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## Student Happiness in the Academic Journey: Analyzing the Determinants, Outcomes and the Moderating Role of Academic Involvement

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### Abstract

Pursuing happiness is a primary goal for humans, and it significantly impacts different elements of life, including consumer behavior. Within the realm of higher education (HE), universities are progressively acknowledged as influential brands that shape students' experiences and satisfaction. This study examines how elements, including the quality of the educational environment, relationships with professors and peers, and self-congruity, contribute to students' happiness with their universities by employing appraisal theories. In addition, the study analyses the outcomes of university brand happiness, which encompass brand engagement, emotional attachment, and brand forgiveness. Also, the current paper delves deeper into how students' academic involvement influences these relationships as a moderating variable. A total of 256 surveys were tested using structural equation modeling, and the data validated the majority of the hypotheses. Accordingly, the quality of the educational atmosphere, relationships between students, and perceptions of self-congruence positively impact happiness. The study also found that university happiness leads to important outcomes, including emotional attachment to the university, active engagement with the university, and forgiveness of the university. Finally, as expected, students' different levels of academic involvement have moderating effects on some of the key relationships in the study. This study contributes to the field of higher education marketing by identifying the primary factors influencing student happiness and illustrating the impact of brand happiness on student behaviors.

**Keywords:** Brand Happiness, Emotional Attachment, Brand Engagement, Self-Congruence, Brand Forgiveness, Involvement

**Jel Codes:** I23, M31

## Akademik Yolculukta Öğrenci Mutluluğu: Belirleyicilerin, Sonuçların ve Akademik Katılımın Düzenleyici Rolünün İncelenmesi

### Öz

Mutluluk her zaman insanların ulaşmak istediği birincil bir hedef olmuş ve tüketici davranışları da dahil olmak üzere yaşamın farklı yönlerini önemli ölçüde etkilediği ortaya konmuştur. Günümüzde yükseköğretim kurumları, öğrencilerin deneyimlerini ve memnuniyetlerini şekillendiren etkili markalar olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışma, değerlendirme teorilerini kullanarak, eğitim ortamının kalitesi, akademisyenlerle ve akranlarla ilişkiler ve öz uyum gibi unsurların öğrencilerin üniversitelerinden duydukları mutluluğa nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu incelemektedir. Buna ek olarak, çalışma, markaya duygusal bağlanma, markaya katılım ve markayı affetmeyi kapsayan üniversite marka mutluluğunun sonuçlarını analiz etmektedir. Son olarak, makale, öğrencilerin akademik katılım düzeylerinin düzenleyici bir değişken olarak bu ilişkileri nasıl etkilediğini incelemektedir. Toplam 256 anketten elde edilen veriler, yapısal eşitlik modellemesi kullanılarak analiz edilmiş ve hipotezlerin çoğu desteklenmiştir. Buna göre, eğitim atmosferinin kalitesi, öğrenciler arası ilişkiler ve öğrencilerin benlik uyumu algıları mutluluk üzerinde pozitif etkiye sahiptir. Ayrıca üniversite mutluluğunun, üniversiteye duygusal olarak bağlanma, üniversiteye aktif olarak katılım ve üniversiteyi affetmek olmak üzere önemli sonuçlara neden olduğu çalışmada bulunmuştur. Son olarak, beklendiği gibi öğrencilerin farklı akademik katılım düzeyleri araştırmadaki temel ilişkilerin bazıları üzerinde düzenleyici etkilere sahiptir. Bu çalışma, öğrenci mutluluğunu etkileyen temel faktörleri belirleyerek ve mutluluğunun öğrenci davranışları üzerindeki etkisini göstererek yükseköğretim pazarlaması alanına katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Marka Mutluluğu, Duygusal Bağlanma, Marka Katılımı, Benlik Uyumu, Markayı Affetme, İlgilenim

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## INTRODUCTION

Happiness is seen as one of the most desirable emotions for human beings, and individuals are constantly looking for ways to achieve this pleasant state of emotional fulfillment. For this purpose, humans engage in activities such as consumption, entertainment, interaction with other people or goal-seeking (Demir & Davidson, 2012; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018; Wang & Wong, 2014). Due to its significant impact on consumer behavior, marketers have been exploiting the concept of happiness to promote their products and brands. In doing so, both local and global brands are using the feeling and emotion of happiness in marketing communication and promising happiness in their slogans (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017).

As research into happiness has progressed, new concepts have arisen from various viewpoints. Brand happiness is one of these new concepts that has emerged in recent years and is defined as “a consumer’s greatest emotional fulfillment, a moment-based experience of pleasant high and low arousal emotions induced at different brand contact points” (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017:467). In the HE context, the emotional fulfillment that students experience as a consequence of their interactions with their university can be conceptualized as university brand happiness.

Brand happiness is not only an emotion that consumers aim to acquire through materials and experiences but also one of the important goals for marketers and branding because brand happiness is known as a driving force in maintaining the long-term success of brands (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Chiengkul & Junla, 2024; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). Today, individuals see product and brand consumption as one of the important and effective ways to achieve happiness (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). Thus, several marketing studies (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Purohit et al., 2024; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018) have investigated brand happiness in different contexts to understand its nature. However, most of these studies are general marketing studies concerned with consumers’ relations with consumption goods or services (Chiengkul & Junla, 2024). The research on brand happiness in the higher education (HE) marketing context is limited. Although research on student happiness is available, studies are either conceptual (Elwick & Cannizzaro, 2017) or have not investigated happiness’s connections with the viewpoint of the student-university relationship. Moreover, empirical studies on student happiness primarily focus on happiness with life or the educational experience rather than happiness with the university brand. Consequently, a particular gap exists in the higher education field concerning brand happiness.

This gap in comprehending brand happiness in the higher education field emphasizes the necessity to investigate how university experiences influence students’ happiness with their institutions as brands. Every interaction and experience on a university campus not only teaches but also inspires and generates an intellectually and emotionally nurturing environment. In higher education institutions, such environments can be the cause of student happiness. In today’s competitive educational landscape, universities are not just centered on learning but are also powerful brands that shape students’ experiences and futures (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016). The quality of the educational atmosphere, the relationships students develop with faculty and peers, and the overall campus environment are crucial in determining students’ satisfaction, happiness, and success (Koenig-Lewis et al., 2016). Thus, today’s universities must therefore strive to offer more than just a curriculum; they must provide a holistic experience that fosters personal growth, emotional well-being (i.e., happiness), and a sense of belonging since students graduating with such acquisitions have several benefits for their universities. Hence, investigating students’ happiness with their universities might contribute to the success of universities

and the student experience.

Examining students' happiness with their institutions requires a theoretical framework, wherein appraisal theories explain how individuals' evaluations of certain circumstances generate emotional connections such as happiness, which in turn influence behavior (Frijda, 1993). Furthermore, the behavioral response to a given situation is indicated to be an outcome of the emotion that has been felt (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Roseman, 2013). The fundamental principles of the appraisal theories, thus, demonstrate that people's internal or external evaluation of the situations or conditions impact their happiness, and this happiness leads them to show specific behaviors. Schnebelen and Bruhn (2018) argue that appraisal theories are the most effective approach to explaining individuals' happiness. The current study, therefore, follows this argument and applies the mentioned theory in the context of HE marketing to explore students' happiness in their relationships with their universities.

The students' assessment process may include their views of the quality of the educational atmosphere, connections with academics and other students, and self-congruity as specific conditions following the appraisal theories. Thus, the first aim of this research is to investigate these factors' effects on students' happiness with their universities. The educational atmosphere refers to the campus and university's overall physical and psychological environment (Zineldin et al., 2011). Relationships with academics comprise several aspects, such as support, interpersonal connections, and feedback (Kember & Leung, 2006), whereas relationships with other students refer to social interactions and forming cooperative networks (Kember & Leung, 2006). Additionally, self-congruence means the harmony between the university's image/personality and the student's self-concept (Japutra et al., 2023; Sirgy, 1982). These elements can all contribute to students' overall happiness at their university.

