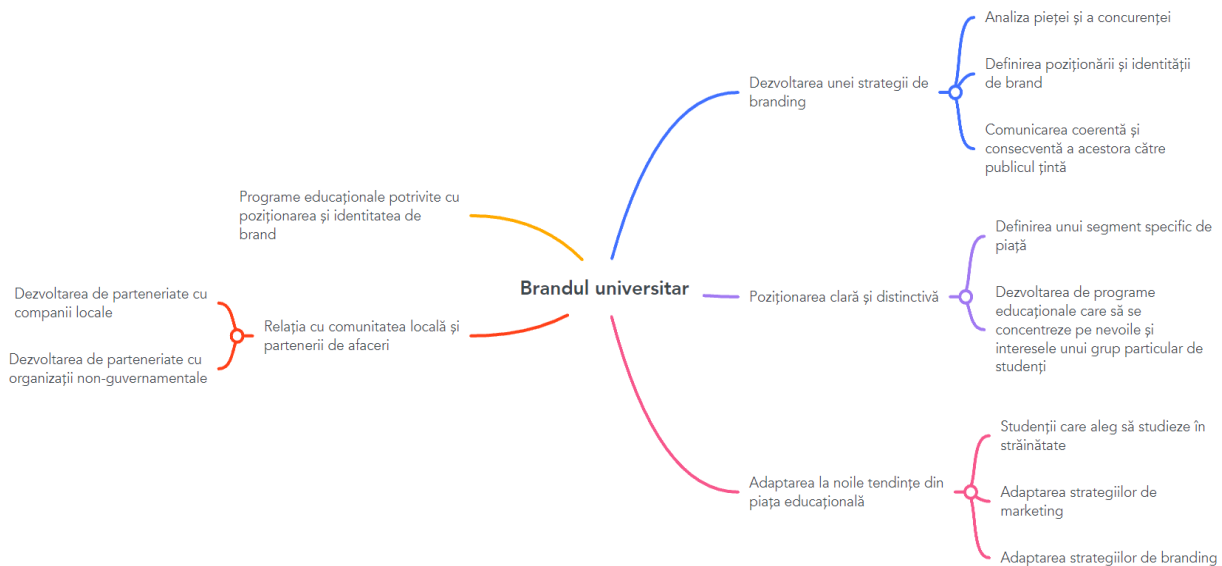
The participation of student volunteers is central to this strategy, as they are involved in organizing and promoting events, which facilitate collaboration between academia and students. Community and charity events organized by volunteers strengthen the faculty's connection to the community, reinforcing the sense of social responsibility. At the same time, participation in educational fairs and other external events enhances the image of the faculty as an institution dedicated to excellence and innovation. Their personal and professional development is supported through workshops and mentoring, aligning their skills with the values of the faculty and motivating them to actively contribute to the institution's mission. A feedback and evaluation system is implemented to monitor the success of initiatives and identify areas for improvement, thus ensuring a continuous evolution of the organizational culture.

Building a strong brand for a university involves several essential strategies. First of all, it is crucial to develop educational programs that align the identity and brand positioning with the values of the institution. For example, a socially responsibility-oriented university should offer programs that encourage student involvement in community projects and prepare graduates for careers in sustainable development.

Secondly, close relationships with the local community and business partners are fundamental. By promoting the image of an institution involved in the economic and social development of the region, the university can develop strong partnerships that support educational and research activities.

In addition to these, universities must attract students who fit the brand identity by defining target market segments and developing specific strategies for each segment. For example, a

university that positions itself as innovative and technology-oriented must offer relevant programs and stimulate student participation in research projects. Universities also need to adapt to new educational trends, such as increasing international student mobility, and adjust their marketing strategies to appeal to this segment. Effective and coherent communication through digital channels, such as the website and social media, is essential to convey brand messages in a relevant and interactive way.



**Figure 3.2. The role of the university brand**  
*Source: author's contribution*

Digital marketing, although sometimes perceived as a simple story, has turned into a precise science thanks to the advancement of technologies such as neuromarketing, which apply neuroscience to understand consumer behavior more deeply. Using modern techniques that go beyond the relevance of the data offered by classic methods, neuromarketing allows a more detailed understanding of what is happening in the minds of customers and partners. During the 2021 admission campaign, this scientific approach was applied by testing and optimizing several versions of creative banners on social media platforms and Google, using heatmap analysis with an analysis software based on the neuromarketing technique (expoze.app). Each material was carefully designed to align the brand's visual identity with the preferences of the target audience, resulting in visuals that managed to capture and maintain the attention of potential candidates. Thus, the campaign demonstrated the effectiveness of a data-driven marketing strategy, which combines creativity with scientific rigor to achieve institutional objectives.



Figure 3.3. Heatmaps advertising Facebook  
Source: author's contribution

The results obtained during this processing were the following:

- Attention capture: 33.26% (slightly towards medium);
- Image Clarity: 66.22% (medium to high);
- Points of interest: Website: 8%, Text: 36%, #tag: 2%;



Figure 3.4. Heatmaps advertising Facebook V3  
Source: author's contribution

The visual analysis revealed how the direction of the three subjects' gazes was used to guide attention to the desired text. Although the photos had different resolutions, they were positioned centrally, using graphical ranking techniques to highlight important messages. The title "Case Study on Neuromarketing" was emphasized by the H1 dimension and imposing font, and

the subjects' gaze and smile were strategically used to draw attention to the call to action and create emotion. The three ranking techniques, image optimization and page layout helped to achieve the following results:

- Attention capture: 36.15% (medium to low);
- Image Clarity: 40.64% (medium to low);
- Points of interest: Subject: 28%, Branding: 6%, Text: 48%, CTA: 7%.



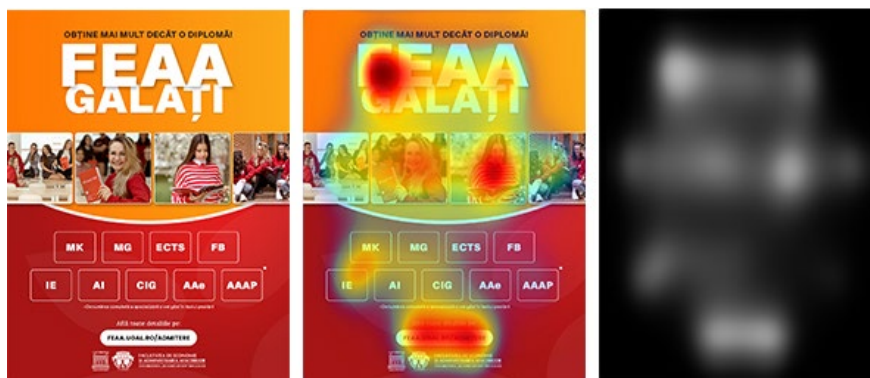
**Figure 3.5. General graphics and heatmap analysis**  
Source: *Output expoze.io, author processing*

Image analysis, with and without Heatmap, highlights an effective design that captures attention and guides the viewer's eye from the university name and the title "ADMISSION 2024" at the top, to the specific details at the bottom. The use of a strong red gradient draws attention to critical elements, confirmed by the Heatmap, which indicates the central and upper areas as the focal points. The design manages to organize the information hierarchically, making it easy to go through the message logically and clearly.



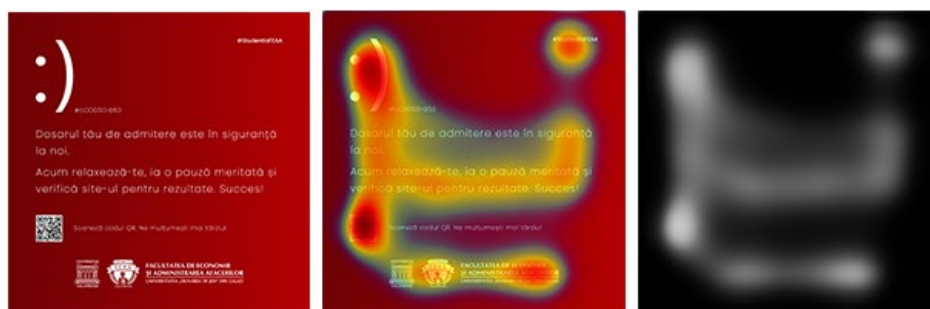
**Figure 3.6. General graphics and heatmap analysis**  
Source: *Output expoze.io, author processing*

Image analysis highlights a clean and efficient design, with a white background that highlights the text using bold fonts for titles and more open fonts for details, ensuring easy readability. The clear hierarchical arrangement of the items, with the title "AVAILABLE SEATS" prominent at the top and the simple list of programs below, facilitates a quick understanding of the information. The heatmap confirms that the focus is mainly on the title and the top of the list, while the bottom, which contains details about admission, draws less attention. In conclusion, the design achieves its goal of guiding the viewer to the essential information, but it may require adjustments to ensure a more balanced focus on all content.



