

Exploring the Role of Educational City Branding in University Students' Satisfaction: A study of Nicosia, Northern Cyprus

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ABSTRACT:

The research focuses on the city branding regarding educational institutions and satisfaction of university students in Nicosia, Northern Cyprus. This study provides an overview for higher educational institution authorities by evaluating the city image, urban environment and cultural heritage impact on the students. By applying quantitative approach, (100) undergraduate students that are studying in universities located in Nicosia participated in this questionnaire. Therefore, a survey evaluated satisfaction of the students via different factors of urban environment including availability of green spaces, efficiency of transportation, safety, cultural richness and housing affordability. Results show high appreciation of students in higher education institutions offerings, safety of the city and the cultural heritage. However, significant dissatisfaction was noted in areas such as housing affordability, accessibility, and public transportation. These insights highlight critical challenges in the city's branding strategy. The study underscores the importance of aligning urban development with higher education strategies to enhance the city's appeal. The study adds to the literature by emphasizing the relation between urban infrastructure and universities. It also recommends the integration of city branding with higher education strategies which support urban identity and enhance satisfaction of the students.

Keywords: City branding; educational cities; urban environment; urban identity; students' satisfaction; Nicosia

1. Introduction

The origin of the city branding concept is dated back in 19th century as an approach to encourage urban environments and from then it developed into a multifaceted approach. Currently, it includes many different fields such as architecture, urban planning, marketing and tourism. City branding has a main objective which is attracting visitors by making a distinguished local identity (Zenker et al., 2017; Hospers, 2020). This can be done with the support of policy makers in a long-term process. Therefore, interested groups are being attracted by branding of the cities as an ideal location for them to settle and grow (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019). Urban reputation improvement is linked to a greater framework which is a part of city branding. To establish a strong identity and enhance the resources the cities need an approach that encompasses a comprehensive strategy (Chan et al., 2021). One of the key factors that the cities rely on is the increasement of the investment in both public and private sectors. This is the reason it acts as an important framework in decision making policies. Furthermore, cities have various

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strategies to show the reliability creating a city branding development model as a complicated challenge. It is crucial to identify the factors that has an impact on urban planning framework (Ma et al., 2021).

Nowadays, nations must enhance their citizens' abilities and knowledge to stay competitive on an international scale. Higher education institutions are increasingly recognizing the impacts of globalization. As a result, the demand for international educational experience obtained entirely or partially abroad is on the rise (Moslehpour et al., 2020). Universities play a role that extends well beyond education and research. In every nation, these institutions significantly influence society and the economy by facilitating knowledge transfer to businesses and fostering a thriving environment for entrepreneurship. Higher Education Institutions are assessed based on a variety of intricate and diverse factors, including the learning environment, career prospects, student experiences, teaching standards, curriculum design, tuition costs, and, importantly, their reputation (Miotto et al., 2020). Universities are refining their branding strategies to address increasing global competition. The researchers explain the higher educational institutions as a marketplace, for that universities are now competing for enrollment of students. Therefore, universities must provide an outstanding brand identity and develop their branding strategies continuously to ensure the long-term success (Yaping et al., 2023). According to Ali et al. (2016), the loyalty of students relies on the quality of services that the universities are offering. Moreover, the image of university is highly affected by the student's satisfaction because the satisfied students are viewing the reputation of universities in a positive manner.

The aim of this study is to investigate how Nicosia city image impacts on undergraduate students' satisfaction that enrolling at various universities in the city. It looks up to evaluate the factors such as city identity, urban environment, and cultural heritage as the features of Nicosia city and their role for shaping students' satisfaction within educational city branding framework. The methodology of this research involves conducting field surveys with (100) undergraduate students from various universities in Nicosia, complemented by literature reviews and observations. By understanding these dynamics, the study focuses to provide insights into how city branding can enhance Nicosia's appeal as a higher educational hub, ultimately supporting local authorities and higher educational institutions in attracting students. The key factors, such as housing conditions, the availability of green spaces, and transport design, affect students' academic experiences. For example, inappropriate housing may have a more immediate and personal influence on students' well-being and academic focus, while inadequate transportation can lead to time and stress inefficiencies that implicitly affect satisfaction. Likewise, access to green spaces, often seen as an ancillary factor, can improve social interaction and mental health, contributing to a more comprehensive academic environment. This research is limited in scope, as it primarily focuses on presenting collective student satisfaction without evaluating the relative weight or importance of each individual component.