Furthermore, according to the same theory, the behavioral reaction to a specific scenario is determined by the experienced emotion (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus, 1991). Marketing studies found that brand happiness is the determinant of various consumer behaviors. For example, Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017) empirically proved the positive effects of brand happiness on purchase intention, price premium, and word-of-mouth. More interestingly, brand happiness predicted these variables better than other relational-emotional constructs, such as brand attachment, customer delight and brand relationship quality. As happy consumers react positively and show favorable behaviors regarding the brand, anticipating positive student behavior for the university is reasonable. The present research considers brand engagement, emotional brand attachment, and brand forgiveness as the consequences of university brand happiness by relying on appraisal theories. Brand engagement is student interaction and involvement within the university and its activities (Brodie et al., 2011; Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014). Brand attachment refers to a student's deep connection and sense of belonging to a university (Japutra et al., 2014; Malär et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2005). Finally, brand forgiveness means the willingness of the students to overlook or forgive a university for mistakes or negative experiences (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019).

In addition, not all students are expected to exhibit the same behavior due to their different involvement levels in higher education. As Zaichkowsky (1985) stated in her classical writing on involvement, consumers may exhibit varying degrees of involvement, which may result in their responses to brand or product-related stimuli. Similarly, some students are full of

interest and involvement in higher education, whereas others' interest is quite low. Thus, this distinct level of involvement may interact with their perceptions of the university and result in unique responses. The current research aims to investigate the moderating effect of students' academic involvement.

This study provides three notable contributions to higher education (HE) marketing. Firstly, it discovers the variables influencing students' happiness with their universities. Comprehending the variables that impact student satisfaction can aid HE institutions in improving overall student experience. By identifying crucial components, universities can effectively adopt focused tactics to enhance these specific areas, consequently elevating student happiness (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). This fosters a more conducive and interactive teaching atmosphere, ultimately resulting in improved student achievements and institutional prosperity (Japutra, 2022; Japutra et al., 2016).

Secondly, this study investigates the positive consequences of university brand happiness, including active brand engagement, emotional brand attachment, and brand forgiveness. This is essential because these outcomes not only demonstrate the immediate advantages of a positive university experience but also have lasting effects on student and alumni connections (Japutra, 2022; Özer et al., 2023). Institutions can cultivate a loyal and supportive community by nurturing a deep emotional connection and encouraging active engagement with the university brand. This community will continue to contribute to the university's reputation and success even after graduation. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics offers useful insights for higher education marketers and administrators who seek to establish enduring relationships with their students.

An additional contribution of the current research is its examination of academic involvement as a moderating factor. The study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneity of student experiences and outcomes by analyzing the impact of differing levels of academic involvement on these relationships. This understanding is essential for institutions of higher education that are striving to customize their strategies to meet the diverse levels of involvement and requirements of their students. Institutions can develop more personalized and effective strategies to foster student happiness, enhance overall academic success, and cultivate long-term relations with the university brand by acknowledging that not all students interact with their university environment in the same manner.

## **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, RESEARCH VARIABLES, AND HYPOTHESES**

### **1.1. Appraisal Theories**

Appraisal theories argue that people's appraisals can be the precursors of human affects and emotions. Additionally, behavioral reactions are the consequences of the experienced emotions, based on the same theory (Ellsworth, 2013; Frijda, 1993; Watson & Spence, 2007). Thus, this theory clarifies the present research's logical reasoning and hypotheses. Indeed, Schnebelen and Bruhn (2018) used this theory to examine brand happiness in four industries from an antecedent and consequences perspective. Also, in a scale development study, Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017) suggest that appraisal theories provide a solid theoretical foundation for consumer and brand happiness research.

Schnebelen and Bruhn (2018) consider appraisal theories the "fullest account of happiness". The statement is because the key determinant of happiness is not solely based on external circumstances, such as events, situations, or conditions, but also on individuals' cognitive appraisal and emotional response to these circumstances (Veenhoven, 1994, 2009). Appraisal

theories suggest that cognitive evaluations involve the conscious or unconscious evaluation of how something impacts an individual's concerns, such as their objectives and needs (Frijda, 1993). In the present study's context, for example, the image of a university brand is one possible condition or circumstance. Although a university brand has a remarkable brand image, a student may subjectively assess the university's image as poor in reality. Consequently, the students' happiness is determined by their evaluation of the university's brand image rather than the actual one.

People's appraisals are categorized as primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisals refer to an individual's evaluation of their relationship with situational elements, specifically emphasizing self-related features. Significant primary appraisals of happiness involve goal relevance (the personal significance of a situation) and goal congruence (the match between the circumstances and the individual's goals and objectives) (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). Secondary appraisals entail assessing situational factors concerning an individual's personal resources and available choices (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). The present study incorporates the primary appraisals as the antecedents of university brand happiness, as it concentrates on brand happiness about students' expectations, goals, and self-perceptions.

The process of evaluating brand emotions at the brand-related level entails the evaluation of various aspects of the overall brand appearance. In general, primary appraisals assess the interaction between an individual and their environment, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the individual's concerns and the stimuli that elicit emotions (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). It is reasonable to presume that primary appraisals' interactive and self-referential nature can be extended to individual brand interactions, as the brand serves as the primary reference object in evaluating brand emotions. This context can be applied to the brand-related level of the brand emotion evaluation procedure (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). Thus, congruence and goal relevance should be incorporated into the brand appraisal framework for brand happiness since these two constructs are at the brand-related level and associated with self-image congruence. According to empirical findings from marketing, sociology, and psychology, the most critical components of happiness are intrinsic, personally relevant factors, including the pursuit of goals, goal congruence (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Nyer, 1997), self-congruence (Sheeraz et al., 2020; Yılmaz et al., 2022), and high-quality relationships (Demir & Davidson, 2012). Thus, relying on prior research, this study investigates the effect of atmosphere quality, relations with academics and peers, and self-congruence on university brand happiness.

Moreover, appraisal theories propose that certain emotions prepare individuals for action (Frijda, 1987; Roseman, 2013). Consumers employ various coping behaviors when they experience a brand emotion caused by primary and secondary appraisals of a brand encounter (Nyer, 1997). Appraisal theories suggest that individuals employ emotion-focused coping strategies, such as creating emotional distance from the problem, expressing their emotions, seeking assistance from others, and deriving positive meanings from adverse circumstances (Chao, 2011; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 2013). As a result, happiness might prompt individuals to exhibit various forms of behavior. Besides the coping strategies, Schnebelen and Bruhn (2018) indicate that happiness makes people more prosocial, cooperative, and forgiving. Based on the literature on happiness (Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2011; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018; Tian et al., 2021; Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Mansoor & Paul, 2022), the present paper examines emotional brand attachment, active brand engagement and brand forgiveness as the positive outcomes of university brand happiness.

## 1.2. Brand Happiness

Happiness is conceptualized in two perspectives: the eudaimonic perspective and the hedonic perspective. According to the eudaimonic perspective, living a good, virtuous, and fulfilling life and living to the fullest of one's potential are the main sources of happiness (Kashdan et al., 2008; Kesebir & Diener, 2008). The hedonic perspective examines happiness differently and defines it as the experience of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (Kashdan et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001). According to this view, happiness is achieved by experiencing various positive emotions such as excitement, joy, satisfaction, enthusiasm and pleasure (Delle Fave et al., 2011). Additionally, the hedonic perspective is the dominant approach to the conceptualization of happiness (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). Since the present study examines brand happiness from the viewpoint of students' emotional and affective experiences with the university, we adopt the hedonic perspective.

Extensive research in numerous areas has been conducted on the concept of happiness; it has also been investigated in the framework of consumer behavior, particularly in relation to the purchase and consumption of products and brands. Moreover, brand happiness should be differentiated from general happiness because in marketing, the term "happiness" is understood to refer to an emotional state that is largely context-specific and often triggered by specific purchases, consumption, or events (Mogilner et al., 2012). This emotional state is characterized by varying degrees of intensity, a relatively short duration, and a subjective nature (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017).

Bruhn and Schnebelen (2017) define brand happiness as "consumers' greatest emotional fulfillment, a moment-based experience of pleasant high and low arousal emotions induced at different brand contact points." Based on this conceptualization, the contact points in universities can encompass interactions with faculty members and fellow students, participation in academic and extracurricular activities, the quality of the educational environment, and the comprehensive campus experience. Thus, brand happiness in higher education can be defined as the profound emotional fulfillment and well-being that students derive from their interactions and experiences with their university.

