

### University Websites: Attractive or Casual?

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## University Websites: Attractive or Casual?

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### Abstract

International student mobility is increasing around the world and the number of students who prefer Turkey for higher education is increasing every year. It is also important for universities to be able to influence students' preferences and attract more successful students. The most used and most important means of universities to introduce themselves to students coming from another country, to leave a positive image and to increase their organisational attractiveness are the corporate websites of universities. Universities create an image about themselves with the visuals they use on their websites. The aim of this study is to examine how universities in Turkey appeal to foreign students to look attractive. For this purpose, it has been examined by using visual content analysis whether there are contents that will positively affect the organisational attractiveness of the university for foreign students on the home pages of the websites of state and private universities in Turkey. Among 129 state and 74 private universities in Turkey, 25 universities were selected by proportional stratified sampling method. The codes determined as a result of the visual analysis were gathered under four themes. It has been found that universities mostly include their scientific studies on their websites, and private universities give more space than state universities to the educational environments, buildings, campuses and visuals of their students interacting in these environments, which create the first impression of the university for international students.

**Keywords:** University websites, Organisational image, Organisational attractiveness, International student

### Introduction

Today, as a result of the rapid developments in education, technology and transportation, studying abroad becomes a distinctive experience for students. According to the report prepared by the OECD (2020), the number of international students worldwide was around two million in 1998, while this number reached 5.6 million in 2018. This situation has made international student mobility an important market for universities.

The number of foreign students in Turkey has also shown an increase similar to the increase in the number worldwide. While the number of the foreign students registered at universities in Turkey was 48.183 in the 2013-2014 academic year, it climbed up to 185.047 in the 2019-2020 academic year (YÖK, 2021). The number of foreign students in Turkey has nearly quadrupled since 2013. Due to the increasing international student mobility in recent years, the internationalization of universities is also gaining importance (OECD, 2021). In the 2019-2020 academic year, there are foreign students coming from approximately 200 different countries at universities in Turkey (YÖK, 2021).

Although the US, UK and China are leading in foreign student enrolment, some other countries like Canada, Australia and Japan are increasing their share in this market recently (Project Atlas, 2019). This situation leads to an increasingly competitive environment and universities need to provide information to students so that they can make informed choices. Websites have become an important tool for

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universities, as the internet is considered one of the main sources of information for potential students (Brown et al. 2009). Websites are a window through which universities introduce themselves to the world and are one of the most important tools that enable them to communicate with large audiences (Iloh, 2014). Through their websites, universities can provide information about their academic programs, campuses, facilities, research opportunities, and student affairs (Peker et al., 2016). Universities present their strengths, cultures, visions, values and images through their websites. The university's website is also one of the tools that enable them to present the identity of the university and the messages they want to give (Al-Qahtani, 2021).

Visiting a university's website has become the first visit to the university itself (Anderson & Reid, 1999). The official websites of universities are perceived as a basic resource by the majority of prospective students, and students first visit the websites of universities (QS, 2020). When prospective students enter the university's website, they visit the campus and the facilities offered by the university online. This process, which students go through to collect information on university websites, has an important role in students' decision-making processes (Pooch & Lefond, 2001). Since the texts and images on the websites give the first organisational impression to the prospective students, the messages and images conveyed on the websites are extremely important (Saichaie & Morphey, 2014). They affect the decision-making process of the prospective students because one of the important factors affecting many decisions and actions that people will take is the image perception that people have about the organisation (Anctil, 2008).

When the literature is examined, there are studies related with student recruitment and university websites (Gordon & Berhow, 2009; Ihme et al., 2016; Meyer & Jones, 2011; Pegoraro, 2006) and university websites as a communication tool (Costales, 2012; Estera & Shahjahan, 2019; Iloh, 2014; Saichaie, 2011; Tang, 2011; Venuti & Nasti, 2016). However, there is a gap about the extent to which university websites attract foreign students. The purpose of this study is to examine how universities in Turkey appeal to foreign students to look attractive.