2. Theoretical Background

Since the deindustrialization era, it has become widely recognized that territories, particularly cities, have sought to transform or enhance their images to maintain their

influence and boost their appeal and competitiveness in the increasingly globalized environment. The rise of global economic competition has brought about a major shift in how place branding is managed, especially in cities. From 1980s, many studies have emphasized that communicating brand image to targeted audience has become a key marketing tactic in the business sector. Urban transformations have prompted cities to broaden their economic foundations, build new infrastructures, and revitalize their regions, all with the goal of boosting their attractiveness, while placing a significant emphasis on sustainability (Juarez et al., 2023). Domański (2017), reported that cities hosting universities can incorporate the academic potential into their branding strategies. The main challenge for the authorities of an academic city is to establish a collaborative platform with higher education institutions that aligns with the values supporting the city's brand.

2.1 Educational city branding

In the knowledge-based society, the university serves as a hub of creativity, enhancing its position as a leader in economic, cultural, and social advancement. Universities can be key components of a city's brand, as their roles and advantages significantly impact the development and long-term sustainability of urban environments. They are, in fact, one of the most important factors in shaping the city's image as a university destination (Popescu, 2012). The relationship between universities and cities, however, varies across different contexts. In certain cases, there are close ties between local governments and universities, especially when public universities are directly dependent on these governmental bodies. Similarly, the university has a significant social impact, influencing areas such as economic, education, development, employment, and support for industry. The idea of knowledge city branding is emphasizing the research, innovation and educational services with higher educational institutions playing a crucial role in setting the identity (Mogaji, 2019).

The public and private universities and their impacts on cities are significant factors. In addition, the geographical place of universities and their closeness to each other can be key strategic factors in boosting the impact and significance of the city's priorities. For example, a city that have various universities and common research with local authorities take crucial procedures in forming their identity and branding (Bisani et al., 2022). The concept of knowledge city has been formed by the role of universities. Over time, the universities and cities have been evolved together creating a resilience urban environment, culture, social and scientific developments. Liu (2019) highlighted that higher educational institutions are fundamental to the creation of knowledge cities, and with creativity and innovation these types of cities will be flourished. To achieve this, it is necessary to focus on a mix of diversity, stability and strong image projection.

2.2 Educational branding and identity in connection with the city

In the past decade, branding has become increasingly significant for higher education institutions. Colleges and universities worldwide are striving to carve out a distinct identity and define their unique characteristics to stand out, attracting students, faculty, and financial support (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Branding is the process of communicating the defining elements of an organization's identity through a clear and focused branding proposition. Although an educational brand is frequently linked to an

institution's academic reputation, this perspective is relatively narrow. To establish a robust branding proposition, an institution must first clarify its core identity and its mission, as well as its fundamental values and unique traits. This definition should be clear and consistent to ensure the development of a cohesive brand image. Higher education branding revolves around the identity of the institution and its people, rather than being restricted to a service or particular product in the marketplace (Black, 2008).

In the city-university relationship, the consumer serves as the connection between branding strategies of both the city and the university. University consumers, whether they are students or research/academic staff, often also become consumers of the city. While universities may attract consumers through high-quality education and advanced technological innovation, these individuals also seek affordable housing, safe urban environment, entertainment options, and other amenities. This reasoning highlights the importance of aligning branding strategies of universities and cities, recognizing that the identity of universities is inherently linked to the urban environment they are part of (Popescu, 2012). Furthermore, educational projects that gain high or moderate visibility in the branding process play a significant role in shaping and strengthening brand identity (Radosavljević et al., 2020).