Marketing and consumer research have identified various types of purchases, acquiring specific materials and advertisements as potential pathways to happiness (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). Among the key factors influencing happiness is experience, which is the focus of the current research. Numerous studies state that experience is a source of happiness and even has a greater effect than acquiring materials (Thomas & Millar, 2013; Van Boven, 2005). The current study concentrates on the happiness associated with students' experiences in higher education institutions. In addition to the drivers of brand happiness, the outcomes of happiness are also important for marketing since happiness is reflected in consumer reactions through positive behaviors. Many studies found that brand happiness results in satisfaction, loyalty (Gelbrich, 2011), service quality, and commitment (Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2011). However, our understanding of the behavioral outcomes of happy students with their universities is lacking. Table 1 shows the prior brand happiness studies.

**Table 1.** Summary of the Prior Studies on Brand Happiness\*

Authors	Context	Aim and findings
Chen & Li (2018)	Tourist happiness in destinations	The study aims to explain tourist happiness by investigating how travel behavior at a specific destination influences life satisfaction, eudaimonia, and affect. The study found that destination image boosts life satisfaction, eudaimonia, and affect, while service quality doesn't impact life satisfaction or negative affect.
Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2022)	Consumer happiness in fashion consumption	The study aims to investigate the impact of brand image, consumer satisfaction, and customer happiness on loyalty towards fashion brands. Brand image, consumer satisfaction, and consumer happiness are found as crucial variables that have a favorable impact on consumer loyalty towards fashion brands.
Gong & Yi (2018)	Consumer happiness and service quality	This study examines and confirms the applicability of a service quality model across five Asian countries. The results indicate that service quality positively impacts customer satisfaction, subsequently resulting in customer loyalty and happiness. Furthermore, the overall structure of relationships between variables holds true in all five countries.
Mansoor & Paul (2022)	Brand happiness with masstige brands	The study examines how the mass prestige of a brand, brand perception, and propensity to pay a premium influence brand evangelism through brand happiness and how self-pleasing experience and product beliefs interact with these relationships. The mass prestige of a brand, brand perception, and propensity to pay a premium significantly predict brand evangelism via brand happiness. Self-pleasing experience enhances brand happiness, which, in turn, interacts with product beliefs to boost brand evangelism.
Papadopoulou et al. (2023)	Brand happiness with goods across eight industries	The study investigates how brand authenticity influences perceived value, and how this, in turn, affects brand forgiveness and purchase intentions, considering the moderating role of cross-cultural happiness. Brand authenticity positively impacts brand forgiveness through perceived value. Cross-cultural happiness enhances the effect of perceived value on brand forgiveness. Additionally, brand authenticity influences purchase intentions through perceived value and brand forgiveness.
Schnebelen & Bruhn (2018)	Brand happiness with goods across four industries	The study develops and analyses a framework to understand brand happiness across four industries. Brand happiness depends on brand connection quality, self-relevance, goal congruence, and self-congruence. Pleasantness, fairness, and certainty affect brand happiness. Repurchase intention, price premium, word-of-mouth, brand evangelism, and brand forgiveness are significantly predicted by brand happiness.
The current study	Brand happiness in higher education	The study aims to investigate the antecedents and consequences of students' happiness with their universities. The moderating effect of academic involvement has also been researched.

### 1.3. Distinguishing Brand Happiness from the Related Concepts

Brand happiness differs from a few affective-relational (brand attachment, customer delight, and brand relationship quality) and cognitive-evaluative concepts (brand satisfaction, attitude and experience) (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). This differentiation is required for the current study to demonstrate each variable's uniqueness because the research model involves some of these mentioned constructs, such as engagement, emotional attachment and students' relations with their friends and academics. Firstly, brand happiness is different from the aforementioned emotional and relational concepts. Brand happiness is a short-term feeling people have towards an object, and emotional brand attachment is distinct from it due to its emotional nature, as it involves experiencing moderately favorable relational emotions (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). Similarly, brand happiness also differs from brand engagement, love, and relationship quality. The formation of brand love and the development of brand relationship quality are influenced by several factors, including the emotional qualities associated with the relationship between the consumer and the brand (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016; Batra et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005; Özer & Buran, 2023). These processes are shaped by the relational dynamics that emerge between the two parties. However, brand happiness is a transient emotional condition arising during different interactions with a

brand (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017). Brand happiness also differs from the cognitive-evaluative constructs. *Brand happiness* is a relatively more affect-related concept influenced by various moments and situations, resulting in different levels of enjoyment in relation to a brand (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). On the other hand, brand satisfaction, attitude, and involvement pertain to the overall assessments of brands (Oliver, 2010; Whan Park et al., 2010).

## 2. ANTECEDENTS OF BRAND HAPPINESS IN HES

### 2.1. Quality of Educational Atmosphere and Student Happiness

This study defines the educational atmosphere as the quality of solutions provided by those who offer education services to address students' needs and problems (Zineldin et al., 2011). A study conducted by Zineldin et al. (2011) on university students in Türkiye emphasizes that the quality of the educational atmosphere is vital to the total service quality. Since the study was carried out in Turkey, the present study follows the same approach. The quality of the educational atmosphere not only improves students' academic abilities but also substantially impacts their whole student experience (Han et al., 2024). This study anticipates a positive effect of a high-quality atmosphere on students' happiness. The quality of the educational atmosphere can enable students to process and learn more efficiently (Heung & Gu, 2012; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012) because such an environment increases students' involvement in the classes and makes them more likely to enjoy the environment (i.e., the university brand), which, in turn, can increase their happiness with the school (Eldor & Shoshani, 2017; Schweiger et al., 2019). Moreover, a high-quality environment requires all staff's involvement (administrative and academic staff) in the education process. For example, solutions offered by faculty members, research assistants or administrative staff to students' academic or non-academic problems contribute to students having positive experiences and developing a sense of fulfillment (Zineldin et al., 2011). As a result, this feeling ensures students' happiness at their university (Gong & Yi, 2018). In addition, a positive atmosphere should involve qualified and friendly faculty members who can effectively impart knowledge to students while simultaneously motivating them both in their studies and in achieving their goals (Zineldin et al., 2011). In this way, a high-quality educational atmosphere contributes to students' achievement, leading students to develop positive feelings toward school (Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Lin & Liang, 2011; Loureiro et al., 2013). Several lines of evidence suggest that the quality of the atmosphere contributes to the student experience and relations with the university. For instance, a study conducted on university students in Türkiye found the quality of the atmosphere to be the most important factor in student satisfaction (Zineldin et al., 2011). Thus, the first hypothesis is suggested as follows:

**H1.** The quality of the educational atmosphere positively affects students' happiness with the university brand.

### 2.2. Relationship with Academics and Student Happiness

Relationships with brands or their components have always been crucial factors in shaping an individual's attitudes, behaviors, and experiences in marketing research. Most studies agree that positive relationships lead to pleasant experiences, emotions, and attitudes (Hayes et al., 2020; Özer & Buran, 2023; Quaye et al., 2022). This reality has also been supported by research on HE marketing. For example, Japutra et al. (2016) demonstrated that the characteristics of university brand logo benefits, including functionality, aesthetics and self-expressiveness, positively impact students' normative and emotional commitment to their universities. The relationship with professors or academic staff is



conceptualized in the present study as the close relationship between academics and students, as well as the feedback and assistance provided by the academics (Kember & Leung, 2006). Prior research in HE found that relationships with academics have positive outcomes for students. For example, Kember and Leung (2006) discovered that relationships between professors and students improve their engagement in academic tasks and decrease their perception of workload. Similarly, the present study proposes that positive relationships with academics significantly impact students' happiness, as they promote happy emotions (Goswami, 2012; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Lewis et al., 2015). In addition, faculty members offer academic guidance and assistance, facilitating students' success in their coursework while ensuring they feel appreciated and valued. When students feel recognized and assisted by their professors, they enjoy heightened contentment at school. This sense of support, recognition, and worthiness brings them happiness (Demir et al., 2007). Thus, the second hypothesis proposes:

**H2.** Students' relationships with academics positively affect their happiness with the university brand.

### **2.3. Relationships between Students and Happiness**

Like the connection between faculty members and students, the relationship between students can potentially promote their happiness. Student relationships mean intimate connections and collaborative efforts in the university environment (Kember & Leung, 2006). Firstly, social support and bonding through friendships and social networks make students feel more secure and supported at school, increasing their overall happiness (Demir et al., 2007; Demir & Davidson, 2012). Emotional support and empathy also help students manage stress and challenges, fostering a sense of being understood (Diener & Seligman, 2002; King et al., 2014). These relationships also boost social integration and a sense of belonging, which results in positive well-being and happiness (Bagci et al., 2018; Cramer & Pawsey, 2023; Tian et al., 2021; Ueno, 2005). Academic collaboration and support through study groups also enhance learning and increase happiness levels (Berdicchia et al., 2022). Based on these supporting discussions, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H3.** Relationships between students positively affect students' happiness with the university brand.