## **Literature Review**

### **Organisational Image**

Organisational image is defined as the whole of the effects that occur in the minds of individuals about an organisation (Barich & Kotler, 1991). It is related to various physical and behavioural characteristics such as the name of the organisation, its architecture, product/service diversity, tradition, ideology, and the quality of the impact it leaves on individuals interacting with the organisation. Organisational image is the instant mental picture held in the minds of individuals about the organisation and is what comes to mind when individuals see or hear the name of the organisation or see its logo (Gray & Balmer, 1998). According to Kennedy (1977), the organisational image includes two different dimensions: the functional dimension, which includes concrete features, and the emotional dimension, which includes feelings and attitudes towards an organisation.

Today, organisations aim to attract more qualified individuals in order to adapt to the rapidly changing environment and to be competitive in market conditions. In order to achieve this, organisational image plays an important role. A strong organisational image provides an important competitive advantage for organisations (Davies & Chun, 2002). A positive image not only attracts large numbers of individuals but also attracts higher-quality individuals (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). For this reason, creating a good image for organisations and ensuring the sustainability of this image contributes to the effectiveness of organisations. In the context of globalization, online appearance stands out as an important concept in order to compete in the market. Establishing trust in websites is considered important for organisations to be competitive (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). For this reason, developing a positive organisational image and increasing organisational attractiveness through the internet is gaining more and more importance for today's organisations.

### **Organisational Attractiveness**

Organisational attractiveness is the whole of the feelings and thoughts that individuals have about certain organisations as potential employment places, as well as the perceived characteristics of the organisation

that cause these feelings and thoughts (Highhouse et al., 2003). The concept of organisational attractiveness is defined as individuals who want to take part in an organisation describe the organisation as an "attractive work environment". Organisational attractiveness can be expressed as being perceived as attractive by existing individuals in the organisation and potential individuals to join the organisation, and these individuals having positive feelings and thoughts towards the organisation (Bingöl & Aksu, 2019). Individuals' image perceptions of the organisation and the extent to which they find the organisation attractive are important factors in the formation of their intention to join the organisation. This also applies to universities and prospective students. In the study conducted by Güler and Basım (2015) on high school graduate candidates, it was determined that the attractiveness and reputation of the organisation positively affected students' intention to join a higher education institution. Therefore, students choose the university by taking its image and attractiveness into consideration.

### **University Choice Process**

Choosing a university is a complex process, especially as the student's needs and circumstances are involved in the process. The most widely used concept of university selection was developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and is defined as a process that students go through to determine which university they will attend. University decision-making models generally consist of three critical stages: (I) the aptitude at which the person decides to go to university, (II) the search in which a person begins to search for information about universities and narrows down his alternatives, and (III) the choice in which the student evaluates the alternatives and decides which university to attend. As students develop strong desires to go to university, they begin to focus on where they want to go. In the search phase, students use a variety of strategies and ways to obtain information that will ultimately inform university decision-making. One of the most used tools today is the websites of universities.

Higher education institutions can influence the decision-making processes of prospective students to choose their own institutions by creating campus trips and informative websites for visits to university facilities for prospective students through promotional campaigns (Menon, 2004). However, considering the students who want to get to know the institution from another country, activities such as campus visits are not likely to take place. For this reason, the website is used as an important tool for the higher education institution to introduce itself and to increase its attractiveness by leaving a positive image especially on potential students who will come from abroad.

Ramli (2019) stated in his study that the ranking and image of the university is an important criterion that affects the decision-making of foreign students. They also revealed that having an environmentally friendly university with a physically attractive campus is a powerful factor in influencing their decision-making processes. Factors such as the image of the university, perceived quality, and recommendation from friends are powerful factors that influence foreign students' decision to choose a university. Polat and Arslan (2017) also gathered the factors affecting the university choices of international students under five headings in their studies. These are academic factors including quality of education, university reputation, quality of academic staff and reputation of scientific research; organisational factors including the quality of the university campus, its physical and technological infrastructure, the level of internationalization of the university and postgraduate education opportunities; economic factors including scholarship opportunities and characteristics of the city; individual factors including department choice based on interests and abilities, and cultural similarity; and social factors including the suggestion of acquaintances and the social opportunities of the university.