2.3 Factors affecting student satisfaction with university cities in relation with the city

It can be argued that the primary audience for the knowledge city brand consists of students, particularly those in higher education. These individuals are the main recipients of offerings related to education, career opportunities, innovation, research, and entrepreneurship (Al Samman & Al-Ethawi, 2023). Cities are intricate networks of services and dynamic interactions among residents from diverse backgrounds, both temporary and permanent. These interactions and services collectively influence residents' satisfaction and expectations with the support and amenities provided by the city. Residents evaluate a city's features, amenities, and attractions in varied ways. Studies have highlighted methods for assessing residents' satisfaction with their neighborhoods and urban living, considering a blend of objective and subjective qualities of a place. Satisfaction with the city life emerges from subjective needs, perceptions, and expectations of the city's qualities and attributes. Objective qualities include factors such as socio-economic status, urbanization levels, population density, and mobility. As an example, students might prioritize a variety of social activities, whereas families may place greater importance on a safe environment for their children (Roostika, 2017). As a result, various aspects of the location where studies take place play a significant role in a student's satisfaction process. For instance, places that offer cultural and better urban environment are likely to be more appealing. Wilkins et al. (2012) stated that the key factors such as the city's reputation, infrastructure, and quality of life, among others, are crucial in this satisfaction process. The city image plays an important role in impacting students' satisfaction while residing in a country or city for their studies. Though many researches take into account factors such as student gender and nationality, there remains an inclination to overlook farther socio-economic and cultural expectations inequalities that form students' urban experiences. Literature proposes that these ignored factors can significantly impact how students participate with and evaluate city life. By addressing these measurements, studies can identify different

urban preferences and emphasize gaps in present educational and urban policies, contributing to the growth of more comprehensive university cities that best meet the needs of a diverse student population.

2.4 Related studies

Prior studies have investigated the relations between the image of university, quality of services and satisfaction of students in universities through various countries. Mihalis (2005) explained that marketplace has been established as a managing locations philosophy and an integral action to planning. All over the world, various places are preferring city branding, embracing ideas with methods of corporation of branding. A definition of contemporary period is the intentional creation and advancement of city images. These images act a significant role in forming perceptions and behaviors. As a result, destination marketing organizations invest significant effort in crafting these images and delivering them through various media to targeted audiences, aiming for the desired response (Bramwell & Rawding, 1996). Moreover, Saygın (2023) reported that the district's distinctive characteristics based on the idea that cities can compete and differentiate themselves in terms of city branding and positioning. To analyze perceptions across different segments, improve the city's brand image, assess university towns, and draw in students by evaluating the importance of heritage and cultural image attributes (Brandt & De Mortanges, 2011). While Uyar (2018) explored the universities in relation to the city image, rather than focusing on factors such as faculty, education quality, or social opportunities. Nguyen et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of service quality, student loyalty, and satisfaction as key factors for the sustainable growth of higher education institutions. Manzoor et al. (2020) examined how the image of a university, as a higher-order construct made up of four dimensions including external communication and values, national and international reputation, economic value, and university facilities affects students' satisfaction. Also, they investigated the influence of image on students' citizenship behavior dimensions of sustainability in higher education institutions, with students' satisfaction acting as an extension of university image framework. Lin et al. (2020) explored value co-creation as a possible factor influencing student satisfaction, as well as evaluated the practicality of an improved conceptual model to understand international student satisfaction. All these studies focus on the satisfaction of students in higher education institutions and the factors that shape it. They explore the shift from viewing students as consumers to recognizing their role in marketing strategies, as well as the influence of urban environment quality and cultural values that reflect the image of the cities hosting these institutions (Table 1).

Table 1: Related studies of city branding and students' satisfaction in higher educational institutions

Author	Year	Title	Country
Mihalis	2005	Branding the city through culture and entertainment	-
Bramwell & Rawding	1996	Tourism marketing images of industrial cities	England
Saygın	2023	Competitiveness of The Cities: Branding and Positioning	Trkiye
Brandt & De Mortanges	2011	City branding: A brand concept map analysis of a university town	Belgium

Uyar	2018	The Influence of City Image on The University Selections of Students Studying in The Department of Marketing	Türkiye
Nguyen et al.	2024	The influence of service quality on student satisfaction and student loyalty in Vietnam: the moderating role of the university image	Vietnam
Manzoor et al.	2020	Revisiting the 'university image model' for higher education institutions' sustainability	Malaysia
Lin et al.	2020	Let's make it better: An updated model interpreting international student satisfaction in China based on PLS-SEM approach	China