### **2.4. Self-Congruity and Student Happiness**

Self-congruence, which has a solid theoretical foundation in consumer behavior, is consumers' perceptions of the fit between their self-concept and the image of brands (Sirgy, 1982). Previous research on self-congruence theory has demonstrated the effects of self-congruity on various consumer behaviors (Japutra et al., 2019; Malär et al., 2011; Zogaj et al., 2021). The core idea of self-congruence asserts that consumers prefer products and brands for self-expression, aligning their choices with the congruence between their personalities and those of the brands (Malär et al., 2011). Self-verification and fulfilling self-consistency needs are the primary motivations for pursuing self-congruity (Sirgy, 2018). Similar to prior research on self-congruity, which found various consumer responses, such as brand attachment (Japutra et al., 2019), word-of-mouth, brand love (Wallace et al., 2017), and purchase intention (Zogaj et al., 2021), it is also expected to influence students' happiness with their university brand.

In the context of the current research, self-congruity is the degree of alignment between a student's self-perception and the university's image. Students who feel their university's values, culture, and image closely match their self-concepts experience self-verification and consistency (Japutra et al., 2019; Sirgy, 1982). This congruence feeling helps

individuals feel accepted and understood by their academic surroundings, therefore strengthening their sense of belonging (Japutra et al., 2023). As a result, this harmony promotes a closer emotional connection and satisfaction (Japutra et al., 2014, 2016), thus improving students' happiness with the university brand.

**H4.** Students' self-congruity perceptions positively affect their happiness with the university brand.

### 3. CONSEQUENCES OF BRAND HAPPINESS IN HES

#### 3.1. Active Brand Engagement

Customer engagement means individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities for the brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Vivek et al., 2012). Since its conceptualization, this concept has attracted too much attention because it has several benefits for brands (Pansari & Kumar, 2017), such as creating trust, commitment, and loyalty (Vivek et al., 2012). Recent studies approached engagement with a different viewpoint: active brand engagement, defined as consumers' willingness to invest time, energy, money, or other resources for the brand (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). This approach is different from consumer engagement because it only focuses on the behavioral aspect of engagement rather than cognitions and emotions. Also, it can be more beneficial for the brands since it deals directly with consumers' behavioral responses, such as advocating for the brand, participating in brand-related activities, and sharing positive information about the brand (Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014). Due to these benefits, the current study adopts active engagement conceptualization. Accordingly, students' engagement with their university might thus be understood as an intention to commit time, effort, money, or other resources to the university.

#### 3.2. Emotional Brand Attachment

Emotional brand attachment refers to the emotional connection between a consumer and a particular brand, which encompasses the consumer's feelings towards the brand, namely affection, passion, and connection (Thomson et al., 2005). Prior research demonstrated that individuals could form emotional attachments to a variety of objects, such as pets (Sable, 1995), celebrities (Özer et al., 2022), brands (Japutra et al., 2019; Malär et al., 2011), or destinations (Can et al., 2023). Similarly, universities are another party in which individuals form emotional connections. Attachment to the university brand is the strong emotional ties that students create. Research showed that attachment to university brands leads to positive outcomes for university brands, such as positive WOM (Özer et al., 2023), satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Dennis et al., 2016).

#### 3.3. Brand Forgiveness

Despite extensive research on forgiveness in psychology and researchers have linked it to many positive outcomes, such as relationship restoration, well-being, and trust repair, there still needs to be more research on forgiveness in marketing (Papadopoulou et al., 2023). Forgiveness is a potent remedy that impacts both individual and social connections, and it is a behavioral response that arises from the assessment of previous experiences (Hur & Jang, 2019). It leads to decreased emotional reactions to betrayal and anger and motivates the person to act positively towards the one who caused harm (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011). If customers hold deep-seated animosity towards a brand, they may partake in acts detrimental to the corporation's reputation (Park et al., 2013). Engaging in anti-brand behaviors can harm an individual's self-concept and may result in destructive activities as the consumer attempts to relieve the tension caused by these behaviors (Johnson

et al., 2011). Furthermore, not all individuals exhibit this particular response. Some consumers might ignore the brand's deceit or the fact that it committed this error (North, 1987). As a restorative power, forgiveness can lessen the adverse effects of service failures, such as brand disloyalty and animosity (Tsarenko & Tojib, 2011). Thus, investigating brand forgiveness in the context of HE makes it possible to understand students' feelings towards their universities and enables us to prevent this negative student behavior.

### **3.4. Effect of Brand Happiness on Students' Emotional Brand Attachment, Active Engagement and Forgiveness Intention**

The relationship between university brand happiness and active engagement can be interpreted as promoting the university in exchange for the emotional benefit that students have received (Chiengkul & Junla, 2024). In other words, students who are happy with their universities are more likely to give back to them. According to the present study's context, happy students are expected to actively engage with the university brand, such as spreading positive information, following the university's social media pages, or buying products bearing the university brand logo. This is because when students are happy with the university brand, they are more likely to feel satisfied and motivated (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). This positive sentiment encourages them to participate actively in activities and behaviors (Heinonen, 2018). Their happiness boosts their sense of belonging and loyalty (Purohit et al., 2024), driving them to invest time and effort into the university brand (Chiengkul & Junla, 2024). Existing literature also corroborates the notion that brand happiness impacts brand engagement. For example, Harrigan et al. (2021) argue that those who experience greater happiness and love with a brand tend to engage in more conversations and social interactions than those with lower happiness levels. This result is also consistent with the current research examining brand engagement as active engagement because this approach to engagement captures the behavioral aspect of engagement (Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014). This logical argument leads to the proposal of the following hypothesis:

**H5.** Students' happiness with the university brand positively affects their active engagement.

Brand happiness research in marketing has shown that happy people react positively to the targeted object or brand. These studies found that positive brand experiences make people happy with their relations with the brand. Happy customers are more willing to pay higher prices (Al Mandil, 2016), spread favorable opinions of the brand to convince others to try the brand (Alsaggaf & Althonayan, 2018), and be more forgiving of the brand (Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). However, these studies are restricted to examining the branding of goods or services, and the consequences of student satisfaction still need to be determined. Because student happiness studies are very limited in the HE context, the current study utilizes the prior work on satisfaction for the happiness and attachment hypothesis. Several studies state that these two constructs are highly correlated. For instance, one study investigating the relationships between service satisfaction, life satisfaction, eudaimonia (i.e., happiness), and positive/negative emotions found such a strong correlation between tourist satisfaction and life satisfaction that it is nearly statistically indistinguishable (Chen & Li, 2018). Moreover, several studies (Lee et al., 2012; Song et al., 2014; Teixeira et al., 2019) demonstrated that happy and satisfied people show positive attitudes and behaviors toward companies, institutions, destinations, and services. Similarly, the present paper proposes that student happiness significantly strengthens their emotional connection with the university because happy students are more likely to develop positive perceptions of the university's quality, faculty performance, and overall services (Santini et al., 2017). These

positive perceptions further reinforce students' bonds with the university, fostering a deeper, more positive attitude towards the university through the qualities and features that fulfill their needs related to the learning experience (Nghiêm-Phú et al., 2021).