### **University Websites**

From an academic point of view, the websites of universities are very important for all potential students. A visually appealing and easy-to-use website is often the first impression a university makes. Even before asking for information or expressing interest, prospective students and others visit an organisation's website and look for information. University websites are becoming an increasingly useful source of information for prospective students (Moogan, 2011). The home page of the university website is the first view of the university for many prospective students (Greenwood, 2012). Since the homepage is the first look at the organisation, individuals can evaluate the organisation simply by visiting its website. Brown and colleagues (2009) state that the information provided on university

websites is generally more effective in informing prospective students. Given the increasing use of websites, it is important for universities to pay attention to how they communicate with prospective students through their websites and to update their websites regularly, and the words, pictures and symbols found on the homepages of websites are where the university starts to establish relationships with its students (Hartley & Morphew, 2008).

Images on websites are an important component in the transmission of both explicit and implicit messages. Images of architecture (e.g., traditional and modern) and landscape (e.g., greenery, lawns and trees) shape students' impressions of the organisation (Ramasubramanian et al., 2002). Students associate academic quality with features such as traditional campus architecture and landscape. Such images are linked to concepts of legitimacy and reliability, such as corporate longevity and traditions. The use of architectural and landscape images to represent the organisation has a strong effect on structuring and/or validating students' expectations about an organisation (Saichaie & Morphew, 2014).

There are also practical considerations to consider when developing an effective website. When students visit the websites of universities, they should be able to get the information they need to make informed decisions, and the images on the websites should reflect the life in the new country, the facilities to be encountered, the resources, the culture and even the weather (Mogaji, 2016). Poock and Lenfond (2001) stated in their study that content and organisation/architecture are the most important features of university websites. In the study by Karani and colleagues (2021), in which they measured the effect of university website usability on satisfaction, they stated that the features affecting users' satisfaction were respectively content, layout, readability; user interface design; performance and effectiveness; navigation and links. In case of paying attention to these issues, the results will be beneficial for both the university and the students, and as a result of their experience, the students will have a positive image perception towards the university and develop a sense of satisfaction from the moment they access the website.

In summary, websites are the most commonly used tool for universities to represent themselves to their prospective students, especially to the international students who have almost no chance apart from using corporate websites to learn about the university. The image that the universities create on their websites can affect students' university choice process positively or negatively. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature by targeting the organisational images on the university websites for international students.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The population of the research consists of 203 (129 state and 74 private) universities in Turkey in the 2019-2020 academic year. The proportional stratified sampling method was used in sample selection. Stratified sampling involves the process of classifying elements in the universe so that a more representative sample can be obtained. The sampling frame is first divided into categories or strata of relatively homogeneous subpopulations that have theoretical or essential meaning in the research. The researcher then takes independent random samples from each of the layers. Each of the sample layers, therefore, represents a sampling frame, and the selection of sample items proceeds as in simple random sampling or systematic random sampling (Tracy & Carkin, 2014). In this direction, universities are divided into 10-year strata (such as those established between 1970-1979) according to their foundation years. Then, the number of universities in each stratum was determined and the required number of universities from each stratum was determined proportionally in order to reach the sample number of 25. Samples from each stratum were determined by simple random sampling technique. The sample consists of 17 state and 8 private universities.

### **Coding**

In the research, the screenshots of the home pages of the websites of the universities were analysed by the visual content analysis method. As the websites are constantly updated communication tools, the screenshots were taken on the same day in the 2020-2021 academic year. In addition to saving

screenshots as images, the sites have also been saved as a whole in order to allow the sites to be reviewed offline due to possible updates on the websites.

According to Krippendorff (1980), content analysis is a research technique used to make reproducible and valid inferences from data to their context. In the content analysis method, the frequency of certain visual elements in an image sample is determined and then these frequencies are analysed (Rose, 2002). In this study, the stages of Rose's (2002) visual content analysis method were followed. In the first of these stages, the images to be analysed are determined. Then, based on these images, categories are created for coding. Images are coded according to the categories obtained and the results are analysed.