**Figure 3.7. General graphics and heatmap analysis**  
Source: Output expoze.io, author processing

The poster analysis highlights a vibrant visual design with a graduated background that draws attention to the text, especially "ADMISSION 2024," placed centrally and highlighted as a focal point. The heatmap confirms that this central area attracts the most attention, while the lower part, where the details about admission are, receives less attention. In conclusion, the design manages to guide the eye to the essential information, but it may require visual adjustments to balance the attention on all the content, thus ensuring that all details are perceived equally.



**Figure 3.8. General graphics and heatmap analysis**  
Source: Output expoze.io, author processing



The poster uses a bold red background to capture attention, with contrasting white and gray text to ensure readability. The elements are arranged hierarchically, with the hashtag "#StudentlaFEAA" at the top and the main message "Your admission file is safe with us" centrally placed as the focal point. A strategically placed QR code in the bottom left corner encourages interaction. The heatmap analysis shows that the main message and QR code attract the most attention, highlighting the effectiveness of the design in directing the eye and promoting interaction. In conclusion, the use of colors, contrast, and guided arrangement manages to prioritize essential information and boost user engagement.

## **Chapter 4 - Evaluating digital marketing strategies in higher education: a dual analytical approach**

According to the above analysis, universities operate in a global higher education ecosystem characterized by intense competition, where adaptable and scalable marketing strategies are essential for success (Kotler & Fox, 1995). In a market marked by diversity and change, the formulation and execution of appropriate strategies constitutes a decisive competitive advantage (Porter, 1980). Due to the complexity of educational services, the implementation of marketing strategies in higher education is particularly challenging, especially in the pre-enrolment decision stage, where prospective students perceive risks associated with adverse characteristics (Ng & Forbes, 2009). A strong university brand can reduce these risks by providing an indicator of the quality and reliability of education, thus facilitating students' decisions and building their confidence (Chapleo, 2010).

### **Research objectives**

- O1 - Analyze and evaluate the competitive digital marketing strategies used in the higher education system and identify the key success factors;
- O2 - Exploring conceptual approaches to digital marketing, including methodologies, tools and techniques applied in different academic contexts;
- O3 - Analysis of current trends and future prospects of educational marketing, with a focus on identifying emerging challenges and exploiting opportunities in the field;
- O4 - Clarifying and deepening the concept of university product in the context of digital marketing, emphasizing the distinctive elements and their relevance for academic institutions;
- O5 - Comparing the effectiveness of marketing campaigns (both offline and online);

- O6 - Identification of best practices for the promotion of higher education institutions.

### **Research hypotheses**

In order to identify the best digital marketing ideas and strategies that could have a real effect in Admission campaigns, and not only, for the higher education system, we conducted the research starting from the hypotheses presented:

- H1: The candidate's perception has a significant positive influence on how a high-performance image is built for an academic brand;
- H2: Efforts in marketing campaigns contribute significantly to creating a high-performance image of an academic brand;
- H3: Amplifying students' skills can enhance the positive perception of an academic brand's image;
- H4: The adoption of appropriate training methods emphasizes the value and attractiveness of the academic brand;
- H5: The academic successes of students are reflected in the reputation and quality of the image of an academic brand;
- H6: The branding strategies of a higher education institution strengthen the prestige and recognition of the academic brand;
- H7: The strengths of educational services, such as teachers' knowledge and combining theory with practical examples, amplify efficiency in forming a high-performance image of the academic brand;
- H8: The quality of educational services has a significant positive influence on the candidate's perception of the academic brand;
- H9: Effective marketing campaigns can shape the candidate's perception of an academic brand;
- H10: An institution's ability to develop students' competencies influences the candidate's opinion of the brand;
- H11: Innovation in training methods and tools can influence the candidate's opinion on the academic brand;
- H12: Outstanding academic results of students can be a determining factor in the candidate's perception of an academic brand;
- H13: The way an institution's brand is defined and presented can change the candidate's perspective on this brand.

## Design, sampling and data collection

The questionnaire designed for the research "Competitive Digital Marketing Strategies in the Higher Education System" was structured into eight essential categories, targeting critical aspects such as the quality of educational services, the effectiveness of marketing campaigns, the development of students' skills, training methods, academic performance and the perception of the academic brand. It included 50 items, created based on the literature, to provide a detailed picture of the digital marketing strategies used by higher education institutions. The data was collected through an online questionnaire, distributed on social media platforms and through direct messages, to a group of 500 respondents from various countries, including Romania, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, and 16 other countries. Following the collection process, 420 responses were validated and included in the analysis.

To ensure the reliability and accuracy of the results, the Bootstrap procedure was used, which allows the estimation of standard errors and confidence intervals through repeated sampling. Also, the QCA (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) method was applied, based on set theory and Boolean algebra, suitable for analyzing small sample sizes. These methodological approaches increased the credibility and relevance of the findings, providing a robust insight into the implementation and effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in the context of higher education.

**Table 4.1. Data collected on the respondents of the study on the evaluation of digital marketing strategies in the higher education system**

<b>Sex</b>	Woman	62.40%
	Man	35.20%
	I'd rather not answer	2.40%
<b>Age</b>	18 - 20 years	57.20%
	21 - 29 years	34.10%
	30 - 39 years	4.80%
	40 - 49 years	2.80%
	50 - 59 years	0.70%
	> 60 years	0.30%
<b>Form</b>	Full-time education (IF)	97.36%
	Part-time education (IFR)	2.64%
<b>Funding</b>	Budget	70.28%
	Tax	29.72%
<b>Scholarship</b>	Yes	41.81%
	No	58.19%

The study has a higher representation of women (62.40%) compared to men (35.20%), and a small percentage (2.40%) prefer not to disclose their gender. This gender imbalance must be considered when interpreting results and developing marketing strategies.

### Conceptual model

The table shows the key constructs used to evaluate digital marketing strategies in higher education. Each construct, chosen for its theoretical and practical relevance, represents an essential strategic component in understanding and optimizing these strategies. The constructs cover aspects such as the quality of educational services, the effectiveness of marketing campaigns, the development of students' skills, training methods, academic performance, the definition and perception of the academic brand, and the construction of a high-performance image of the university brand

**Table 4.2. The main constructs used for the conceptual model of the study on the evaluation of digital marketing strategies in higher education**

