



## Role of the physical environment in creating an academic major brand image

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Image and reputation management have become important activities in the current competitive higher education environment, both at the institutional and program level. The image of an academic major is a key determinant in the college decision and perceptions of one's chosen major influences willingness of students and alumni to recommend their major to others (Stephenson, Heckert & Yerger 2016). Thus, academic programs must manage factors that contribute to a positive reputation among prospective and current students. Students use a variety of cues to form evaluations of college offerings. Although there is ample evidence that academic quality, faculty and job placement contribute to the perceived image of a college academic program, there is little research to understand the role of the built environment in forming academic major image. *The goal of this study was to explore how currently enrolled students use cues in the physical environment where their studies take place to form a 'brand image' of the academic major.*

Higher education institutions have adopted a marketing approach in recruitment and retention, viewing the student as a customer with multiple choices. Physical space cues have been shown to be an important factor in creating image perceptions in other consumer exchange situations. The built environment reflects organizational understanding of consumers' needs, serving as an evaluative criterion in the purchase decision (Koo & Kim 2013). In retail/service contexts, a positively perceived physical environment stimulates internal responses and yields favorable behavioral intentions such as patronage and positive word of mouth intentions (Ryu & Jang 2008). Studies show that students' college decisions mirror other consumer decision processes (Stephenson, Heckert & Yerger, 2016), thus it seems reasonable that the built environment in an educational setting would have similar effects as in other exchange contexts. It is therefore proposed that students' image of their major can be predicted in part by perceptions of the physical environment where their major studies take place.

*Methods.* Data were collected via electronic survey from undergraduate students in a family and consumer science department at a Midwestern university. The survey included closed- and open-ended questions related to built environment features developed from the environmental psychology and service exchange literature. Two hundred seventy five individuals responded (32.2% response rate). Respondents included nutrition (28.6%), family science (41%) and design and merchandising (30.4%) majors.

ANOVA tests revealed no differences by major, therefore, analyses combined responses for all majors. Regression analysis was used to identify variables that influence perceptions of major image. Independent variables measured perceptions about the physical environment (maintenance, safety, cleanliness, comfort, wayfinding) and perceptions of the building's suitability for learning, comparison to other campus buildings, to other institutions, and to standards in the student's field of study. The model was significant ( $R^2 = 60.4$ ,  $F = 34.078$ ,  $p =$

.000). Two variables predicted academic major image: comparison with other universities ( $\beta=.229$ ,  $t(246) = 3.72$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and comparison with standards in the field ( $\beta=.467$ ,  $t(246) = 7.95$ ,  $p = .000$ ) suggesting that currently enrolled students use physical cues in confirming or disconfirming pre-decision expectations based on comparison with alternatives.

Content analysis of open-ended responses yielded further insights about academic major image and its relationship to the built environment. Two researchers independently reviewed open-ended responses to identify themes related to formation of academic major image. Two key themes emerged. One theme related to students' desire/expectation to be stimulated or inspired to learn by their surroundings. Representative comments illustrate this theme: "*The environment in [this building] is not very stimulating for learning, very outdated and "strict" feeling.*"; "*The building... needs renovation to create an atmosphere that inspires me to learn.*" Students may equate quality of the educational experience with the physical space in which education is delivered. This parallels findings in consumer research, where customers relate physical cues to merchandise or service quality (Koo & Kim 2013). A second theme expanded on comparative evaluation as a means to forming an image of one's major. A common response regarding perceptions of the major was to compare the physical space occupied by their major program to their high school, to community colleges and to other universities with similar programs. Image also appeared to form from comparison with other buildings on the same campus. One respondent noted "*It's only when I go to the other newer buildings [on this campus] that I really realize how old [this building] is.*" Another remarked "*Other institutions that house [my major] have amazing facilities. The labs are updated, like sewing, kitchens, drafting, and computer labs whereas [this building] isn't.*" This theme suggests that attention to attributes of competitor institutions and students' previous experiences when positioning an academic major 'brand' is important, as students appear to draw on alternatives in their evoked set during the post-college decision expectancy confirmation/disconfirmation process.

These results suggest that physical space cues contribute to the creation of an academic major image, which parallels brand image formation in other consumer contexts. In addition to other factors, cues in the built environment may influence the perceptions and representations that students construct about the major, suggesting that attention to physical spaces is important as academic programs develop and execute strategic plans to attract and retain students. As few studies on college decision processes and student satisfaction address the built environment in higher education, it may be useful to include physical cues in future studies seeking to understand reasons for college selection and satisfaction.

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