In the research, firstly, the images on the websites were determined. In order to create the themes, a literature review was conducted on the images of universities and the preferences of international students (Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006; Polat & Arslan, 2017; Saichaie & Morphey, 2014). These studies have themes like academics, institution image, economy, personal reasons, student life, programme evaluation, campus aesthetics and value. By putting the similar themes from the literature together, four main themes were created. The homepages of the websites were coded within the framework of four determined themes. Coding was made for each website and these codes were placed under the themes on the Excel file. In order to test the reliability of the coding, a second coder was informed about the themes and codes, and the visual content analysis was repeated. As a result of the two analyses, the results of the two encoders were examined and they showed 95% similarity. Then, the frequencies of the codes were calculated. In order to interpret the differences between state and private universities, frequencies were calculated separately.

## Results

The codes found out as a result of the visual analysis are grouped under four themes: (I) Academic, (II) Organisational, (III) Social and (IV) Economic.

**Table 1.** Visual content analysis results of university websites

Theme	Code	<i>f</i>	State Uni.	Private Uni.
Academic	Scientific study	24	16	8
	Quality	15	8	7
	Department information	9	3	6
Organisational	Physical environment	14	8	6
	Student photo	13	7	6
	Promotional video	12	7	5
	Organisational numbers	12	10	2
	Internationalization	8	5	3
	Map	4	4	0
	Social	Social media accounts	25	17
Social events		20	13	7
Political news		11	8	3
Important day celebrations		9	7	2
Sports events		8	4	4
Economic	Accommodation	5	0	5
	Scholarship	3	1	2
	City promotion	1	1	0

Three codes were determined under the "Academic" theme. These are the "Scientific study" code, which includes scientific studies, publications, conferences, and symposiums made by universities, the "Quality" code, which includes the quality awards and success rankings of universities, and the "Department information" code, which universities introduce their departments. When the websites of the universities are examined in terms of "Academic", it is seen that while almost all of them have scientific studies/research, these activities are generally conferences and symposiums organized within their own structure. Scientific studies are followed by quality-related posts, and it has been found out that universities present their quality certificates and national/international rankings for quality less than scientific studies. In the last place, it was seen that the promotion of undergraduate/graduate/doctorate programs of universities took place.



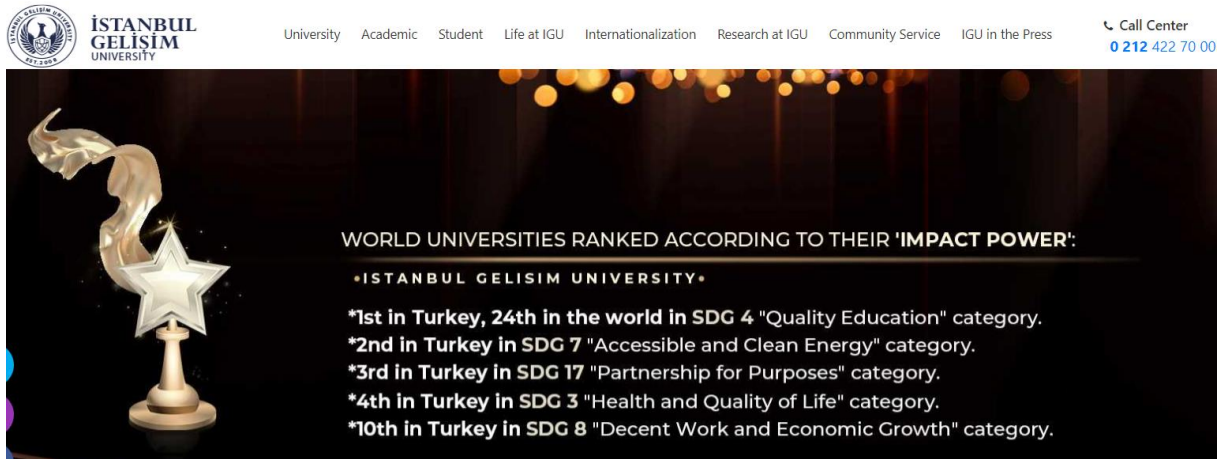


Figure 1. Example of “Quality” coding in the Academic category

Six codes were determined under the "Organisational" theme. These are the "Physical environment" code showing the campus, buildings and gardens of the university, the "Student photo" code showing the students at various places in the university, the "Promotional video" code containing the video prepared to promote the university, the "Organisational numbers" code which provides numerical information about various units related to the university, the "Internationalization" code which shows the cooperation and projects carried out by the university at the international level, and the "Map" code which indicates the location of the university.