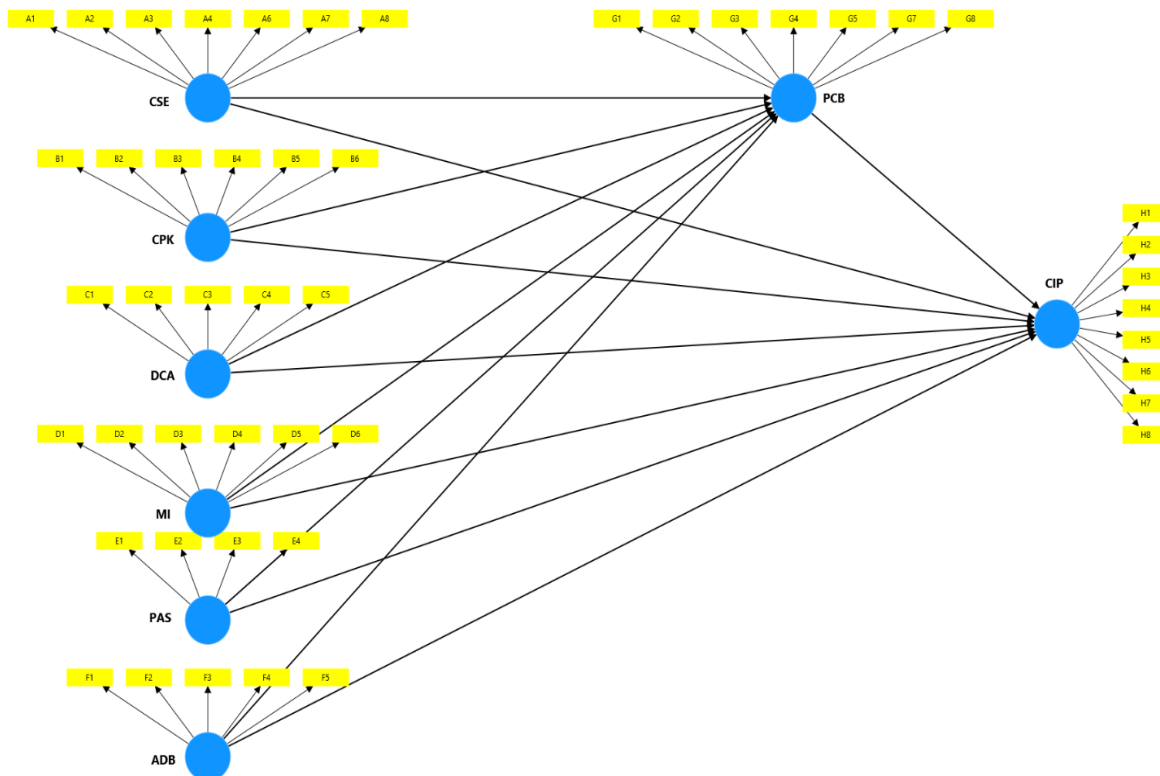
Acronym for latent variables	Indicators / Variable*	Source
<b>CSE</b> - Quality of educational services	CSE1 ... CSE8	(Pedro et al., 2018) (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016)
<b>CPK</b> - High-performance marketing campaigns	CPK1 ... CPK6	(Manika et al., 2019) (Abbas, 2019) (Abbas, 2014)
<b>DCA</b> - Developing students' advanced skills	DCA1 ... DCA5	(Lazányi, 2014) (Pereira et al., 2022)
<b>MI</b> - Training methods and tools	MI1 ... MI6	(Stynska & Prokopiv, 2020) (Marques et al., 2023) (Ihor et al., 2021)
<b>PAS</b> - Academic performance of students	PAS1 ... PAS4	(Mohamed Nafuri et al., 2022) (Pedro et al., 2016)
<b>ADB</b> - Actions to define the brand of an educational institution	ADB1 ... ADB5	(Noite & Nogueira, 2019) (Williams Jr. & Omar, 2014) (Dennis et al., 2017)
<b>PCB</b> - The candidate's perception of the academic brand	PCB1 ... PCB8	(Hannan, 2021) (Dimitrova & Iliana, 2021) (Valentinova & Valkov, 2020)
<b>CIP</b> - Building a high-performance academic brand image	CIP1 ... CIP8	(Goi et al., 2014) (Nguyen et al., 2019) (Simões, 2019)

*Sursa: author processing*

The conceptual model shown in Figure 4.1 reflects the links between latent variables and formative and reflective measurement models of variables. This model helps to estimate the relationships between different dependent and independent variables.

In the process of validating the questionnaire data, we eliminated 80 responses out of a total of 500, keeping only 420 valid responses. This reduction has been achieved by applying rigorous criteria of validity and consistency of data. First, I checked for discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), ensuring that each construction is distinct and properly measured.

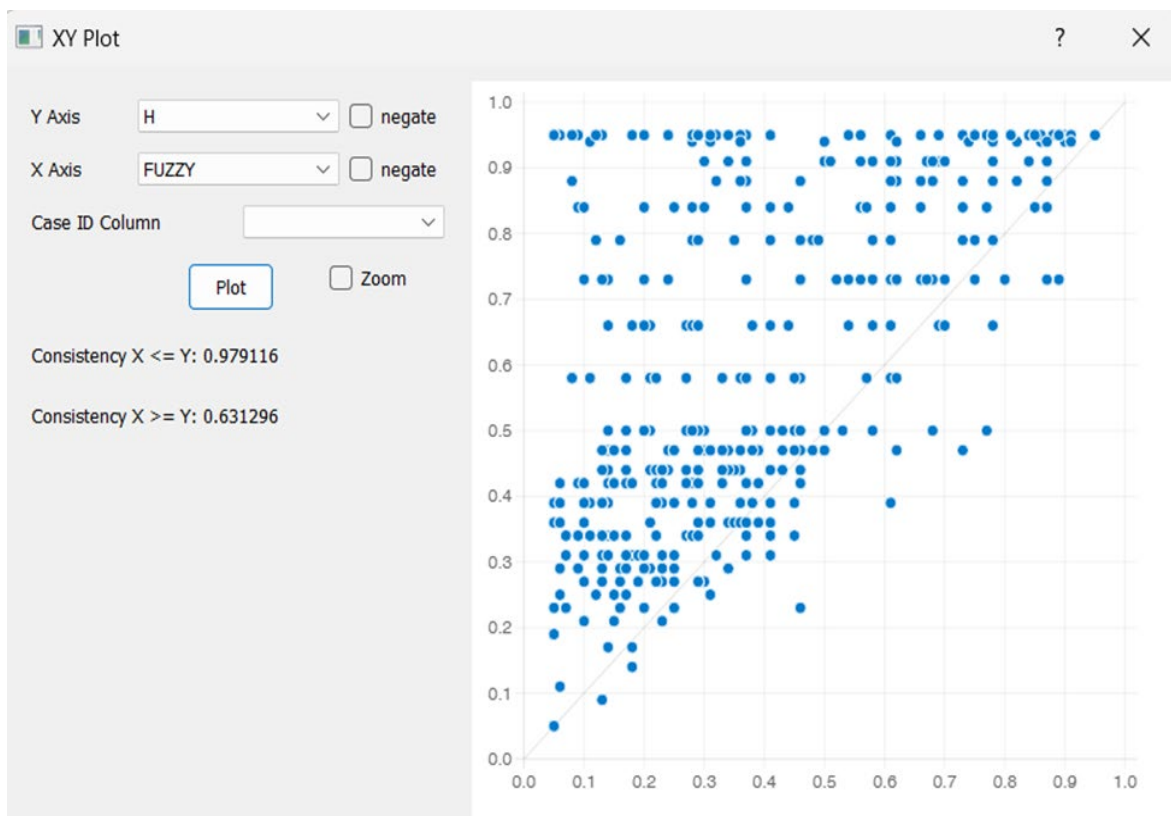
We also applied standard deviation analysis and eliminated outlier responses that exceeded the acceptable threshold of z-scores ( $\pm 3$ ). The internal consistency of the responses was assessed by Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with low consistency questionnaires being eliminated. We also checked the completeness of the data and eliminated questionnaires with incomplete answers or obvious non-response patterns. These methods were essential to ensure that the data used in our PLS-SEM model is of high quality and meets all the necessary statistical assumptions.



**Figure 4.1. The structural model of the study on the implementation of competitive digital marketing strategies in the higher education system**  
*Source: Smart PLS 4 software processing*

## Particularities of the results in different educational contexts and their approach through the fsQCA method

The first step in the analysis is to identify the sufficient configuration to meet the main condition of the hypothesis, namely Building a high-performance image of the academic brand (CIP). A configuration is considered sufficient if the measured consistency exceeds 0.75 (Woodside, 2014). The analysis of the XY graph shows a significant inverse relationship between the FUZZY and CIP variables, where the decrease in FUZZY values corresponds to the increase in CIP values. The consistency coefficient for the  $FUZZY \leq CIP$  relationship is very high, at 0.979116, indicating a strong and consistent pattern. In contrast, the consistency for the opposite relationship ( $FUZZY \geq CIP$ ) is lower, at 0.631296, suggesting the need for further investigation. Overall, the analysis reveals a complex interaction between FUZZY and CIP, with potential outliers that could provide additional information.