**H6.** Students' happiness with the university brand positively affects their emotional attachment.

Brand forgiveness can be perceived as a mechanism that fosters positive relationships (Christodoulides et al., 2021), and individuals with a strong brand relationship exhibit this behavior even after experiencing a service failure (Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Wolter et al., 2019). Typically, customers who experience a service failure tend to have diminished satisfaction and want to switch to a different service provider (Chiengkul & Junla, 2024). Demonstrating patience and tolerance toward minor defects and understanding of service failures reflects a positive mindset and a greater likelihood of forgiveness among happy individuals (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). In higher education marketing, brand forgiveness refers to the extent to which students are willing to overlook or forgive their university for minor errors or service failures. Students who experience happiness might be more inclined to demonstrate brand forgiveness, so they maintain their relationship with the institution even when confronted with minor problems. When students are happy with the university brand, they tend to have a more positive and supportive attitude toward the institution (Purohit et al., 2024; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). This positive sentiment makes them more likely to overlook minor issues or mistakes, as their overall happiness creates a buffer against negative experiences (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018). Their happiness fosters a sense of loyalty and engagement (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022), making them more willing to forgive the university for any shortcomings or errors (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). This forgiving nature helps maintain a positive relationship between the students and the university, contributing to a harmonious academic environment. Moreover, students develop a stronger loyalty and connection with the university through active engagement. Students establish stronger relationships with their peers, faculty, and the institution due to their active engagement with the university brand (Snijders et al., 2022). This engagement fosters a sense of investment in the university's reputation and image (Jain et al., 2022). As a result, students are likely to overlook the university's occasional shortcomings or mistakes because of their happiness and engagement.

**H7.** Students' happiness with the university brand positively affects their forgiving intentions.

**H8.** Students' active engagement with the university positively affects their forgiving intentions.

### 3.5. Emotional Attachment and Students' Forgiving Intentions

Prior attachment studies agree that emotional connections of people with other objects, brands, and institutions lead to positive behaviors such as loyalty, willingness to pay more or recommend to others (Japutra et al., 2014; Santos & Schlesinger, 2021; Thomson et al., 2005). The current study proposes that students who are emotionally attached to their university may forgive the university's mistakes because developing an emotional bond with a university cultivates a profound feeling of connection and devotion among students. Attachment theory, initially formulated within the framework of parent-child relationships, proposes that individuals establish emotional connections with important others that impact their actions and beliefs (Bowlby, 1979; Bretherton, 2013). In the context of universities, students who have formed a deep emotional bond with their institution are more inclined to disregard or dismiss any mistakes made by the university. This is

because they perceive the university as an important and valued entity in their lives (Özer et al., 2023). Their emotional connection fosters loyalty and commitment, causing them to prioritize the relationship over any specific problems (Donovan et al., 2012). Prior marketing studies (Japutra et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2024) also support the positive connection between attachment and forgiveness. The following hypothesis is proposed considering these supporting discussions:

**H9.** Students' emotional attachment to the university positively affects their forgiving intentions.

### **3.6. The Moderating Effect of Academic Involvement**

Marketing researchers have shown a long-time interest in involvement (Varki & Wong, 2003). Involvement refers to how an individual's essential values, goals, and self-concept are personally relevant and important to the object being considered in a decision (Zaichkowsky, 1986). While involvement may appear only to pertain to consumers' interest in goods, it is also highly significant in services and relationship marketing (Varki & Wong, 2003). This study defines involvement as the level of academic interest exhibited by students in higher education (Japutra, 2022; Japutra et al., 2023) and examines it as a moderating variable. Indeed, numerous prior research has discovered that consumer involvement moderates consumer behavior (Hwang et al., 2020; Mulcahy et al., 2021; Varki & Wong, 2003). Likewise, this study anticipates that academic involvement will exert a similar influence on the relationships in the research model. Involved students are expected to give more importance to education, universities, or news about academia (Japutra et al., 2023; Zaichkowsky, 1986). Thus, students with high academic involvement place significant importance on their education and actively engage with news and developments related to higher education institutions. Indeed, many prior studies discovered that people's involvement could differentiate their attitudes and behaviors (Eisend, 2013; Eskiler & Altunışık, 2021; Hajjat, 2003). This high level of involvement may amplify students' sensitivity to and perception of university-related factors such as atmosphere quality, relationships with academics and peers, self-congruence or university brand-related concepts. Consequently, the relationships between these factors are expected to be more pronounced among students who are highly involved in academia (Dagger & David, 2012). In contrast, students with low academic involvement may not prioritize or actively engage with their educational experience to the same extent. For these students, the university's atmosphere, academic relationships, and self-congruence might have a weak impact on their overall brand happiness (Karagöz & Ramkissoon, 2024). Thus, academic involvement is anticipated to affect the strength of these relationships, making them more intense for students who have a higher level of involvement with their academic education.

**H10.** Students' academic involvement moderates the relationships in the research model, such that the relationships are stronger for the students with high academic involvement than those with low academic involvement.

Based on the research hypotheses, the current study suggests the conceptual model depicted in Figure 1.

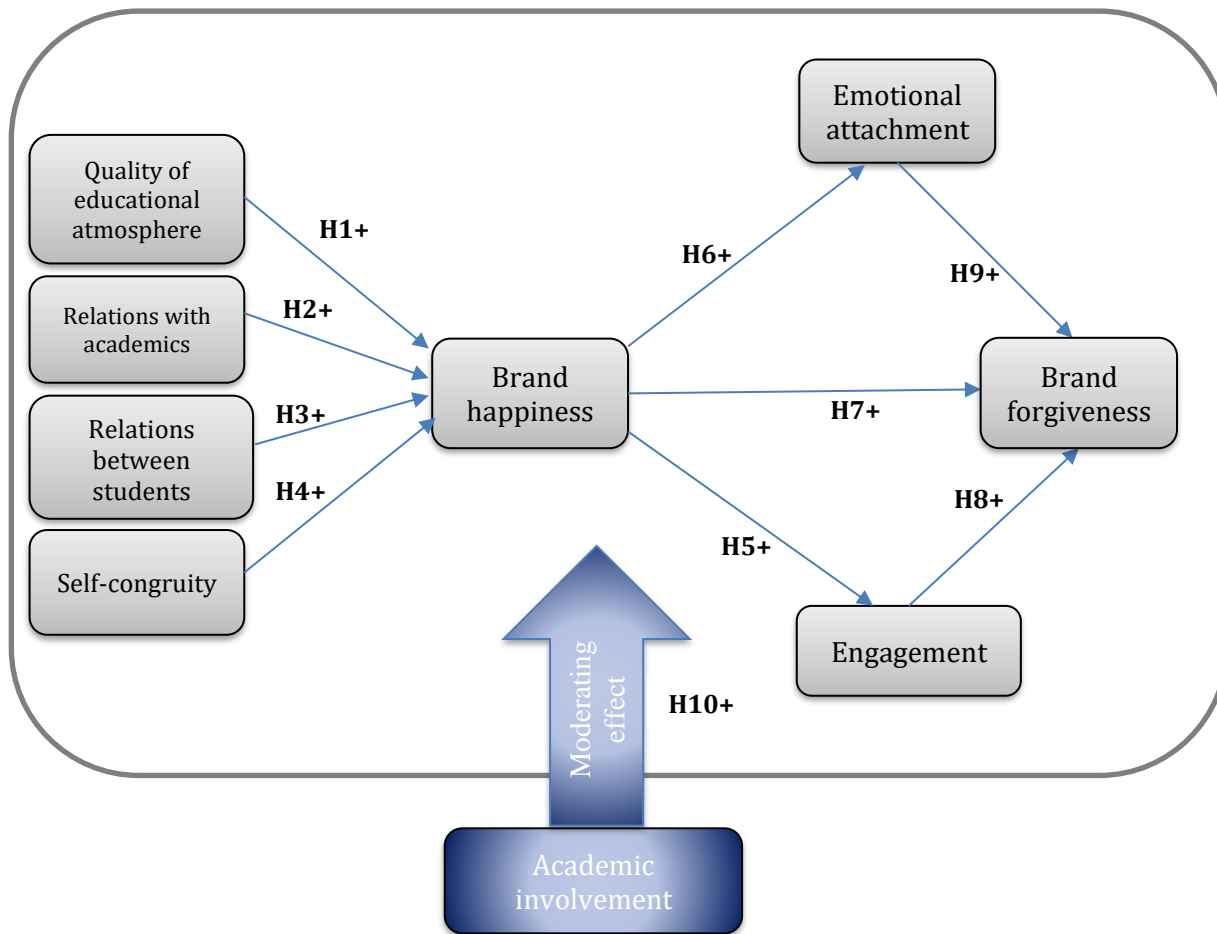


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Data Collection and Measurement Instruments

The research data was acquired through an online survey methodology. This data-gathering strategy enables researchers to save time and costs while enhancing the efficiency of data collection (Lefever et al., 2007). Thus, the online survey method was chosen. The research population involves university students in Turkey, and no specific universities have been targeted for the research to increase the chance of reaching students. For a similar reason, the study utilized the snowball sampling technique. The survey link was initially disseminated to a few university students, who were encouraged to share it with other students via messaging and email applications. This method enabled the acquisition of students from the target group by using peer networks to expand participation. The statements included in the questionnaire form were chosen using valid and reliable scales that have been employed in earlier marketing research. The source of each scale is shown in Table 2.