Under the "Organisational" theme, it was seen that about half of the universities share the physical environments including the campus, nature, building, and the students who are engaged in different activities in different parts of the university. Relatively similarly, it has been found out that half of the universities present numbers related to different subjects such as institutes, departments, academicians, and students. These codes are followed by internationalization-oriented posts showing the cooperation and projects carried out by universities at the international level and maps showing the location of the university.



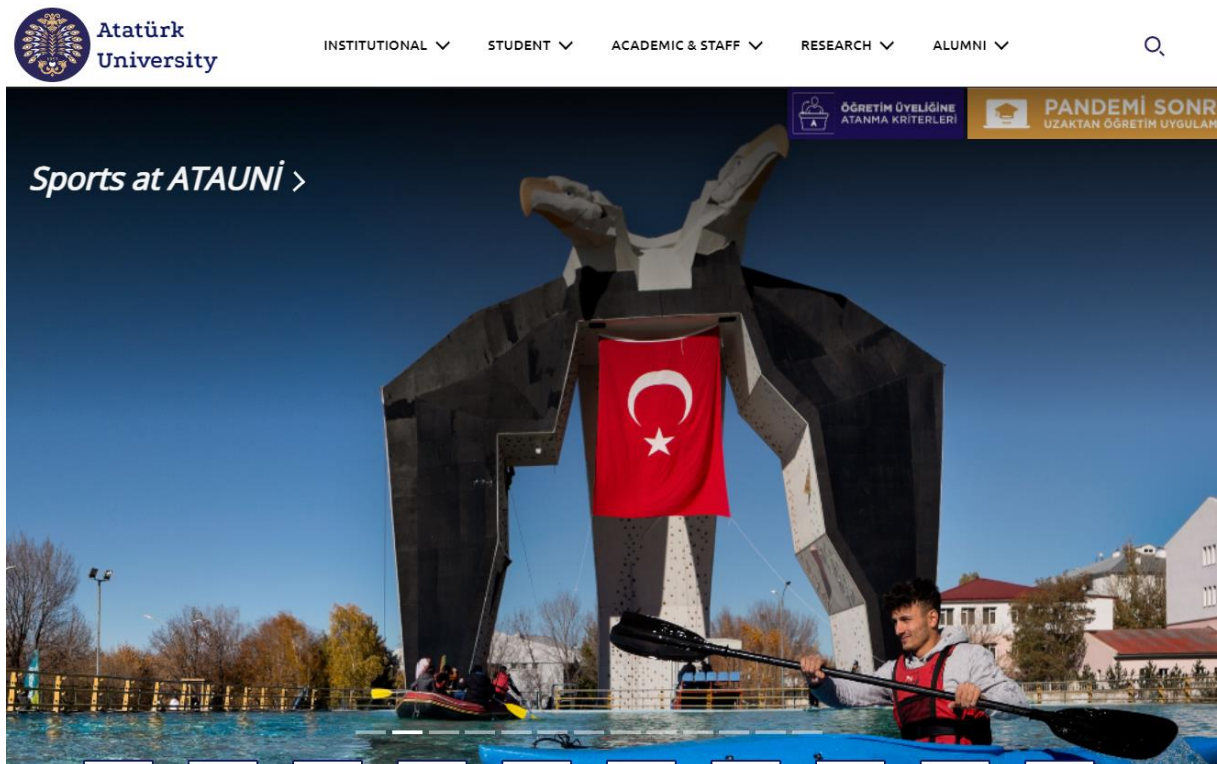
Figure 2. Example of “Physical environment” coding in the organisational category



**Figure 3.** Example of “*Internationalization*” coding in the Organisational category

Five codes were defined under the “Social” theme. These are the "Social media accounts" code owned by the university, the "Social activities" code for various events held at the university, the "Political news" code, which includes the news the university shares about political issues on the agenda, and the "Important day celebrations" code, which includes the news the university shares about important days such as holidays and anniversaries, and “Sports events” code indicating the sportive events held within the university.