3. Methods

The research will be conducted using quantitative methods, with measurements developed through a structured approach. Initially, a comprehensive review of empirical studies will be conducted, involving an in-depth content analysis of scientific publications. This review will emphasize research examining how the undergraduate students are satisfied regarding their city urban environment. Drawing on Saygın's (2023) exploration, a competitive city enhances its citizens, and visitors by providing modern, efficient, and sustainable infrastructure, ensuring a high quality of life. This includes access to quality education, affordable housing, cultural activities, and good healthcare. Additionally, it should maintain a healthy and clean urban environment, along with safety and security. This study focuses on evaluating Nicosia universities undergraduate students' satisfaction in relation to urban environment within the city, with the goal of improving the city's image. Given the challenge of reaching all students, we opted for a sampling method and utilized random sampling. In this approach, participants are chosen randomly, individuals whom the researcher believe can provide relevant insights into the research question. Students from various faculties across universities were selected as the sample group, as the features and strengths that define Nicosia's perceived city brand are closely tied to the educational activities within the region. In this context, data had been gathered from a total of (100) undergraduate students from different universities during the 2024-2025 academic year using a survey method. Data collection was conducted in various locations, including libraries, bus stations, public parks, and other similar venues. The survey was conducted in both Turkish and English to ensure participation from a diverse group of students, including 35% Africans, 35% Middle Easterners, and 30% from other countries. Additionally, the surveys were distributed equally between male and female students, with each group representing 50% of the total participants. This approach aligns with the framework of Brandt and De Mortanges (2011), who selected both local and international students to explore their views and gain insights into the branding of their ideal educational city. As demonstrated by Uyar (2018), who conducted surveys to examine the impact of city image on students' university and analyzed the data using SPSS with comparative tables, this study adopts a similar approach. The research questionnaire is divided into two sections. The first section includes (2) questions aimed at collecting demographic information. The second section comprises (14) statements assessing the perceived city image, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very poor to very good. The analyzed data revealed how students perceive the city of Nicosia as an educationally branded city, viewed

through urban environment perspectives. All research procedures involving human participants were done in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained for all research components that involved human participants, in accordance with standard ethical practice.

4. Research area

Cyprus was divided into two regions in 1974, with the north governed by Turkish authorities and the south governed by Greek authorities. In 1975, Turkish Cypriots established the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus as their first self-determined administration, which was later followed by the proclamation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in 1983. They sought international recognition for the TRNC; however, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 541, declaring the TRNC legally invalid and urging all nations to refrain from recognizing any Cypriot state other than the Republic of Cyprus. To date, Trkiye remains the only country to recognize the TRNC, acting as a key supporter by financing a substantial portion of its budget, which in turn gives Trkiye a degree of influence over the TRNC's internal affairs (Sabri & Sakallı, 2021). Nicosia, locally referred to as 'Lefkoşa' in Turkish and 'Lefkosia' in Greek, is the largest city and capital of Cyprus. Uniquely, it holds the distinction of being Europe's last divided city, with a United Nations buffer zone, known as the Green Line, separating its northern Turkish-administered section from the southern Greek-administered section (Figure 1). This division, has led to prolonged periods of inactivity and neglect in certain parts of the city, leaving some areas underdeveloped and disconnected. Nicosia is the capital of the island and with its location it become the center of the governance and economic life which host many educational and cultural activities, along with it offers many employments and international opportunities. Nicosia reflects Cyprus resilience by contemporary development and historical values which ensures its multifaceted urban environment (Oktay, 2007). Northern Cyprus lack of international recognition has been acknowledged as a factor that might in an unintended manner influence the city branding attempts of Nicosia. Although references to its political position are often brief, the consequences for city image, student perceptions and institutional credibility are far-reaching. International non-recognition can influence the ability of universities to shape global exchange programs, academic partnerships or attract international students pursuing degrees with global acceptance. As branding strategies increasingly aim foreign student markets, the political validity of a region may play an important role in shaping both image of the city and the decisions of prospective students.