The present study seeks to comprehend the relationships and happiness of university students regarding their universities. Therefore, we utilized students as the sample for this study. The questionnaire forms were structured using Google Forms and distributed to the students using various social media platforms, email, and personal messaging applications. The scale statements were originally formulated in English and subsequently translated into Turkish. Therefore, two marketing academics reviewed and verified the translations to assess if there was any loss of meaning. Following the incorporation of

expert comments and further review, the pre-test questionnaire link was dispatched to a total of 30 students. The initial 30 questionnaires were distributed to identify factors that may impact the validity and reliability of the scale statements. Following the pre-tests, problems pertaining to the expressions on certain scales were rectified, resulting in the questionnaire being prepared for the main study. Consequently, the link to the questionnaire form was distributed to those who are presently involved in higher education at a university in Turkey. Except for the pre-test data, we collected 325 questionnaires and removed 40 from the dataset due to the attention question. Furthermore, to enhance the accuracy of the data, potential anomalies were detected using Mahalanobis distance analysis, resulting in the exclusion of 29 questionnaires from the analysis (Morrison, 1967). Therefore, the data analysis proceeded with a total of 256 surveys. In structural equation modeling, two primary viewpoints exist about sample size requirements: overall sample size and the N:p ratio (cases per variable). The first group highlights the significance of the overall sample size, considering samples under 100 as unsatisfactory and those below 200 as frequently insufficient (Comrey & Lee, 1992; Kline, 2023). Larger samples are generally favored, with a threshold of 300 or more regarded as acceptable (Comrey & Lee, 1992; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Conversely, the alternative viewpoint posits that extensive samples (e.g., above 500) may lead to errors and diminish practical significance (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A sample size of 250 is considered minimally adequate (Hoyle, 1995). For the N:p viewpoint, Kyriazos (2018) states that 10 participants for each variable is a widely accepted rule in deciding sample size. The present study meets both criteria and consequently, the sample can offer reasonable power and precision for its medium-complexity model.

## 4.2. Findings

### 4.2.1. Descriptive Statistics and Normality

The participant students consisted of 47% 4<sup>th</sup>-grade, 25.3% 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade, 22.5% 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students, and 5.1% 1<sup>st</sup>-grade. The mean age of the students was 22.85. Finally, the female participants accounted for 64% of the student population, while the male participants comprised 36%. Although sex distribution seems uneven, the independent sample t-test results indicate no significant difference in the research's primary and dependent variables regarding gender (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Independent Samples T-Test

Variable	Sex	Mean	Std. Deviation	p	Mean difference
Engagement	Female	3.9004	0.94438	0.165	0.176
	Male	3.7246	1.01106		
Attachment	Female	3.5427	1.10410	0.965	-0.006
	Male	3.5489	1.05367		
Forgiveness	Female	3.4634	0.87550	0.373	-0.102
	Male	3.5652	0.87435		
Happiness	Female	3.4871	0.91553	0.367	-0.109
	Male	3.5966	0.95450		

We examined the distribution of the research data using skewness and kurtosis values. The observed variables' skewness values range from 0.25 to -1.62, while their kurtosis values range from 4.97 to -0.94. Because these value ranges are fewer than the suggested values (2 for skewness and 7 for kurtosis), the data set has no substantial deviation and fits the normal distribution (Tang et al., 2014; West et al., 1995).

#### 4.2.2. Common Method Bias

Given that the dataset used in the study was obtained from a single source, there is a potential concern with common method variance, which might lead to artificially inflated or deflated associations between the research variables and pose a substantial danger to the accuracy and reliability of the study's results. We conducted a comprehensive analysis of the common method variance using several methodologies. Prior to data collection, we adhered to a set of processes called procedural remedies (Bairrada et al., 2018). We utilized the translation/back-translation technique and took measures to ensure our statements' clarity and grammatical accuracy. Once the questionnaire was prepared, we explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and assured participants that all information provided would be kept confidential. In addition, the participants were provided with only basic information regarding the survey topic, and the specific objectives of the research were not thoroughly elucidated. In addition to procedural remedies, we utilized two different methods to identify if there is a common method bias problem. First, we used Harman's single-factor method in exploratory factor analysis. According to this method, common method bias occurs when a single component explains the majority of the variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results released seven factors rather than a single factor, and the first factor's explained variance was 20.66%, which is lower than 50% of the total variance (75.49%). Additionally, we used a one-factor model analysis in confirmatory factor analysis (Venkatraman & Prescott, 1990). We loaded all items to a single factor, and the results showed poor model fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 6497,993$ ;  $df = 815$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 7.98$ ; CFI = 0.48; NFI: 0.45 TLI = 0.46; GFI = 0.30; RMSEA = 0.17). These results demonstrated that there is no severe concern about common method bias.

#### 4.2.3. Measurement Reliability, Validity, and Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to validate the factor structure. The model showed a satisfactory fit (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2023). However, after examining the modification indices, it was observed that some items' error terms have correlations. Accordingly, attachment items (i3-i4), brand happiness items (i10-i11), (i11-i12) and brand forgiveness items (i1-i2) were correlated. This adjustment was made to enhance the model fit (Brown, 2015). Additionally, we examined the standardized residuals and excluded the fourth item of engagement from the analysis because of its high standardized residual value ( $>1.96$ ) (Brown, 2015). As a result, the model showed satisfactory fit [ $\chi^2 = 1256,528$ ,  $df = 664$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.892$ , CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, SRMR = 0.059, RMSEA = 0.059]. Furthermore, the factor loadings of the measured variables are above the required threshold (Field, 2024). The reliability of the measurements was assessed by examining the Cronbach Alpha coefficients. All variables have alpha coefficients greater than 0.7. The factor loadings and reliability coefficients are displayed in Table 2.



**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics, Factor Analysis and Reliability Results\*

	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loadings	Variance explained	Cronbach's alpha	
Happiness 1	3.60	0.99	0.89			
Happiness 2	3.71	0.98	0.91			
Happiness 3	3.71	1.04	0.91			
Happiness 4	3.58	1.16	0.92			
Happiness 5	3.50	1.11	0.92			
Happiness 6	3.53	1.11	0.76	70.1	0.95	Schnebelen & Bruhn (2018)
Happiness 7	3.76	1.18	0.84			
Happiness 10	3.48	1.13	0.80			
Happiness 11	3.21	1.16	0.83			
Happiness 12	3.42	1.10	0.89			
Atmosphere 1	3.80	1.04	0.86			
Atmosphere 2	3.61	1.05	0.70			
Atmosphere 3	3.69	1.13	0.85	74.6	0.89	Zineldin et al. (2011)
Atmosphere 4	3.88	1.12	0.85			
Feedback 1	3.76	1.13	0.86			
Feedback 3	3.61	1.17	0.92			
Relation 1	3.49	1.19	0.87			
Relation 2	3.72	1.05	0.95	81.1	0.95	
Support 1	3.65	1.15	0.95			
Support 2	3.75	1.09	0.93			Kember & Leung (2006)
Relation 1	2.77	1.24	0.93			
Relation 2	2.62	1.21	0.90			
Cooperation 1	2.92	1.18	0.93	62.1	0.80	
Cooperation 2	3.63	1.11	0.63			
Self-congruity 1	3.60	1.14	0.84			
Self-congruity 2	3.28	1.27	0.96	88.4	0.93	Japutra et al. (2019)
Self-congruity 3	3.07	1.27	0.94			
Attachment 1	3.61	1.16	0.90			
Attachment 2	3.66	1.07	0.92			
Attachment 3	3.55	1.21	0.90	85.6	0.94	Japutra et al. (2023)
Attachment 4	3.36	1.24	0.85			
Engagement 1	3.85	1.06	0.81			
Engagement 2	3.89	1.08	0.75	74.6	0.83	Sarkar & Sreejesh (2014)
Engagement 3	3.77	1.23	0.80			
Forgiveness 1	3.03	1.19	0.55			
Forgiveness 2	3.31	1.14	0.60			
Forgiveness 3	3.69	1.08	0.76	63.1	0.85	Rasouli et al. (2022)
Forgiveness 4	3.71	1.09	0.86			
Forgiveness 5	3.76	1.04	0.84			
Involvement 2	4.27	0.87	0.69			
Involvement 3	4.45	0.84	0.89	60.0	0.79	Japutra et al. (2016)
Involvement 4	4.35	0.89	0.88			

\* Involvement 1 was removed due to the low factor loading. Happiness 8 and 9 were removed because of the discriminant validity with brand attachment. Feedback 2 and Atmosphere 5 were dropped because of the discriminant validity issue of atmosphere quality and relations with academics (Hair et al., 2010; Kline, 2023). Engagement 4 was eliminated due to a high standardized residual value (>1.96) (Brown, 2015).