**Figure 4.2. Distribution of cases within the XY Plot chart**  
*Source: fsQCA software processing*

The CIP variable was calculated using the fuzzyand function in fsQCA, combining the factors CSE, CPK, DCA, MI, PAS, ADB, and PCB. Most cases are positioned above the diagonal of the graph, indicating that these conditions are sufficient to obtain a positive result (CIP = 1), i.e. a strong image of the academic brand. Consistency scores are high, exceeding 0.96, with a

coefficient of 0.979116, suggesting a very strong relationship between antecedent conditions and outcome. The most common configuration, in which all factors are present (CSE, CPK, DCA, MI, PAS, ADB, PCB = 1), occurs 109 times, emphasizing the effectiveness of this combination in building a solid academic brand identity.

Performing Marketing Campaigns (CPK), Advanced Student Skills Development (DCA), and Innovative Training Methods (IM) are essential in all successful configurations for building a high-performing academic brand image. The quality of educational services (CSE) and student academic performance (PAS) vary in attendance but are significant, contributing significantly to the brand image. Although the candidate's perception of the academic brand (PCB) and brand definition actions (ADB) are relevant, they are not absolutely necessary in all cases, which indicates the existence of several avenues of success in the implementation of marketing strategies. The high consistency of these configurations suggests that these factors work synergistically, being strong predictors of success in creating a strong academic brand image.

**Table 4.3. Truth Table Analysis for Expected Outcome**

CSE	CPK	DCA	MI	PAS	ADB	PCB	Num år	CIP	Gross coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
1	1	1	1	1	0	1	4	1	0.986769	0.894973	0.894973
1	1	1	1	0	1	1	9	1	0.986328	0.908079	0.912818
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1	0.983515	0.914025	0.917972
0	1	1	1	0	1	1	4	1	0.981631	0.83983	0.839832
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	109	1	0.979116	0.954028	0.974625
1	1	1	1	1	1	0	15	1	0.977604	0.892479	0.89898
0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	1	0.976274	0.751025	0.751025
1	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	1	0.971542	0.794429	0.795081
0	0	0	1	0	0	1	5	1	0.968314	0.659461	0.663045
0	1	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0.96424	0.623816	0.62721
0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0.944877	0.514383	0.514383
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0.944171	0.495115	0.495115
0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	1	0.94393	0.512713	0.515993
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	11	1	0.936722	0.543624	0.547298
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	65	0	0.790377	0.252268	0.265418

*Source: Author processing, fsQCA software output*

The data reveals a single configuration that does not lead to a high-performance academic brand image (CIP = 1). In these cases, most of the factors, including CPK, DCA, MI, PAS, ADB, and PCB, are absent, suggesting that the lack of these elements is associated with a negative result. In the first configuration, CSE is absent, and in the second, it is present, indicating that the mere presence of the quality of educational services is not enough to achieve a high-performance brand. The first configuration (all factors absent) occurs 65 times, and the second (CSE present only) 4 times, both of which have high consistency (0.9154 and 0.9453). However, PRI

consistency scores are lower, suggesting that these configurations are more associated with positive than negative outcomes. The absence of all factors is frequently associated with a poorly performing brand, emphasizing the importance of the presence of key elements. The quality of educational services (CSE) alone does not guarantee success; Other factors such as marketing campaigns, student skill development, and innovative teaching methods are crucial. The analysis confirms that a synergistic approach, which includes multiple elements, is essential for building a high-performance academic brand image. Institutions must avoid the absence of these factors and adopt a multidimensional strategy to ensure the success of the academic brand.

**Table 4.4. Truth table analysis for negated expected result**

CSE	CPK	DCA	MI	PAS	ADB	PCB	NUMĂ	CIP	Gross coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0.945251	0.504885	0.504885
0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0.941612	0.485617	0.485617
0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	1	0.940273	0.48093	0.484007
0	1	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0.940185	0.370772	0.37279
0	0	0	1	0	0	1	5	1	0.938136	0.335134	0.336955
0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4	1	0.928432	0.248975	0.248975
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	11	1	0.923694	0.449662	0.452702
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	65	1	0.915388	0.698186	0.734581
0	1	1	1	0	1	1	4	1	0.903685	0.160168	0.160168
1	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	1	0.88991	0.204751	0.204919
1	1	1	1	1	0	1	4	1	0.887257	0.105027	0.105027
1	1	1	1	0	1	1	9	1	0.864167	0.08673	0.087183
0	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1	0.823923	0.081676	0.082028
1	1	1	1	1	1	0	15	1	0.812595	0.100289	0.10102
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	109	0	0.55701	0.024839	0.025375

*Source: Author processing, fsQCA software output*

The analysis identified eight combinations of conditions that lead to "Building an Academic Brand Performance Image" (CIP), all of which have perfect consistency (1,000) and total solution coverage, meaning they explain all cases of a positive outcome. The most relevant empirical combination is CPK-DCA-MI-ADB-PCB, indicating that high-performance marketing, student skill development, effective training methods, clear brand definition, and positive candidate perception contribute most significantly to a strong academic brand image. Another significant combination also includes the quality of educational services (CSE) and student academic performance (PAS), highlighting the need for excellence in multiple areas for a successful brand. Interestingly, there are also combinations that show that a high-performance brand image can be achieved even in the absence of important factors, if there is a strong brand perception (PCB). This emphasizes



flexibility in building academic brand image and the fact that there is no single crucial factor; It is the combinations of factors that determine success.

The conclusion of the analysis is that academic institutions have several strategies available to build a high-performance brand image, adaptable according to their strengths and available resources.

**Table 4.5. Configurations of the antecedent conditions that lead to a high-performance image of the academic brand**

Configurations	High perceived Solutions							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>CSE</b>		⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	⊗
<b>CPK</b>	●	●	⊗	●		●	⊗	⊗
<b>DCA</b>	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	⊗	⊗
<b>MI</b>	●	⊗		⊗	●	●	⊗	⊗
<b>PAS</b>		⊗	⊗		●	●	⊗	●
<b>ADB</b>	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	●		⊗	⊗
<b>PCB</b>	●		●	●	⊗	●	⊗	⊗
Consistency	<b>0.966919</b>	<b>0.941366</b>	<b>0.939988</b>	<b>0.957052</b>	<b>0.966302</b>	<b>0.974290</b>	<b>0.944171</b>	<b>0.936722</b>
Gross coverage	<b>0.672013</b>	<b>0.316211</b>	<b>0.321718</b>	<b>0.318864</b>	<b>0.411472</b>	<b>0.638209</b>	<b>0.316091</b>	<b>0.323687</b>
Unique coverage	<b>0.026408</b>	<b>0.002451</b>	<b>0.005426</b>	<b>0.001246</b>	<b>0.029462</b>	<b>0.004341</b>	<b>0.008320</b>	<b>0.012219</b>
Solution Consistency Score	<b>0.904385</b>							
Solution Coverage Score	<b>0.798384</b>							

Note: Black circles (●) indicate the presence of an antecedent, and circles with "x" (⊗) indicate its absence. Large circles: basic conditions, small circles: peripheral conditions, empty spaces: "I don't care" condition.

*Source: Author processing, fsQCA software output*

The fsQCA results for the conditions that lead to building a high-performance academic brand image (CIP) reveal ten distinct combinations of factors, each with perfect consistency, indicating that they are reliable predictors for achieving the desired outcome. The concept of "causal complexity" emphasizes the existence of multiple pathways that can lead to the same outcome, highlighting the conjunctural nature of causality.

The most significant pathway, accounting for 28.6% of cases, involves the absence of the factors CSE, DCA, MI, PAS and ADB, suggesting that the elimination of these factors is essential for the achievement of the CIP. Other pathways, each explaining 14.3% of cases, include varying

combinations of factors, emphasizing that different sets of conditions can lead to a successful academic brand. The presence of PCBs in some combinations suggests that this factor can compensate for the absence of others. The absence of CSE in many of these pathways indicates its critical importance in achieving a successful brand image. The analysis suggests that institutions should focus on managing or eliminating harmful factors and tailor their strategies to their specific context to maximize academic brand performance. The diversity of pathways and the complex interaction of factors underscore the need for a holistic approach to effectively manage these factors and achieve the desired outcomes.

