Enhancing University Branding through Fostering Intercultural Sensitivity: A Comparative Study of Domestic Students in Various Bachelor Programs

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ABSTRACT

In the globalized world of higher education, many universities strive to attract international students by showcasing their commitment to intercultural sensitivity and diversity. This research delves into the realm of university branding by investigating how institutions can position themselves as attractive destinations for international students. Specifically, we explore the differences in intercultural sensitivity among Budapest Business university students in Hungary across four distinct bachelor programs: Commerce and Marketing, Communication and Media, International Business Economics, and International Relations. The study was conducted during the spring semester of 2023 among Hungarian students only, i.e., no international students were included in the study. The research examines the influence of gender and the number of years spent at the university on intercultural sensitivity. Our study included 254 participants and employed Chen and Starosta's (2000) 24-items Intercultural Sensitivity Scale, comprising five critical components: respect for cultural differences, interaction engagement, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and attentiveness. Our findings shed light on the varying levels of intercultural sensitivity among students from different academic backgrounds. Notably, the research sheds light on how universities can leverage these differences to bolster their branding efforts. Universities can apply the outcomes of this study to strategically tailor their marketing and recruitment strategies in order to emphasize their ability to cultivate intercultural sensitivity among their sets of students.

Keywords: Intercultural sensitivity, MANOVA, Branding, Higher education

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized landscape of higher education, universities are faced with the ever-increasing challenge of attracting international students. In their pursuit of a diverse and interculturally sensitive set of students, universities are compelled to showcase their commitment to fostering an environment that thrives on inclusivity and mutual respect (Lin & Shen, 2020). This research examines this particular context of university branding, seeking to unravel the intricate dynamics of how institutions can strategically position themselves as alluring destinations for international students. This topic is particularly intriguing given the evolving dynamics of international education. As students from diverse cultural backgrounds seek higher education opportunities abroad, the role of intercultural sensitivity and its influence on their choice of academic institutions takes on significant importance (Bridges, 2023). The extent to which Hungarian students possess intercultural sensitivity, as well as the factors that impact it have become pivotal considerations for universities looking to attract and retain a globally diverse groups of students.

Despite the wealth of research in the area of intercultural sensitivity, a noticeable gap remains in the existing research in regard to the present research context. Prior studies (Toptsi & Hajeer, 2023; Chen & Hu, 2023; Jacobi, 2021) have explored various aspects of intercultural sensitivity but few have delved into the nuances of how it varies across different academic backgrounds. Furthermore, limited research has been dedicated to understanding the roles of gender and the duration of university enrollment in shaping intercultural sensitivity. This study endeavors to bridge this research gap by investigating these crucial aspects in the context of higher education. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to examine and elucidate the variations in intercultural sensitivity among university students in Hungary across various academic programs, namely Commerce and Marketing, Communication and Media, International Business Economics, and International Relations. Secondly, the study aspires to explore and understand the influence of gender and the number of years spent at university on intercultural sensitivity. By filling this research gap, the study aims to provide valuable insights that universities can utilize to tailor their marketing and recruitment strategies effectively, emphasizing their capacity to cultivate intercultural sensitivity among their student community, thus enhancing their global appeal.

1.1. Branding in Higher Education

Branding and student satisfaction play a critical role in the global competitiveness of higher education institutions and in international student recruitment and enrollment. A study conducted by Hashemnia and Bagherimajd (2020) investigated the influence of branding on the attraction of international students in higher education, specifically considering the mediating effects of brand satisfaction and loyalty. With 177 faculty members from Sistan and Baluchestan Universities as the sample, the research utilized structural equation modeling. The results demonstrate that brand reinforcement significantly impacts brand satisfaction, loyalty, and international student attraction while brand satisfaction directly and indirectly affects both loyalty and the attraction of international students. In addition, brand loyalty directly influences international student attraction.

According to Joseph et al. (2012), some of the key factors that influence students' decisions when selecting a university include the reputation of the university, selectivity, personal interaction, facilities and athletics, cost, location, and programs offered. In the context of the present inquiry, the central emphasis will be placed on personal interaction. The personal interaction factor refers to the level of interaction that students have with faculty, staff, and other students at the university. This factor can include things like faculty/student interaction, student life, community involvement, and a friendly environment (Joseph et al., 2012). Recognizing the diverse cultural backgrounds of international students, it is postulated that fostering intercultural sensitivity among domestic students is of paramount importance to facilitate effective and harmonious interpersonal interactions. Hence, the pivotal role of intercultural sensitivity among domestic students in shaping and enhancing the institutional brand of higher education establishments is evident. This, in turn, may exert a substantial influence on the satisfaction levels of international students and subsequently impacts the recruitment and enrollment of future international cohorts.