The validity was assessed using factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variance extracted values. The factor loadings of the statements ranged from 0.55 to 0.96, which exceeded the required threshold and demonstrated statistical

significance ( $p < 0.01$ ). All of the CR values exceeded 0.70, and all of the AVE values exceeded 0.50. Therefore, the findings provided evidence for the convergent validity of the study (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). We assessed discriminant validity by comparing the square roots of AVE values and correlations between the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All the correlations are smaller than the square roots of AVE values, except for the correlation of relations with academics and atmosphere quality. However, as seen in Table 3, this correlation is slightly greater than the square roots of AVE. Also, Kline (2023) proposed that correlations below 0.85 provide strong evidence for discriminant validity. Thus, the results showed that the variables used in the study demonstrated discriminant validity.

**Table 3.** Results for the Convergent and Discriminant Validity

	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Atmosphere</b>	.89	.67	<b>.82</b>							
<b>Relation academics</b>	.97	.91	.84**	<b>.95</b>						
<b>Relation students</b>	.70	.55	.40**	.43**	<b>.74</b>					
<b>Self-congruity</b>	.94	.83	.12*	.13*	.33**	<b>.91</b>				
<b>Brand Happiness</b>	.95	.66	.27**	.23**	.39**	.61**	<b>.81</b>			
<b>Attachment</b>	.94	.80	.21**	.19**	.41**	.76**	.76**	<b>.89</b>		
<b>Engagement</b>	.83	.62	0.12	.17**	.32**	.42**	.35**	.52**	<b>.79</b>	
<b>Forgiveness</b>	.85	.53	.24**	.25**	.34**	.52**	.54**	.57**	.34**	<b>.73</b>

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

Values written in bold indicate the square root of the AVE values.

#### 4.2.4. Hypothesis Tests

We tested the research hypotheses by structural equation modeling. The structural model's fit indices were at a satisfactory level [fit [ $\chi^2 = 1385,757$ ,  $df = 677$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.047$ , CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.077, RMSEA = 0.064]. Table 4 shows the hypothesis test results; except for one hypothesis, all research hypotheses were supported. Accordingly, as the antecedents of university brand happiness, quality of education atmosphere ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), relationships with students ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and self-congruity ( $\beta = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) positively impacted students' happiness with their university. However, surprisingly, students' relations with academics did not affect their happiness ( $\beta = -0.29$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Additionally, university brand happiness positively impacted university brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.83$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), active engagement ( $\beta = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and brand forgiveness ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ). Furthermore, university brand attachment ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and active engagement ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) positively influence brand forgiveness.

**Table 4.** Path Analysis

	Hypothesis	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	p	Std estimates	
<b>H1</b>	<i>Atmosphere → Happiness</i>	0.37	0.17	2.21	0.027	0.40	Supported
<b>H2</b>	<i>Rel. with academics → Happiness</i>	-0.24	0.15	-1.61	0.107	-0.29	Not supported
<b>H3</b>	<i>Rel. with students → Happiness</i>	0.17	0.08	2.17	0.03	0.19	Supported
<b>H4</b>	<i>Self-congruity → Happiness</i>	0.50	0.06	8.60	***	0.58	Supported
<b>H5</b>	<i>Happiness → Engagement</i>	0.46	0.07	6.22	***	0.43	Supported
<b>H6</b>	<i>Happiness → Attachment</i>	1.06	0.07	14.44	***	0.83	Supported
<b>H7</b>	<i>Happiness → Forgiveness</i>	0.21	0.12	1.72	0.085	0.20	Marginally supported
<b>H8</b>	<i>Engagement → Forgiveness</i>	0.16	0.07	2.38	0.017	0.16	Supported
<b>H9</b>	<i>Attachment → Forgiveness</i>	0.28	0.09	2.97	0.003	0.34	Supported

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

#### 4.2.5. The Moderating Effect of Academic Involvement

We employed Process Macro (Model 1) in accordance with the methodology delineated by Hayes (2022) to evaluate the moderating impact of academic involvement. The results indicated that academic involvement had a number of significant moderating effects. Although the data fully supports one of these hypotheses ( $p < 0.05$ ), we considered the others to be marginally supported by following the usual procedure in the literature ( $p < 0.1$ ) (Pritschet et al., 2016). Consequently, the impact of students' engagement on their forgiving intentions increases as their academic involvement increases, as anticipated. Similarly, the strengths of the relationships between the quality of education atmosphere – brand happiness, relations with students – brand happiness, and brand attachment – brand forgiveness become stronger when the students have greater levels of academic involvement. Nevertheless, these interaction effects are marginally significant and should be cautiously approached. Results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Moderating Effect Analysis

Effect	Interaction effect	S.E.	p	LLCI	ULCI	
<i>Atmosphere → Happiness</i>	0.111	0.063	0.078	-0.013	0.234	<i>Marginally supported</i>
<i>Relations with Academics → Happiness</i>	0.093	0.063	0.141	-0.031	0.217	Not supported
<i>Relations with Students → Happiness</i>	0.122	0.064	0.059	-0.005	0.249	<i>Marginally supported</i>
<i>Self-congruity → Happiness</i>	-0.006	0.057	0.918	-0.117	0.106	Not supported
<i>Happiness → Engagement</i>	0.138	0.087	0.114	-0.034	0.310	Not supported
<i>Happiness → Attachment</i>	0.040	0.070	0.564	-0.097	0.178	Not supported
<i>Attachment → Forgiveness</i>	0.103	0.059	0.081	-0.013	0.219	<i>Marginally supported</i>
<i>Engagement → Forgiveness</i>	0.187	0.066	0.005	0.058	0.317	<i>Supported</i>
<i>Happiness → Forgiveness</i>	0.117	0.077	0.129	-0.034	0.267	Not supported

## CONCLUSION

The present study investigates brand happiness, which has been a hot topic in marketing in recent years in the context of HE marketing. By exploiting the appraisal theories, the study examines the quality of the educational atmosphere, relationships with professors and students, and self-congruity as the precursors of university brand happiness. The study also explores the positive outcomes of students' happiness. Finally, academic involvement was examined as a moderating variable that has the potential to differentiate students' responses towards university. The findings provide valuable insights for universities to enhance student experiences, cultivate loyalty, and boost institutional outcomes by customizing solutions to meet the different demands and levels of student involvement.

The results of this study have significant theoretical implications, especially in the field of marketing and brand management in higher education. The study showed that the quality of the educational atmosphere, relationships between students, and self-congruence positively influence students' happiness with their university brand. These findings are consistent with appraisal theories (Ellsworth, 2013; Frijda, 1987, 1993; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018) and prior marketing and psychology research (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Demir & Davidson, 2012; Sheeraz et al., 2020), which propose that the assessment of situational elements impacts emotional reactions. The relatively strong effect of self-congruence on brand happiness emphasizes the crucial importance of aligning the university's image with the self-concept of its students. This discovery strengthens the idea that people experience more emotional fulfillment when their personal identity or self-perception is in

harmony with their surroundings, enhancing their overall happiness (Sheeraz et al., 2020). Hence, for higher education institutions, aligning their branding with students' self-perception can be crucial in promoting student satisfaction and commitment.