**Table 4.6. Configurations of antecedent conditions that do not lead to a performing image of the academic brand**

Configurations	Low perceived Solutions								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
CSE	⊗		⊗	⊗	⊗	•		⊗	•
CPK		⊗	⊗	⊗	•		•	•	•
DCA	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	•	•	•	•
MI	⊗	⊗	⊗		⊗	•	•	•	•
PAS	⊗	⊗		⊗			⊗		•
ADB	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	•	•	•	⊗
PCB		⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	•	•	•
Consistency	0.904798	0.914306	0.900068	0.932002	0.927012	0.812630	0.861713	0.827123	0.887257
Gross coverage	0.621377	0.594685	0.611618	0.455543	0.441077	0.494174	0.460709	0.477871	0.450376
Unique coverage	0.008495	0.006945	0.015039	0.003271	0.003845	0.031456	0.006830	0.011308	0.009987
Solution Consistency Score	<b>0.76561</b>								
Solution Coverage Score	<b>0.830147</b>								

Note: Black circles (•) indicate the presence of an antecedent, and circles with "x" (⊗) indicate its absence. Large circles: basic conditions, small circles: peripheral conditions, empty spaces: "I don't care" condition.

*Source: Author processing, fsQCA software output*

The fsQCA analysis for building a high-performance academic brand image (CIP) reveals the complexity of institutional success, highlighting that no single factor is strictly necessary for high or low CIP. Surprisingly, the absence of factors such as ADB, CSE, and CPK is more associated with high CIP, suggesting that eliminating the negative aspects may be more beneficial than developing these areas. In contrast, the presence of factors such as MI, ADB, PAS and DCA is linked to low CIP, thus challenging traditional expectations. The asymmetry between the conditions for high and low CIP underlines that strategies of excellence differ from those of

prevention of decline. This complexity suggests the need for nuanced approaches adapted to the specific context of each institution, emphasizing the importance of balancing strengths and managing potential weaknesses.

**Table 4.7. Sufficient conditions for achieving the result (CIP) - negative**

Tested conditions for CIP	Consistency	Coverage
CSE	0.714309	0.532523
~CSE	0.827048	0.761041
CPK	0.672119	0.502468
~CPK	0.825096	0.756645
DCA	0.724125	0.519713
~DCA	0.803684	0.776668
MI	0.733884	0.513145
~MI	0.81861	0.820304
PAS	0.712702	0.500746
~PAS	0.79255	0.788746
ADB	0.699098	0.504682
~ADB	0.841627	0.807024
PCB	0.680959	0.516365
~PCB	0.831868	0.74987

*Source: Author processing, fsQCA software output*

**Table 4.8. Conditions necessary to meet the CIP - positive**

Tested conditions for ~CIP	Consistency	Coverage
CSE	0.81816	0.871063
~CSE	0.560916	0.737113
CPK	0.81418	0.869245
~CPK	0.533985	0.69932
DCA	0.838177	0.859102
~DCA	0.531412	0.7334
MI	0.874432	0.873169
~MI	0.51244	0.733332
PAS	0.851361	0.854245
~PAS	0.502433	0.714083
ADB	0.859078	0.88567
~ADB	0.519554	0.711471
PCB	0.8057	0.872507
~PCB	0.553398	0.712407

*Source: Author processing, fsQCA software output*

External loads reflect how much each indicator contributes to defining latent variables. In Table 4.11, most indicators have external loads above the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating a strong contribution to reflective variables. However, six indicators (ADB\_A6, ADB\_A7, CSE\_2, PAS\_4, PAS\_8 and PCB\_3) are below this threshold, suggesting lower reliability. The DCA\_3 indicator has the highest reliability, with an index of 0.912.

**Table 4.9. Representation of the external loads of the indicators associated with the reflective variables related to the study on the evaluation of competitive digital marketing strategies in the higher education system**

	ADB	CIP	CPK	CSE	DCA	MI	PAS	PCB
ADB_1				0.789				
ADB_A2				0.821				
ADB_A3				0.826				
ADB_A4				0.796				
ADB_A6				0.661				
ADB_A7				0.621				
ADB_A8				0.763				
CIP_1			0.848					
CIP_2			0.894					
CIP_3			0.785					
CIP_4			0.777					
CIP_6			0.8					
CPK_1					0.853			
CPK_2					0.814			
CPK_3					0.855			
CPK_4					0.827			
CPK_5					0.767			
CSE_1						0.799		
CSE_2						0.678		
CSE_3						0.85		
CSE_4						0.804		
CSE_6						0.782		
DCA_3							0.912	
DCA_4							0.89	
MI_1	0.839							
MI_2	0.825							
MI_3	0.79							
MI_4	0.853							
MI_5	0.829							
PAS_1								0.823
PAS_2								0.826
PAS_4								0.698
PAS_5								0.706
PAS_8								0.629
PCB_3		0.686						
PCB_4		0.754						
PCB_6		0.833						
PCB_7		0.818						
PCB_8		0.779						

Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output

The Cronbach Alpha, an indicator of internal consistency and reliability of measurements, was calculated for all variables in the structural model, and all exceeded the threshold of 0.7, according to Table 4.12. The reliability indicators for all reflective variables (ADB, CIP, CPK, CSE, DCA, IPC, MI, PAS) also passed the minimum recommended threshold of 0.7. The correlation coefficient of Spearman's rank (Rho) indicates a positive correlation, approaching 1. Convergent validity testing showed that all variables have an AVE (Average Variance Extracted) above the recommended threshold of 0.5, confirming the convergent validity of the variables.

**Table 4.10. Evaluation of internal consistency and convergent validity in the case of the reflective measurement model**

Item	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
ADB	0.885	0.887	0.916	0.684
CIP	0.834	0.842	0.883	0.602
CPK	0.879	0.882	0.912	0.676
CSE	0.874	0.882	0.903	0.574
DCA	0.881	0.882	0.913	0.679
IPC	0.793	0.803	0.857	0.548
MI	0.842	0.847	0.888	0.616
PAS	0.768	0.774	0.896	0.811

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

The Composite Confidence Level (CR) was calculated to assess the reliability of latent variables, considering variable loads of indicators, as opposed to Cronbach Alpha, which assumes uniform loads. In this study, all CR values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7 for the eight reflective variables (ADB, CIP, CPK, CSE, DCA, IPC, MI, PAS), indicating robust reliability. Also, the correlation coefficient of Spearman's rank (Rho) showed a positive correlation between the variables. The convergent validity was confirmed by the extracted mean variance (AVE), with all variables exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.5, suggesting an adequate proportion of explained variance compared to measurement errors.

The Fornell-Larcker criterion, used for discriminant validity, was confirmed in this study. The square root of the AVE for each latent variable (ADB, CIP, CPK, CSE, DCA, IPC, MI, PASP) was greater than the correlations of these variables with the other latent variables, demonstrating that each variable better explains the variance of its own indicators than the variance of other latent variables.

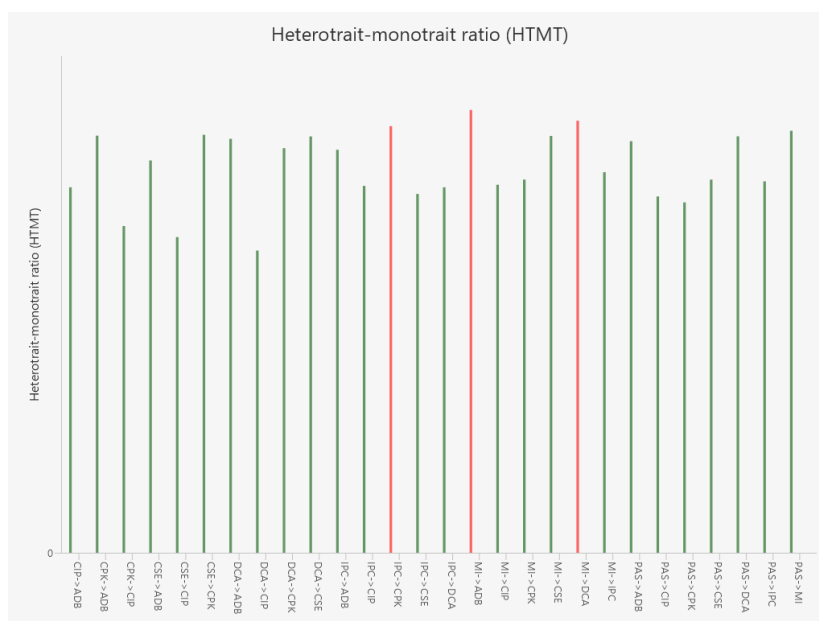
**Table 4.11. Evaluation of discriminant validity in the case of the reflective measurement model (Fornell-Larcker criterion)**

	ADB	CIP	CPK	CSE	DCA	IPC	MI	PAS
ADB	0.827							
CIP	0.634	0.776						
CPK	0.742	0.571	0.822					
CSE	0.691	0.544	0.735	0.758				
DCA	0.738	0.527	0.719	0.739	0.824			
IPC	0.693	0.624	0.729	0.617	0.621	0.74		
MI	0.775	0.622	0.653	0.721	0.76	0.643	0.785	
PAS	0.684	0.579	0.582	0.618	0.692	0.588	0.691	0.901

The diagonals represent the square root of the mean value of the extracted variance (AVE), while the non-diagonal elements represent the correlations between the variables.