1.2 Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity, a component of intercultural competence, has drawn scholarly attention with varied interpretations. Chen and Starosta (2000) note that it is often confused with intercultural communication competence and intercultural awareness. Within their framework, intercultural communication competence encompasses three dimensions: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural adroitness. While intercultural awareness primarily involves cognitive aspects and intercultural adroitness relates to behavioral facets, intercultural sensitivity centers on the emotional and affective dimensions of the interacting individual (Chen & Starosta, 1996). In contrast, Bennet (1986) offers a different perspective, defining intercultural sensitivity as an individual's ability to transition from the denial stage, where cultural differences are denied, to the integration stage, which encompasses emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. Luo and Chan (2022) acknowledge the diversity of terminology in the field, including terms like intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural adaptation, and global competence. Regardless of the nomenclature, these terms collectively revolve around a shared notion: evaluating how individuals navigate intercultural contexts.

To enhance the intercultural sensitivity of domestic students, it is imperative to initially assess their current level of sensitivity, which constitutes the primary focus of the present investigation (Luo & Chan, 2022). Different questionnaires have been created to measure intercultural sensitivity, including Bennet (1986), Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) and Chen & Starosta (2000), among others. The present research employed Chen and Starosta's widely recognized Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (2000), which has been extensively validated in numerous prior studies (Fritz et al., 2005; Tamam, 2010; Wang, 2016; Wu, 2015; Hajeer et al., 2023). Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS, 2000) has found widespread application in diverse professional and cultural contexts for assessing intercultural sensitivity. Previous studies have utilized the ISS to gauge intercultural sensitivity among individuals

across various domains, including education (Demir & Kiran, 2016) and the hospitality sector (Yurur et al., 2018).

The development of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (henceforth ISS) involved a three-fold process (Chen & Starosta, 2000). Initially, an extensive literature review informed the creation of a comprehensive set of 73 items designed to measure intercultural sensitivity using a five-point Likert scale. A validation study, encompassing 168 participants, led to the identification of 44 valid items. In the second phase, 414 participants completed the questionnaire to establish the factor structure of these 44 items. This analysis revealed five distinct factors, comprising a total of 24 items. These factors included Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants and Data Collection

The questionnaires were filled during the spring semester in 2023 and involved a total of 254 participants from Budapest Business University. The sample included 90 males and 164 females, ensuring a diverse gender representation within the sample. The nationality of the students is Hungarian. The age range of the participants was between 18 to 24 years, reflecting a predominantly younger demographic. The academic distribution among the participants encompassed various disciplines, with 74 individuals specializing in Commerce and Marketing, 58 in International Relations, 73 in Business, and 49 in Economics and Communication and Media. This diversity in academic backgrounds contributed to a well-rounded participant group, offering a broad perspective on intercultural sensitivity across different fields of study within the higher education context. For the initial data collection, an online Google Form survey was distributed to a total of 400 university students specializing in business-related fields. Out of the 400 surveys disseminated, a substantial cohort comprising 254 students actively participated by completing the survey, thereby providing valuable data for the study.

2.2 Instrument

The data collection instrument utilized in this study was developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). The structured questionnaire consisted of 24 items (see Appendix 1) that represent five distinct constructs: Interaction Engagement (7 items) assesses the willingness of individuals to engage in intercultural exchanges, with items such as , "I often show my understanding of different cultures through verbal or nonverbal cues"; Respect for Cultural Differences (6 items), which focuses on acknowledging and accepting differences between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, with items such as, "I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures"; Interaction Confidence (5 items), measuring an individual's self-assurance when interacting with people from different cultures, with items such as "I am confident when interacting with individuals from diverse cultures"; Interaction Enjoyment (3 items), which gauges the positive emotions and satisfaction experienced during

intercultural interactions, including items such as, "I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures"; and lastly, Interaction Attentiveness (3 items), which examines an individual's ability to focus on interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, as seen in items such as "I actively seek information during interactions with individuals from different cultures".

2.3 Data analysis

The reliability of the scales in this study was examined to ensure the consistency and dependability of the measurement tools. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to assess internal consistency, a key aspect of reliability, with a commonly accepted threshold of 0.7 or higher (Pallant, 2011). However, it is worth noting that for scales with a limited number of items, low Cronbach alpha values are common. In such cases, it may be more appropriate to report the mean inter-item correlation for the items, which is a robust alternative for assessing reliability (Pallant, 2011). An optimal range for the inter-item correlation is recommended to fall between 0.2 and 0.4 (Briggs & Cheek, 1986).