Figure 1: Cyprus map showing separation (Oktay, 2007)

The actions of universities in Northern Cyprus have the key role in the development of academic environment in the region. Education sector becomes a cornerstone in Northern Cyprus growth and for that it becomes a remarkable factor in the development of the island. In 1979, the process began with the establishment of Eastern Mediterranean University, the first university in the region. Thereafter, industry of higher education has become one of the main economic drivers in the country and expanded significantly. Nowadays, the island is recognized as a hub for higher education institutions, attracting international students from Middle East and Africa. Beside the local students, universities welcome students from many countries around the world, including Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Somalia, Kenya, Brazil, Moldova and Ukraine (Gökbulut et al., 2019). According to the latest statistical report published by the Ministry of National Education of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (2023), the country is home to 24 universities. Among these, 11 are located in Nicosia, with 6 situated within the city's central areas (Figure 2).

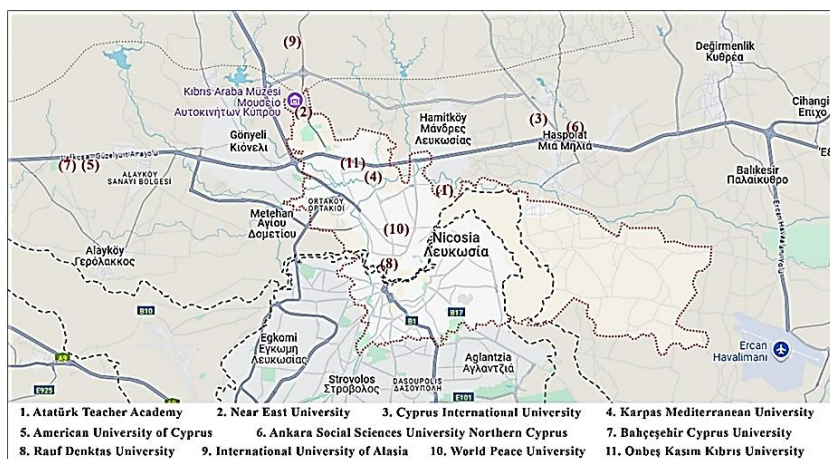


Figure 2: Nicosia map showing location of universities and boundary of city center

The establishment of Near East University in Nicosia in 1988 marked the beginning of the city's emergence as a key player in the higher education sector. By the 2023–2024 academic year, the total student population across Northern Cyprus had reached 108,185, with 45,376 of these students enrolled in universities based in Nicosia. This highlights the city's pivotal role in shaping the educational landscape of the region (Table 2).

Table 2: Students number in Nicosia universities (MNE, 2023)

2023-2024 Number and rate of higher education students by nationality and districts					
District	University	North Cyprus	Trkiye	3 rd Countries	Total
Nicosia	Atatrk Teacher Academy	341	0	0	341
Nicosia	Near East University	3620	11706	10608	25934
Nicosia	Cyprus International University	999	3356	9615	13970
Nicosia	Karpas Mediterranean University	369	42	773	1184
Nicosia	American University of Cyprus	176	300	48	524
Nicosia	Ankara Social Sciences University Northern Cyprus	64	677	25	766
Nicosia	Baheşehir Cyprus University	102	189	1013	1304
Nicosia	Rauf Denktaş University	105	20	522	647
Nicosia	International University of Alasia	3	2	0	5
Nicosia	World Peace University	7	0	271	278
Nicosia	On Beş Kasım Kıbrıs University	28	3	392	423
Nicosia Total		5814	16295	23267	45376

5. Results

The data reveals several insights into participants' perceptions of various factors related to their city urban environment, categorized by nationality and gender (Table 3).

