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Abstract

A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF IMAGE CONGRUENCE THEORY AS A PREDICTOR OF COLLEGE PREFERENCE

As higher education continues to become a more and more competitive industry, institutions must work to identify key factors influencing the college choice decision. Consumer behavior literature has been linking self-image factors to buying behaviors for decades, but few studies have brought self-image into service industries.

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the relationship between brand image, self-image, and college preference within the field of higher education. Specifically, the image congruence theory was used to measure the distance between the respondents ideal self-image and his/her actual perception of the brand image of an institution. Additional variables were identified and measured including spiritual, geographic, economic, academic, and social factors.

Anderson University, affiliated with the Church of God movement, was the school selected for the study. Usable responses from 498 prospective high school juniors were collected through the use of an online survey. Factor analysis results indicated that the image congruence variable was multidimensional leading to a revised model. Multiple regression was used to answer the null hypotheses and resulted in the rejection of all null hypotheses. Finally, cluster analysis provided additional suggestions and conclusions.

The academic contributions of this study stem from the image congruence variable being identified as the strongest predictor of college preference in relation to the additional variables mentioned above. Secondly, implications for Anderson University were provided based on the data analysis findings. Lastly, limitations were recognized and future research opportunities were discussed in depth.