As presented in Table 1, the reliability analysis of the five scales used in this study revealed varying results. The "Attentiveness" scale, with only three items, demonstrated a relatively low Cronbach alpha, which is typical for shorter scales, at 0.433. However, the inter-item correlation for this scale, as reported in the table, falls within the acceptable range. This suggests that despite the brevity of the scale, the items were consistent in measuring the construct. The other scales displayed Cronbach alpha values around the 0.7 threshold, indicating strong internal consistency and reliability. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the Cronbach alpha values and inter-item reliability for all five scales, ensuring that the measurement tools used in this study are reliable and dependable for analyzing intercultural sensitivity.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha & Interitem correlation of the five scales

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Inter-item correlation mean
Engagement	.664	.228
Respect	.742	.333
Confidence	.851	.534
Enjoyment	.603	.332
Attentiveness	.433	0.203

Source: Authors' own research (editing)

Prior to conducting a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), several assumptions were assessed to ensure the validity of the analysis. These assumptions, outlined below, encompass considerations related to sample size, normality and outliers, linearity, homogeneity of regression, multicollinearity, and homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices (Pallant, 2011).

Sample Size: One fundamental prerequisite for MANOVA is having an adequate sample size in each cell, surpassing the number of dependent variables. In this study, the

dependent variables consisted of five components of intercultural sensitivity, including "respect for cultural differences," "interaction engagement," "interaction confidence," "interaction enjoyment," and "attentiveness." It is noteworthy that each cell within the sample significantly exceeded the minimum required number of cases, ensuring the robustness of the analysis.

Normality and Outliers: Assessing normality involves scrutinizing the skewness and kurtosis values for each variable. The data was considered normal if the skewness fell within the range of -2 to +2 and the kurtosis ranged from -7 to +7 (Byrne, 2010; Hair et al., 2010). In the present study, skewness values between variables ranged from -0.918 to 0.35, while kurtosis values ranged from -0.600 to 0.579. Furthermore, multivariate normality was assessed using Mahalanobis distances, which revealed three outliers that were subsequently removed from the dataset.

Linearity: The linearity assumption examines the presence of a linear relationship between each pair of dependent variables. To assess this, scatterplots were generated for each pair of variables (Pallant, 2011). Examination of the scatterplots indicated that all variables displayed linear relationships, satisfying this assumption.

Homogeneity of Regression: The assumption of homogeneity of regression is pertinent when conducting a stepdown analysis, which organizes dependent variables based on theoretical or conceptual reasoning (Pallant, 2011). Since such an analysis was not part of the study's design, this assumption was not explored.

Multicollinearity and Singularity: To evaluate potential multicollinearity among variables, a Pearson correlation test was performed. The analysis revealed that the correlation coefficients (r) ranged from 0.091 to 0.592, indicating no excessive correlations among the variables.

Homogeneity of Variance-Covariance Matrices: The homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was confirmed through Box's test, where the significance level was set at 0.095. This test's non-significant result suggests that the variance-covariance matrices were indeed homogeneous, supporting the assumption's validity.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Differences based on field of study.

As shown in the following table, there is no evidence of a significant difference among the groups. This is indicated by the significance level (Sig.) of Wilk’s Lambda and Pillai’s Trace test, which is reported as .572 and .569 (refer to Table 2 for more details). This significance level indicates that the *p*-value is more than 0.05. This means that statistically, there is no significant difference among the four specializations, namely, Commerce and Marketing, Communication and Media, International Business Economics, and International Relations in terms of their intercultural sensitivity level.

Table 2: Differences among the groups

Effect		Value	F- value	Hypothesis degrees of freedom	Error degrees of freedom	Significance.	Partial Eta squared
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.988	4165.396	5.000	246.000	<.001	.988
	Wilks' Lambda	.012	4165.396	5.000	246.000	<.001	.988
	Hotelling's Trace	84.663	4165.396	5.000	246.000	<.001	.988
	Roy's Largest Root	84.663	4165.396	5.000	246.000	<.001	.988
Specialization	Pillai's Trace	.053	.896	15.000	744.000	**.569**	.018
	Wilks' Lambda	.948	.893	15.000	679.499	**.572**	.018
	Hotelling's Trace	.055	.890	15.000	734.000	.576	.018
	Roy's Largest Root	.030	1.502	5.000	248.000	.190	.029