Table 3: The impact of Nicosia city image on university undergraduate students' satisfaction

Demographic	Nationality										
	Africans (35)				Middle Easterners (35)				Others (30)		
	Gender										
	Female (50)						Male (50)				
Statements	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)		(5)		Mean
	Very Poor		Poor		Fair		Good		Very Good		
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	

1. Plenty of Social Activities											
Africans	2	5.71	5	14.29	15	42.86	7	20.00	6	17.14	3.29
Middle Easterners	1	2.86	6	17.14	10	28.57	10	28.57	8	22.86	3.51
Others	1	3.33	1	3.33	13	43.33	7	23.33	8	26.67	3.67
Total	4	4.00	12	12.00	38	38.00	24	24.00	22	22.00	3.48
Female	1	2.00	5	10.00	21	42.00	13	26.00	10	20.00	3.52
Male	3	6.00	7	14.00	17	34.00	11	22.00	12	24.00	3.44
2. Affordable Rental Housing											
Africans	18	51.43	7	20.00	7	20.00	3	8.57	0	0.00	1.86
Middle Easterners	15	42.86	8	22.86	10	28.57	2	5.71	0	0.00	1.97
Others	14	46.67	6	20.00	8	26.67	2	6.67	0	0.00	1.93
Total	47	47.00	21	21.00	25	25.00	7	7.00	0	0.00	1.92
Female	25	50.00	7	14.00	12	24.00	6	12.00	0	0.00	1.98
Male	22	44.00	14	28.00	13	26.00	1	2.00	0	0.00	1.86
3. Not Far from Where My Family Lives											
Africans	16	45.71	10	28.57	9	25.71	0	0.00	0	0.00	1.80
Middle Easterners	11	31.43	13	37.14	7	20.00	4	11.43	0	0.00	2.11
Others	12	40.00	11	36.67	7	23.33	0	0.00	0	0.00	1.83
Total	39	39.00	34	34.00	23	23.00	4	4.00	0	0.00	1.92
Female	24	48.00	12	24.00	13	26.00	1	2.00	0	0.00	1.82
Male	15	30.00	22	44.00	10	20.00	3	6.00	0	0.00	2.02
4. Identity and Sense of Space											
Africans	2	5.71	5	14.29	11	31.43	17	48.57	0	0.00	3.23
Middle Easterners	1	2.86	3	8.57	18	51.43	13	37.14	0	0.00	3.23
Others	0	0.00	2	6.67	14	46.67	14	46.67	0	0.00	3.40
Total	3	3.00	10	10.00	43	43.00	44	44.00	0	0.00	3.28
Female	3	6.00	4	8.00	17	34.00	26	52.00	0	0.00	3.32
Male	0	0.00	6	12.00	26	52.00	18	36.00	0	0.00	3.24
5. The City is Well-Established in Terms of Higher Educational Offerings											
Africans	0	0.00	0	0.00	14	40.00	16	45.71	5	14.29	3.74
Middle Easterners	0	0.00	0	0.00	9	25.71	17	48.57	9	25.71	4.00
Others	0	0.00	3	10.00	13	43.33	11	36.67	3	10.00	3.47
Total	0	0.00	3	3.00	36	36.00	44	44.00	17	17.00	3.75
Female	0	0.00	1	2.00	19	38.00	18	36.00	12	24.00	3.82
Male	0	0.00	2	4.00	17	34.00	26	52.00	5	10.00	3.68
6. Has Historical and Natural Sites											
Africans	0	0.00	1	2.86	18	51.43	13	37.14	3	8.57	3.51
Middle Easterners	0	0.00	1	2.86	19	54.29	10	28.57	5	14.29	3.54