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

The Heterotrait Monotrait Correlation Ratio (HTMT) is an advanced measure for discriminant validity, considered more specific and reliable than the Fornell-Larcker criterion. HTMT below 0.85 indicates appropriate discriminatory validity. In this study, the HTMT is below the threshold of 0.85 in most variable relationships, except for CPK->, MI-> ADB, and MI-> DCA, as shown in Figure 4.3. The evaluation of the formative measurement model involves the analysis of the significance and relevance of the weights associated with the indicators, convergent validity, collinearity and redundancy of the indicators. The weights reflect the contribution of each indicator to the latent variables and are determined by multiple regressions.



**Figure 4.3. Evaluation of discriminant validity in the case of the reflective measurement model (Heterotrait Monotrait correlation ratio - HTMT)**

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

The variance inflation factor (VIF) measures multicollinearity between independent variables in a multiple regression, with values above 5 indicating high multicollinearity. In this study, all VIF values for formative and reflective variables, generated by Smart PLS 4, are below the threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity is not problematic. The CSE formative indicator has the highest VIF, and the MI the lowest, but neither reaches critical levels, thus ensuring the reliability of the structural model estimation.

**Table 4.12. Evaluation of the statistical collinearity test**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>VIF</b>	<b>1/VIF</b>
<b>CSE</b>	2.21	0.453
<b>CPK</b>	2.41	0.415
<b>DCA</b>	2.33	0.430
<b>MI</b>	1.82	0.548
<b>PAS</b>	1.64	0.611
<b>ADB</b>	2.14	0.467
<b>PCB</b>	1.83	0.545
<b>CIP</b>	1.98	0.505
<b>Mean VIF</b>	2.04	

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

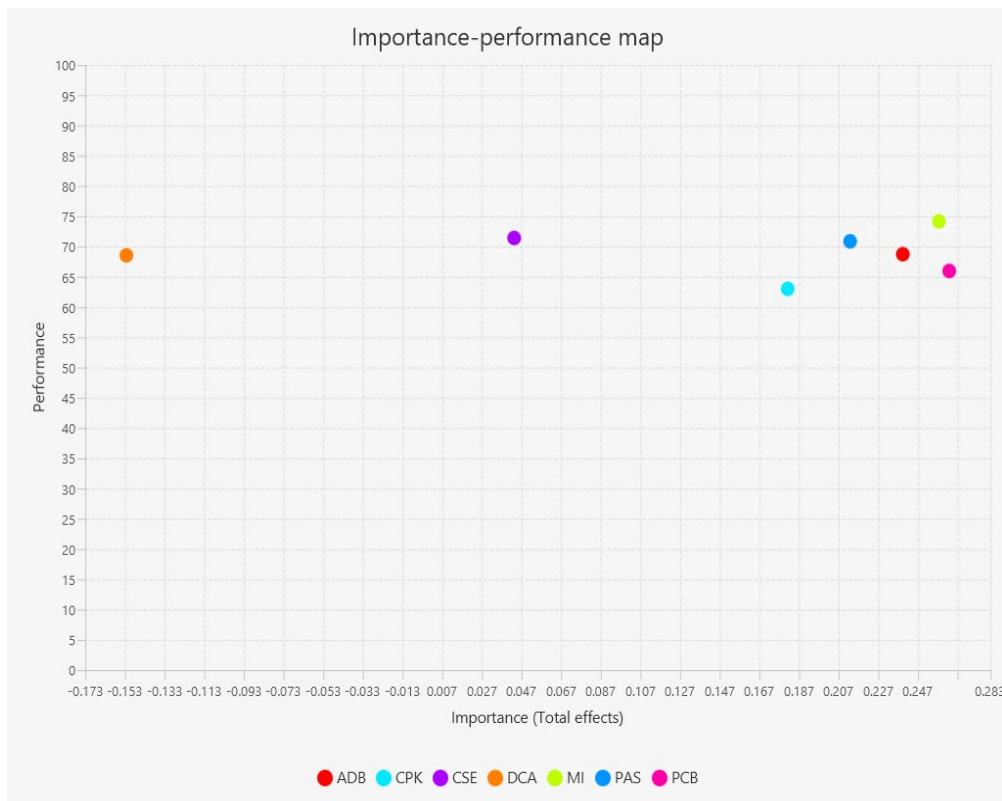
Smart PLS 4 generated Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for formative and reflective variables, with CSE having the highest VIF and PAS the lowest. All VIF values are below the threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity is not a critical issue in structural model estimation. Evaluation of the model by comparing it to a saturated model showed a good fit, with an SRMR of 0.068 and an NFI of 0.754, indicating a moderate fit. The covariance matrix was used to assess mean residuals and discrepancies, highlighting the suitability of the proposed model.

**Table 4.13. Model fit**

<b>Fit measures</b>	<b>Model saturat</b>	<b>Model estimat</b>
<b>SRMR</b>	0.068	0.068
<b>D_ULS</b>	3.599	3.599
<b>D_G</b>	1.243	1.243
<b>CHI-SQUARE</b>	2890.163	2890.163
<b>NFI</b>	0.754	0.754

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

The results of the IPMA (Importance-Performance Map) analysis highlight the performance and importance of each construct within the model. CSE has the highest performance (70-75), followed by MI (65-70), indicating that they are perceived as effective. PCB, although moderately important, performs well (60-65). PAS and CPK need improvement (55-60), and ADB, with the lowest performance (45-50), may require special strategic attention.



**Figure 4.4. Importance-Performance Matrix - Variables**  
*Source: Smart PLS 4 software output*

To improve the PAS and CPK, it is recommended to assess needs, implement training programs, increase allocated resources, and review processes to eliminate inefficiencies. These actions could significantly enhance the performance of these constructs, thus contributing to the success of the organization.