In addition to self-congruence, the quality of the educational atmosphere and the relationships between students are also important for students' happiness. This finding implies that establishing a nurturing and stimulating campus atmosphere is critical for improving students' psychological welfare. The results align with the prior studies (Han et al., 2024; Schweiger et al., 2019; Zineldin et al., 2011) and emphasize that both the tangible and intangible elements of the educational environment play a crucial role in determining students' overall happiness with their university. According to this result, educational institutions should allocate resources towards cultivating a favorable and all-encompassing campus environment wherein students experience a sense of worth and belonging. Moreover, the effect of student relationships on happiness underscores the significance of peer connections and social support in the university environment. Fostering cooperative and nurturing student relationships can enrich the university experience and cultivate a stronger sense of belonging (Bagci et al., 2018; Cramer & Pawsey, 2023; Demir & Davidson, 2012; Diener & Seligman, 2002). Since prior literature neglects these influential factors' effects on student happiness, these results contribute to the body of knowledge on brand happiness.

Surprisingly, relationships with academics do not affect student happiness, even though they are traditionally accepted as a powerful source of student satisfaction. Although it was expected that academic assistance and professor-student interactions would improve students' emotional experiences (Goswami, 2012; Kember & Leung, 2006), this study's findings contradict this assumption by showing a lack of substantial impact. There might be several reasons for this unexpected result. For instance, a strong and deep relationship can only emerge over a long time (Thomson et al., 2005); thus, students' superficial or transactional interactions with academics may fail to evoke a positive emotional response toward the university (i.e., happiness). Similarly, even though students have opportunities to interact with the academics during the classes, this period only involves interaction about the lectures. If students do not engage with academics outside of class, which fosters a more organic and natural environment for establishing deeper relationships, the limited interaction in class may not result in the development of significant emotional connections. Due to this lack of emotional interaction, students may not have associated their relationships with academics with happiness (Fournier, 1998; Japutra et al., 2023). This finding promotes a theoretical reassessment of how academic relationships contribute to the overall pleasure of students and indicates that other elements, such as the quality of the educational environment and relationships with peers, may have a greater impact.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated the significant impact of university brand happiness on brand attachment, active engagement, and brand forgiveness. The present paper also emphasizes the subsequent influence of brand attachment and active engagement on brand forgiveness. These findings provide valuable insights into the positive outcomes of emotional fulfillment in higher education settings. The observed outcomes suggest that students who have a profound sense of happiness with their universities are more inclined to have a deep emotional bond with the university, actively engage in its activities, and be willing to overlook any mistakes. This result expands the application of the brand happiness theory (Bruhn & Schnebelen, 2017; Frijda, 1993; Roseman, 2013; Schnebelen & Bruhn, 2018) to include educational settings, showcasing

its significance beyond conventional consumer contexts. Even though branding literature agrees on the positive results of brand happiness for consumers and companies, studies on brand happiness in higher education marketing literature are largely unexamined.

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by investigating academic involvement as a moderating variable. The study demonstrated several moderating effects of student involvement congruent with the prior literature. For instance, Mulcahy et al. (2021) found that individuals' involvement moderated the effect of the games' simulation aspect on satisfaction. Similarly, the current study demonstrated that a few relationships were stronger for the students more involved with the university. Accordingly, students' academic involvement serves as a moderator in the relationship between engagement and forgiveness and as a partial moderator in the connections between the quality of educational atmosphere – brand happiness, relations between students – brand happiness, and emotional attachment – brand forgiveness. These results emphasize how different levels of student involvement can impact the intensity of these connections. The findings indicated that highly involved students perceive a stronger connection between engagement and forgiveness, implying that their increased involvement in the university enhances their tendency to overlook institutional shortcomings (Japutra et al., 2023; Zaichkowsky, 1986). Similarly, the quality of the educational environment was more closely linked to brand happiness for students with greater academic involvement, as their greater involvement in the university heightened their sensitivity to its characteristics (Eisend, 2013; Eskiler & Altunışık, 2021). Moreover, the relationship between emotional attachment and brand forgiveness was significantly more pronounced among highly involved students, suggesting that their involvement develops a more forgiving disposition grounded in their emotional connections with the institution. This discovery enhances the theoretical framework by incorporating the academic involvement concept into brand happiness, providing a holistic understanding of how student involvement influences emotional and behavioral reactions.

In summary, this research fills a gap in the literature by applying established consumer behavior theories to the academic environment, illustrating that the principles of brand happiness are applicable beyond conventional marketing settings. This study enhances the literature by incorporating factors unique to higher education, including self-congruence, educational environment, and student interactions, into the broader discourse on brand management. The study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of the impact of emotional experiences with educational institutions on student outcomes and potentially influencing new approaches in HE marketing and student engagement strategies. It should also be noted that these relationships are not identical for every student. Students' different academic involvement levels distinguish their reactions to the university.

The results of this study provide valuable insights for higher education institutions striving to improve student happiness, engagement, and attachment. Universities can enhance the student experience and fortify their institutional brand by developing more effective strategies based on the current study's results.

One of the important conclusions is the influence of the quality of the learning environment on students' happiness. The universities' primary concern should be establishing a good and encouraging campus atmosphere. The general happiness of students can be improved by efforts to improve campus infrastructure, guarantee clean and friendly surroundings, and offer tools supporting their well-being. For example, university marketing initiatives can highlight campus facility and well-

being improvements and promote an encouraging and supportive environment through social media, email newsletters, and campus activities. Also, student relationships affect brand happiness, emphasizing the need for universities to create strong social networks. University administrations, thus, should create an environment wherein students can establish meaningful connections through initiatives that encourage student interaction and community-building, including group projects, social events, and peer mentorship programs. Universities should also foster a sense of community and belonging among students, which is essential for students' happiness, by providing opportunities for them to interact and collaborate. Providing platforms for social engagement and fostering a vibrant student life can significantly enhance the affective experiences of students. For instance, establishing online communities or alumni networks can enhance emotional connections and promote enduring attachment, promoting a sense of loyalty among students.

The results showed that students' self-congruity perceptions are the most important source of their happiness in university, which highlights the importance of universities aligning their institutional identity and personality with their students' values and self-concepts. This harmony can be realized by comprehending the aspirations and characteristics of students and incorporating them into the university's language, activities, and culture. Regularly engaging with students to gain feedback and incorporating their perspectives into the university's strategic planning can help university administrations sustain this congruity. Another particular marketing strategy could involve creating personalized communication approaches, such as specific emails or focused social media content, that resonate with students' values and self-perceptions, thereby reinforcing the university's congruence with their identities and cultivating a more profound emotional connection.

The study's results regarding the moderating effect of academic involvement provide critical insights into how differing levels of student involvement influence the relationship of university brand happiness with its antecedents and outcomes. Universities should acknowledge that students with varying degrees of involvement may react differently to different aspects of their university experience. Institutions can foster a more inclusive and responsive environment by customizing strategies to meet the requirements of both highly involved and less involved students. For example, the development of targeted engagement initiatives for students who are less involved and the development of deeper connections for those who are highly engaged can contribute to the improvement of overall student happiness and engagement.

The present study is subject to various limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted on university students from Turkey and employed a non-probability sampling method, restricting the findings' generalizability. Thus, the generalizability of the findings is restricted to Turkey alone. Furthermore, a few of the findings were supported marginally, requiring caution in interpreting results. Due to these limitations, future research is necessary to enhance the generalizability and robustness of the findings. As this study employs a quantitative methodology, it could only capture the extent of the research hypothesis. Nevertheless, students may find happiness in their universities driven by other factors. Therefore, there are plenty of possibilities for further advancement in identifying the essential elements of university brand happiness, and qualitative research is critically important. Particularly, the rejected hypothesis (i.e., relations with academics-brand happiness) highlighted the necessity for the source of student happiness. Furthermore, the present work examined the research hypotheses within the context of a cross-sectional investigation. However, the connections between a university brand and students are characterized by extensive duration. Therefore, longitudinal studies on student responses such as loyalty, alumni donations, or professional success can benefit higher education marketing. By employing longitudinal tracking of

students, future studies could assess the influence of prolonged happiness with their university on the level of loyalty, engagement, and/or support from alumni post-graduation.

## **ETİK BEYAN VE AÇIKLAMALAR**

### ***Etik Kurul Onay Bilgileri Beyanı***

Ankara Sosyal Bilimler Üniversitesi Etik Kurulu tarafından 29 Temmuz 2024 tarih ve 125154 sayılı kararla bu çalışmanın etik kurallara uygunluğu onaylanmıştır.

### ***Yazar Katkı Oranı Beyanı***

Yazarın katkısı %100'dür.

### ***Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı***

Çalışmada potansiyel bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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