Source: Authors' own research (editing)

3.2 Differences based on gender

In light of the various analyses performed within this study, it is prudent to consider an adjustment to the alpha level, thereby mitigating the potential for Type 1 errors. A widely accepted technique for this purpose involves implementing a Bonferroni correction. In essence, this correction method entails dividing the original alpha level of 0.05 by the total number of planned analyses, thereby fortifying the statistical rigor (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Within the scope of this study, examining five dependent variables, a tailored adjustment of the alpha level is warranted. This adjustment involves lowering the alpha value to 0.01 by dividing the conventional 0.05 alpha by the number of dependent variables, which in this case is five. Thus, statistical significance is attributed solely to results where the probability value (Sig.) registers below the 0.01 threshold. Consequently, the data reveals significant disparities in regard to three specific variables: engagement, respect, and confidence (as indicated in Table 3).

Table 3: Statistical significance of dependent variables

Variable	F-value	Significance.
Total engagement	7,167	,008
Total respect	14,828	<,001
Total enjoyment	,640	,425
Total attentiveness	1,241	,266
Total confidence	13,480	<,001

Source: Authors' own research (editing)

Upon analyzing the mean values for males and females (see Table 4), notable distinctions emerge. In terms of engagement, females exhibit higher mean value, suggesting a greater propensity for active participation in intercultural conversations. Conversely, males demonstrate higher levels of confidence in intercultural interactions. Furthermore, the data

indicates that females outperform males in terms of respect for cultural differences, suggesting a heightened propensity to exhibit respect in situations involving intercultural diversity and its associated nuances.

Table 4: Comparison of Intercultural Sensitivity Dimensions Between Genders

Variable	Gender	Mean
Engagement	male	25,633
	female	26,823
Respect	Male	24,600
	Female	26,335
Enjoyment	Male	12,100
	Female	11,884
attentiveness	Male	10,389
	Female	10,659
Confidence	Male	18,700
	Female	16,909

Source: Authors' own research (editing)

3.3 Differences based on year of study

The statistical analysis reveals an absence of significant differences among the groups, as evidenced by the significance levels (Sig.) obtained from both the Wilk's Lambda and Pillai's Trace tests, which are reported as 0.866. This indicates that the p-values exceed the 0.05 threshold. Thus, from a statistical perspective, no statistically significant distinctions exist among the three groups – first, second, and third-year students – regarding their levels of intercultural sensitivity.

4. Conclusions

This research aimed to provide a snapshot of intercultural sensitivity among university students in Hungary across diverse academic programs. Through addressing its aim, the study offers practical insights and a deeper grasp of the research problem. The findings highlight the uniform levels of intercultural sensitivity among students from various fields, reinforcing the inclusive nature of higher education institutions. Furthermore, it has successfully addressed a gap in the existing literature by underscoring the consistency of intercultural sensitivity across gender and years spent at university. This study emphasizes the importance of fostering intercultural sensitivity from the start of a student's university journey.

As we consider the future, this research paves the way for several avenues of exploration. Future research can delve into the dynamic aspects of intercultural sensitivity, including the impact of intercultural training programs and the role of extracurricular activities in enhancing this crucial attribute among students. Furthermore, exploring how curriculum design and pedagogical approaches influence intercultural sensitivity can provide valuable insights for academic institutions. However, this study is not without its limitations. The focus was on a specific set of academic disciplines, and extending the research to a more diverse range of programs would likely yield further insights. Additionally, the sample size, while adequate for the analyses conducted, could be expanded to increase generalizability. Despite

these limitations, the conclusions drawn here have important implications for higher education institutions. By positioning themselves as promoting of intercultural sensitivity, universities can enhance their global appeal, diversify their student body, and foster a culture of inclusivity and mutual respect, leaving a lasting impression on prospective international students. This study not only advances our understanding of the topic but also highlights the continued relevance and importance of intercultural sensitivity in today's interconnected world.

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Appendix A. ISS

Below is a series of statements concerning intercultural communication. There are no right or wrong answers. Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement. Thank you for your cooperation. 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree (Please put the number corresponding to your answering the blank before the statement)

1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.

2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.

3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.

4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.

5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.

6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.

7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures. 8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.

9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures. 10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.

11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.

12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.

13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.

14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.

15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.

16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.

17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.

18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.

19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.

20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.

21. I often give positive responses to my culturally-different counterpart during our interaction.

22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.

23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.

24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.