When the "Social" theme is examined, it is seen that all universities have more than one social media account and these social media accounts are on all websites. It has been observed that the majority of universities include social activities such as music, theatre and conversations on their websites. Social events are followed by the reactions of the universities to the political events on the agenda and the posts they make to celebrate national and religious special days. Under this theme, the sports activities organized within the university or in which the school teams are included are at the lowest level on the home pages of the websites of the universities.



**Figure 4.** Example of “*Sports events*” coding in the Social category



Three codes were determined under the "Economic" theme. These are the "Accommodation" code, which shows the accommodation opportunities for the students of the university, the "Scholarship" code, which shows the scholarship opportunities offered by the university to the students, and the "City promotion" code, which is intended to promote the city where the university is located. Under the theme of "Economic", which includes issues related to the financial situation of students, it has been observed that very few universities include accommodation and scholarship opportunities that students can benefit from. In addition, almost none of the universities have shared anything to promote the city they are in.

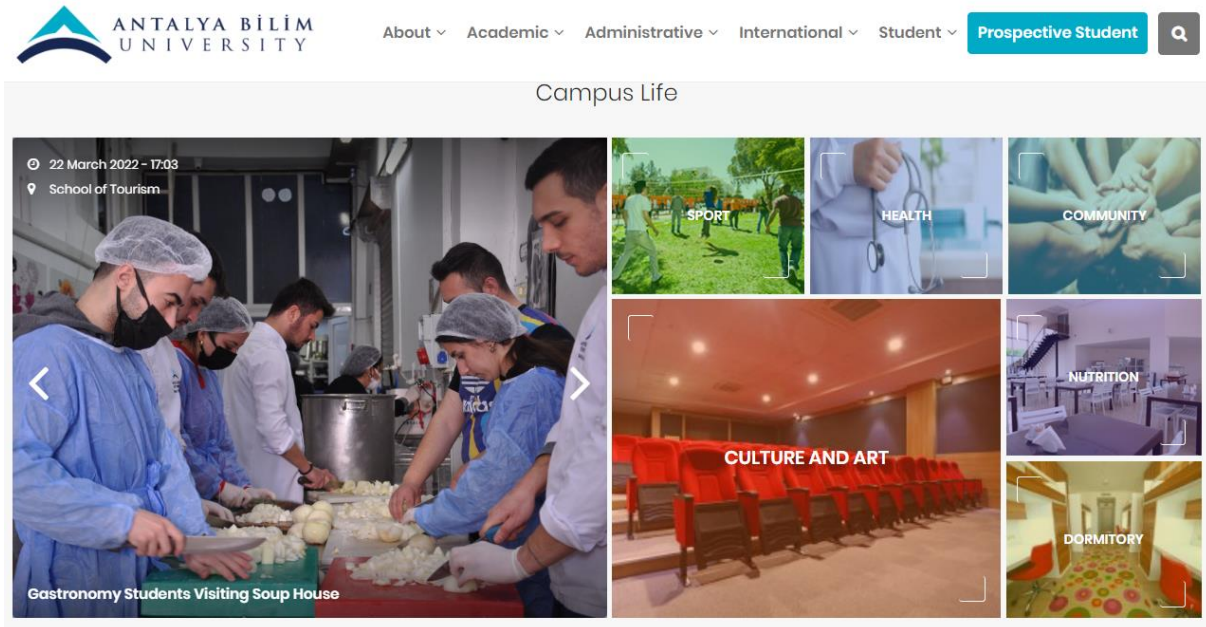


Figure 5. Example of "Accommodation" coding in the Economic category

### Discussion and Conclusion

Visual content analysis on corporate websites, which is one of the most important ways of introducing universities to international students, creating a positive image about themselves in students and increasing their organisational attractiveness, which will create a sense of choosing themselves in students, provides important findings about universities.