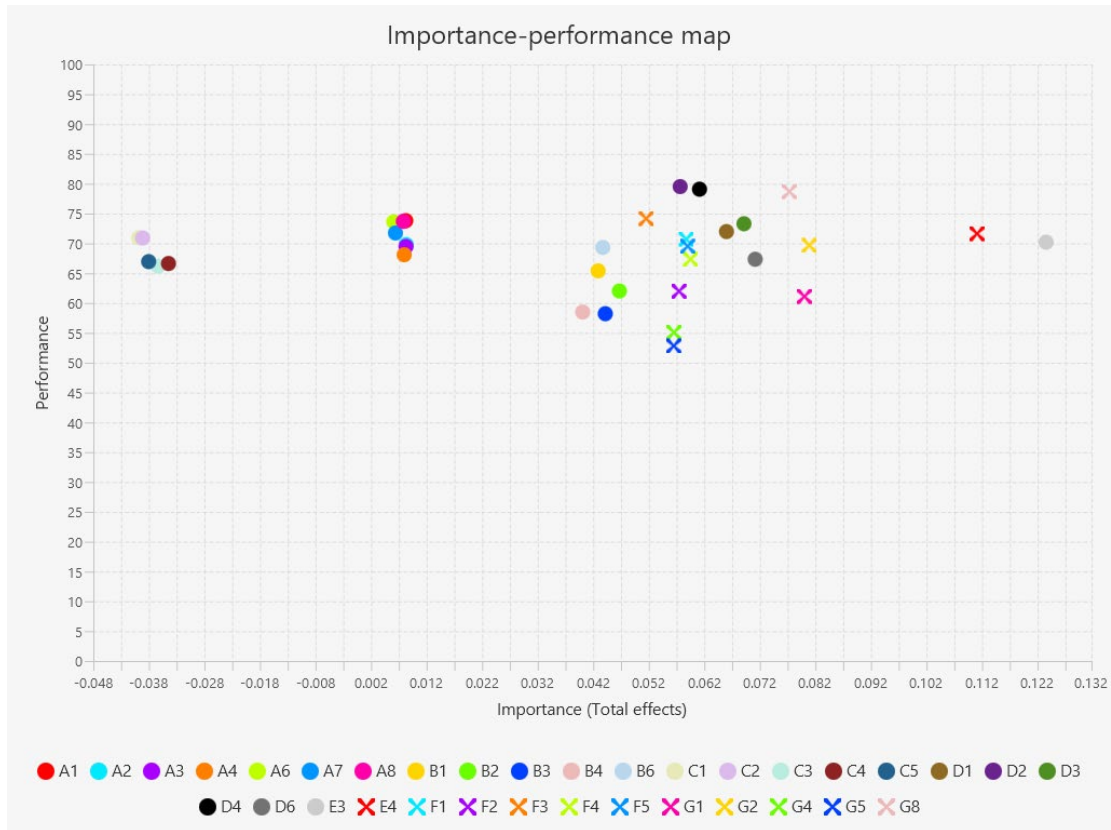
The importance-performance map for variables highlights strong correlations between branding, perception, and marketing efforts in educational institutions. Brand-defining actions (ADB) and the candidate's perception of the academic brand (PCB) are closely related, suggesting that brand-building activities influence how prospective students perceive the institution. Performance marketing campaigns (CPK) are essential in shaping and communicating brand identity.

There is also a clear link between the quality of educational services (CSE) and student academic performance (PAS), emphasizing the importance of maintaining educational standards for student success and strengthening the institution's reputation. The correlation between training methods and tools (IM) and student skill development (DCA) indicates that innovative training approaches are essential for the development of advanced skills.

Overall, an integrated strategy that combines quality education, effective marketing, innovative training methods, and strong branding actions can improve the institution's



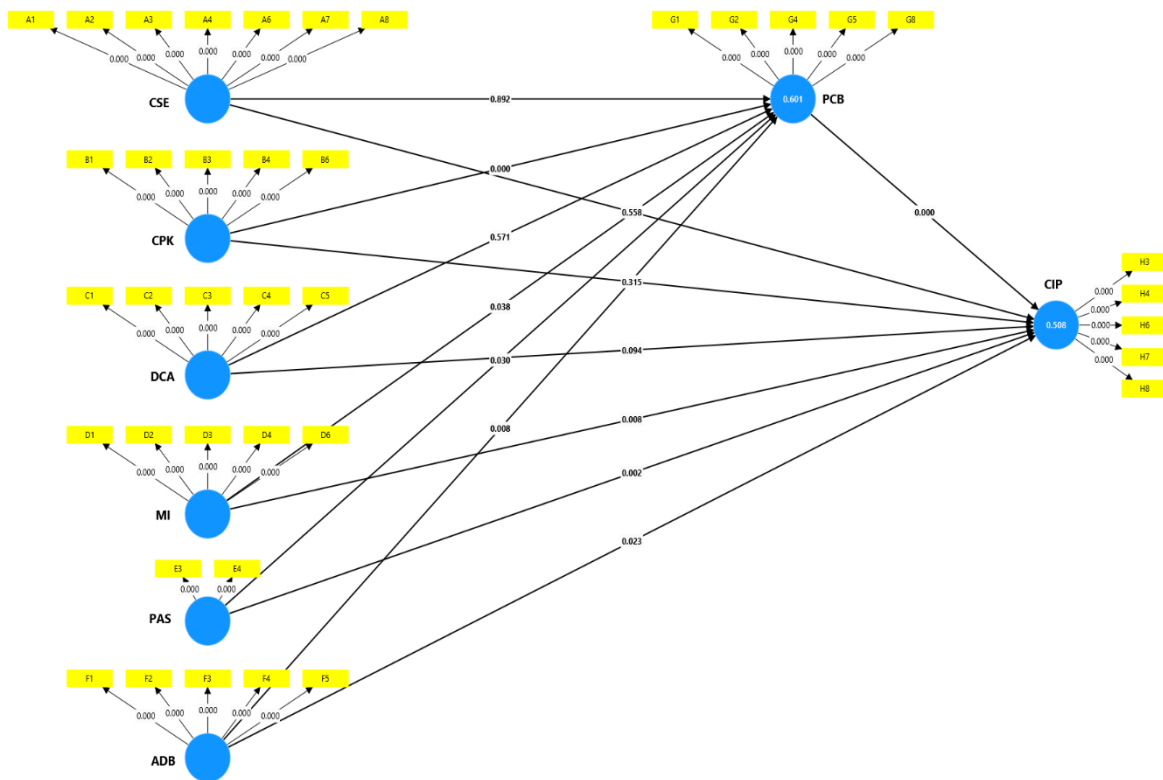
performance and reputation. Compared to the previous analysis, the current evaluation emphasizes the use of the Importance-Performance Map as a strategic prioritization tool, highlighting the areas that need improvement to optimize institutional performance.



**Figure 4.5. Importance-Performance Matrix - items**  
 Source: Smart PLS 4 software output

The PLS-SEM method, which does not assume normal data distribution, uses the bootstrapping procedure to test the significance of estimated coefficients, such as weights, external loads, and relationship coefficients. In this procedure, random subsamples are generated by extraction with replacement, from the original data set, usually around 5,000 subsamples.

The parameter estimates obtained from these subsamples are used to calculate standard errors and T-test values, as well as asymptotic meanings (p-values), which are used to assess the statistical significance of coefficients and to validate or refute research hypotheses.



**Figure 4.6. Determination of the P values associated with the relationships between the variables of the model, after applying the bootstrap procedure**  
 Source: Smart PLS 3 software processing

Data reflected in Table 4.16. are useful for validating/refuting the hypotheses in the analyzed structural model.

Following the analyses, out of the 13 hypotheses tested, 8 were validated. Unvalidated assumptions, where the p-value exceeded the maximum allowable level of 0.05, include CPK -> CIP, CSE -> CIP, CSE -> PCB, DCA -> CIP, and DCA -> PCB relationships, suggesting that these relationships are not statistically significant.

**The validated hypotheses are:**

- H1: Candidate Perception (PCB) positively influences the construction of a high-performance image (CIP) for an academic brand.
- H5: The development of student competencies (MI) enhances the positive perception of the academic brand (PCB).
- H6: The branding strategies of higher education institutions strengthen the prestige and recognition of the brand (PAS and PCB).
- H7: Combining teachers' knowledge with real examples (ADB) contributes to the formation of a high-performance image of the academic brand (CIP).

- H9: The way of defining and presenting the academic brand (CPK) influences the candidate's perception of the institution (PCB).
- H11: Innovations in training methods (MI) influence the candidate's opinion of the academic brand (PCB).
- H12: The perception of the institution's ability to develop students' competencies (PAS) influences the candidate's opinion on the brand (PCB).
- H13: Effective Marketing Campaigns (ADB) shape the candidate's perception of the academic brand (PCB).

The T-test reveals that high-performing marketing campaigns (CPK) have the strongest impact on candidates' perception of the academic brand (T-test = 6.719, p tends to zero), while the quality of educational services (CSE) has the lowest impact (T-test = 0.136, p = 0.892).

**Table 4.14. Values of asymptotic significance P and test T for the 13 hypotheses in the structural model**

Assumptions	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	Statistica test T (IO/STDEV)	Values P	Hypothesis test result
<b>ADB -&gt; CIP</b>	0.188	0.191	0.083	2.268	0.023	Validated
<b>ADB -&gt; PCB</b>	0.192	0.189	0.072	2.660	0.008	Validated
<b>CPK -&gt; CIP</b>	0.065	0.064	0.064	1.006	0.315	Invalidated
<b>CPK -&gt; PCB</b>	0.443	0.444	0.066	6.719	0.000	Validated
<b>CSE -&gt; CIP</b>	0.041	0.04	0.070	0.585	0.558	Invalidated
<b>CSE -&gt; PCB</b>	0.008	0.009	0.056	0.136	0.892	Invalidated
<b>DCA -&gt; CIP</b>	-0.142	-0.142	0.085	1.677	0.094	Invalidated
<b>DCA -&gt; PCB</b>	-0.039	-0.035	0.070	0.566	0.571	Invalidated
<b>PCB -&gt; CIP</b>	0.262	0.259	0.060	4.386	0.000	Validated
<b>MI -&gt; CIP</b>	0.219	0.219	0.082	2.664	0.008	Validated
<b>MI -&gt; PCB</b>	0.146	0.144	0.070	2.081	0.038	Validated
<b>PAS -&gt; CIP</b>	0.181	0.181	0.059	3.055	0.002	Validated
<b>PAS -&gt; PCB</b>	0.120	0.118	0.055	2.169	0.030	Validated

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) for CIP is 0.508, indicating that approximately 50.8% of the variability in building a performing image of the academic brand is explained by the predictors included in the model, suggesting a moderate explanatory power. The adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.499 confirms that the model remains robust after adjusting for predictor complexity.

For PCB,  $R^2$  is 0.601, which shows that the model explains 60.1% of the variability of the candidate's perception of the academic brand, indicating a greater explanatory power than in the case of CIP. The adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.595 confirms the robustness of the model after adjusting for the number of predictors.

Comparing the two constructs, PCB has greater explanatory power than CIP, suggesting that the factors influencing the candidate's perception of the academic brand are better defined and relevant than those influencing the construction of a high-performance academic brand image. It highlights the importance of understanding and optimizing the factors that shape the candidate's perception.

**Table 4.15. R<sup>2</sup>**

	<b>R-square</b>	<b>R-square adjusted</b>
<b>CIP</b>	0.508	0.499
<b>PCB</b>	0.601	0.595

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

The effect size ( $f^2$ ), analyzed in Table 4.18, ranges from 0.000 to 0.166, reflecting the contributions of each predictor variable to the variability explained in the model. These metrics indicate the extent to which each predictor variable influences dependent variables, such as marketing performance campaigns (CPK) and the candidate's perception of the academic brand (PCB). A higher value of  $f^2$  signifies a stronger impact of the variable on the model, while a lower value reflects a reduced effect on the explained variability. These values help assess the significance and relevance of each predictor in the specified model.

**Table 4.16. Interpretation  $f^2$**

	<b>f-square</b>
<b>ADB -&gt; CIP</b>	0.020
<b>ADB -&gt; PCB</b>	0.026
<b>CPK -&gt; CIP</b>	0.002
<b>CPK -&gt; PCB</b>	0.166
<b>CSE -&gt; CIP</b>	0.001
<b>CSE -&gt; PCB</b>	0.000
<b>DCA -&gt; CIP</b>	0.012
<b>DCA -&gt; PCB</b>	0.001
<b>PCB -&gt; CIP</b>	0.056
<b>MI -&gt; CIP</b>	0.028
<b>MI -&gt; PCB</b>	0.015
<b>PAS -&gt; CIP</b>	0.028
<b>PAS -&gt; PCB</b>	0.016

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

To evaluate the predictive quality of PLS models, we included predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), obtaining values of 0.454 for model 1 (CIP) and 0.579 for model 2 (PCB), according to Table 4.19. These values emphasize the substantial predictive relevance of the models. We also checked for multicollinearity using the VIF values, setting a threshold of 8. All predictors had VIF values below

2.5, indicating the absence of multicollinearity and confirming the robustness of the analyzed models.

**Table 4.17. Qualitative evaluation of model predictability**

	<b>Q<sup>2</sup> predict</b>
<b>CIP</b>	0.454
<b>PCB</b>	0.579

*Source: Author processing, Smart PLS 4 software output*

## **Capitolul 5 - Concluzii și analiza implicațiilor practice ale valorificării conceptelor de marketing digital în educație**

The purpose of this research is to identify the impact of digital marketing capabilities on the performance of universities, analyzing the factors that influence this process. The study examines the orientation of universities towards the adoption of innovative digital marketing concepts, technologies and techniques, with the aim of developing strategies appropriate to the current context. The research also evaluates the impact of key dimensions of constructs, such as the quality of educational services, marketing campaigns, development of students' skills, training methods, academic performance, branding actions, brand perception and building a performing image, on the digital marketing strategies applied in the admission campaigns of Romanian universities.

### **Practical implications of visual analysis in the educational context**

Based on the visual analysis carried out in the context of admission campaigns, essential practical implications for optimizing visual strategies in the educational environment were outlined. The analysis allowed the development of precisely adjusted graphic materials that maximize engagement and meet the expectations of the target audience. By adapting the colors, composition and use of symbols in the images, a significant impact on the perception and reaction of potential candidates was achieved.

A notable example is the clear preference for clear and concise infographics, which have proven to be much more effective than dense textual content. In addition, images evoking academic success and the benefits of international programs generated a more positive response than standardized approaches. These findings were crucial in refining and personalizing the marketing campaign messages, ensuring not only increased visibility but also a deep understanding of the information conveyed by the students. In addition to the visual content, the volume and diversity of materials required, including still images, short and dynamic videos, was correctly anticipated to maintain the audience's interest throughout the campaign. The use of real-

time feedback and analytical data provided by expoze.io allowed the campaign to be continuously adjusted, significantly contributing to increasing the conversion rate and attracting a greater number of qualified candidates. This continuous optimization process demonstrates the importance of a well-founded visual strategy, based on detailed analysis and adaptability to the specific needs of the audience.

### **Theoretical implications**

This research brings significant theoretical contributions by clarifying and confirming some aspects discussed in the literature on digital marketing in education. The study explores the conceptualization and applicability of modern digital marketing techniques, demonstrating how these strategies can be evaluated empirically. The paper also emphasizes the importance of an integrated and modern approach in educational marketing, detailing the adaptability of the elements of the 5Ps (price, product, promotion, placement, personnel) to the specifics of the educational market. The research highlights the crucial role of digital technologies and new methodologies in optimizing marketing strategies to attract and retain students.

On a practical level, the research highlights the need for advanced digital marketing techniques to be adopted by higher education institutions in order to remain competitive and meet the expectations of current generations of students. By implementing well-structured strategies and making effective use of analytics and tracking tools such as Google Analytics, institutions can monitor student behavior in real-time, adjusting their strategies to maximize the impact and effectiveness of campaigns. Institutions that adopt these modern strategies and technologies will not only attract and retain more students, but will also strengthen their position in the global educational market.

### **Limits and directions of research**

This research, although extensive and innovative, has certain limitations that require attention for a correct contextualization of the results. First, the use of neuromarketing techniques and social media data analysis, while useful, relies on tools and methodologies that can vary in accuracy and applicability depending on the context. The sample limited to a small number of students and higher education institutions also restricts the possibility of generalising the conclusions.

Second, reliance on technologies such as Google Analytics and Google Tag Manager raises issues related to data quality and accuracy. Any limitations in data collection or interpretation may affect the validity of the results. Differences in institutions' technical capabilities and available resources can influence the effectiveness of implementing digital marketing strategies, thus creating variations in the observed impact. To overcome these limitations, future

research should include a more diversified sample, extending the study to institutions in different regions and cultural contexts, to allow for a more robust generalization. It would also be valuable to explore the integration of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality, into educational marketing strategies, thus providing new insights into the personalization and interactivity of campaigns.

Additionally, a deeper use of real-time social media feedback and data could help adapt marketing strategies quickly and effectively. Future research should also focus on longitudinal analysis of the evolution of students' perceptions and behaviors in relation to digital marketing campaigns, which would provide a clearer understanding of long-term trends and changes. By expanding these research directions, a deeper and more detailed understanding of digital marketing in higher education can be achieved, facilitating the development of strategies that are more effective and tailored to the needs of students.

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