According to the results of this research, which was conducted to determine whether there is content that will positively affect the organisational attractiveness of the university for foreign students on the home pages of the websites of public and private universities in Turkey, universities highlight their scientific studies. As a result of the research conducted by Pooch (2006), it was determined that the most searched information by prospective students was department information and program introductions. From this point of view, it can be said that state universities in Turkey are not sufficient to provide students with information about their departments, while private universities include more of their departments on their websites compared to state universities. It is observed that universities present their awards and quality certificates rather than providing information with their departments/programs. When evaluated in terms of foreign students, the most important place where prospective students can get information about the departments offered by the university is the websites of the universities. If students cannot easily access information about the program they are interested in, they assume that it is not offered and visit another university's website (Hudson, 2018). In this respect, although state universities in Turkey give importance to presenting their scientific studies and quality certificates, it has been seen that they are deficient in presenting the information international students need to learn and the education they will receive, and they cannot provide a full organisational attractiveness to these students.

In the research conducted by Vilnas-Yavatz and Tifferet (2009) to determine what prospective students think about university websites, it was determined that the visuals presented on the websites play an important role in influencing the students' perspectives on the university. As a result of this research, it has been found that those who visit the websites of universities associate the building images presented on the websites with the impressions left by the organisations, such as the quality of the service provided, the attractiveness of the campus and providing a pleasant experience. In addition, Peifer (2012) found that students interacting in different places and activities within the university increase the attractiveness of the university. From this point of view, the websites of universities in Turkey do not include sufficient visuals of their campuses and students, and they are limited in terms of attracting students who will come from abroad and who have limited or no knowledge about the university to the university and leave a positive image for these students. When public and private universities are compared in this respect, private universities, with the effect of being commercial organisations, include more content about their campuses and students in order to introduce themselves and leave a positive image to international students compared to state universities.

In another study examining the effectiveness of the university's websites (Mechitov et al., 2004), features such as online applications, registration information, virtual tours, education information, department information, and search function come to the fore. Similar to campus and student images, promotional videos that will provide comprehensive information about the university on the websites of universities in Turkey have been included at a moderate level. "Internationalization", another subject that may attract the attention of international students, is not sufficiently included in the websites of universities. This situation may create the perception that the vision of the university is not at the highest level among students coming from other countries and may reduce the desire of students to join the organisation.

When the websites of universities are examined from a social point of view, there are images and links related to the social media accounts of the university on all of the websites. A study on students who will choose a university (QS, 2020) shows that students use social media accounts extensively and use these accounts to obtain more detailed information about the university. It can be concluded that universities in Turkey also use social media accounts effectively to attract international students. Social activities such as speeches, symposiums, music and poetry activities are frequently featured on the websites of universities, and this also contributes to creating a positive image about the university for students. However, the low level of sharing about sports activities may negatively affect the attractiveness of universities for international students.

In the study of Mechitov and colleagues (2004), students especially want to learn about internships, accommodation, information about university activities and organisations, and the area around the institution. From this point of view, there is very little information on the websites of universities in Turkey about the accommodation, fees and scholarship opportunities that international students especially want to learn. This situation creates economic uncertainty about the university choice of international students and lowers the attractiveness level towards the university. While the information about scholarships and accommodation is very limited on the websites of public universities, private universities frequently include these titles on their websites in order to increase their attractiveness for students.

As a result, it can be said that the efforts of universities in Turkey to create a positive image and attractiveness for their international students on their websites are not sufficient. With the effect of the fact that private universities are commercial organisations, it seems that there are more efforts to create a positive image about themselves on websites compared to state universities. Although universities mostly include scientific studies, social media and social activities on their websites, the first and most important effect on a foreign student is the university campus and the visuals of their students. In this respect, if universities include visuals of educational environments, buildings, campuses and students interacting in these environments on their websites, it will leave a positive image on prospective foreign students. Since the university websites are the only source of information for international students, the universities can give more details about the accommodation facilities and the scholarships the students

can have in their websites. Also, providing more information about their programs and courses will help the universities be more selected.

As with any research, this study also has limitations. This research focused only on university websites. Since websites are environments that can be updated, the results presented in this study are related to the data of the period in which the data was collected. The sample of the research is limited to 25 university websites. Future studies can be done on the websites of all universities in Turkey or by examining the website of a university in more detail. In addition, the subject of this study can be examined through interviews with international students who have preferred universities in Turkey or a scale that can be developed in this regard.

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