Others	0	0.00	3	10.00	15	50.00	9	30.00	3	10.00	3.40
Total	0	0.00	5	5.00	52	52.00	32	32.00	11	11.00	3.49
Female	0	0.00	3	6.00	23	46.00	17	34.00	7	14.00	3.56
Male	0	0.00	2	4.00	29	58.00	15	30.00	4	8.00	3.42
7. Rich in Culture and Art											
Africans	2	5.71	3	8.57	17	48.57	10	28.57	3	8.57	3.26
Middle Easterners	1	2.86	8	22.86	9	25.71	11	31.43	6	17.14	3.37
Others	2	6.67	5	16.67	16	53.33	7	23.33	0	0.00	2.93
Total	5	5.00	16	16.00	42	42.00	28	28.00	9	9.00	3.20
Female	4	8.00	7	14.00	23	46.00	11	22.00	5	10.00	3.12
Male	1	2.00	9	18.00	19	38.00	17	34.00	4	8.00	3.28
8. The City Has a Good Transportation System											
Africans	5	14.29	0	0.00	21	60.00	5	14.29	4	11.43	3.09
Middle Easterners	2	5.71	6	17.14	12	34.29	12	34.29	3	8.57	3.23
Others	2	6.67	9	30.00	11	36.67	8	26.67	0	0.00	2.83
Total	9	9.00	15	15.00	44	44.00	25	25.00	7	7.00	3.06
Female	2	4.00	10	20.00	26	52.00	12	24.00	0	0.00	2.96
Male	7	14.00	5	10.00	18	36.00	13	26.00	7	14.00	3.16
9. Safe and Trustworthy Environment											
Africans	0	0.00	5	14.29	6	17.14	18	51.43	6	17.14	3.71
Middle Easterners	0	0.00	7	20.00	8	22.86	11	31.43	9	25.71	3.63
Others	0	0.00	1	3.33	5	16.67	16	53.33	8	26.67	4.03
Total	0	0.00	13	13.00	19	19.00	45	45.00	23	23.00	3.78
Female	0	0.00	9	18.00	11	22.00	18	36.00	12	24.00	3.66
Male	0	0.00	4	8.00	8	16.00	27	54.00	11	22.00	3.90
10. The City is Easy to Navigate and Friendly for Disables											
Africans	19	54.29	9	25.71	4	11.43	3	8.57	0	0.00	1.74
Middle Easterners	11	31.43	13	37.14	8	22.86	3	8.57	0	0.00	2.09
Others	11	36.67	8	26.67	6	20.00	5	16.67	0	0.00	2.17
Total	41	41.00	30	30.00	18	18.00	11	11.00	0	0.00	1.99
Female	24	48.00	14	28.00	11	22.00	1	2.00	0	0.00	1.78
Male	17	34.00	16	32.00	7	14.00	10	20.00	0	0.00	2.20
11. The City is Rich in Green Spaces											
Africans	2	5.71	6	17.14	20	57.14	5	14.29	2	5.71	2.97
Middle Easterners	1	2.86	5	14.29	17	48.57	9	25.71	3	8.57	3.23
Others	3	10.00	11	36.67	9	30.00	1	3.33	6	20.00	2.87
Total	6	6.00	22	22.00	46	46.00	15	15.00	11	11.00	3.03
Female	1	2.00	15	30.00	17	34.00	11	22.00	6	12.00	3.12
Male	5	10.00	7	14.00	29	58.00	4	8.00	5	10.00	2.94

12. Clean and Well-Maintained											
Africans	2	5.71	4	11.43	24	68.57	3	8.57	2	5.71	2.97
Middle Easterners	2	5.71	1	2.86	19	54.29	9	25.71	4	11.43	3.34
Others	3	10.00	6	20.00	15	50.00	5	16.67	1	3.33	2.83
Total	7	7.00	11	11.00	58	58.00	17	17.00	7	7.00	3.06
Female	5	10.00	8	16.00	26	52.00	8	16.00	3	6.00	2.92
Male	2	4.00	3	6.00	32	64.00	9	18.00	4	8.00	3.20
13. The City Has a Good Healthcare Facilities											
Africans	3	8.57	8	22.86	18	51.43	5	14.29	1	2.86	2.80
Middle Easterners	2	5.71	5	14.29	21	60.00	4	11.43	3	8.57	3.03
Others	3	10.00	2	6.67	13	43.33	9	30.00	3	10.00	3.23
Total	8	8.00	15	15.00	52	52.00	18	18.00	7	7.00	3.01
Female	5	10.00	10	20.00	19	38.00	12	24.00	4	8.00	3.00
Male	3	6.00	5	10.00	33	66.00	6	12.00	3	6.00	3.02
14. The City Has a Diverse and Flavorful Cuisine											
Africans	0	0.00	2	5.71	16	45.71	6	17.14	11	31.43	3.74
Middle Easterners	0	0.00	0	0.00	13	37.14	8	22.86	14	40.00	4.03
Others	0	0.00	4	13.33	10	33.33	9	30.00	7	23.33	3.63
Total	0	0.00	6	6.00	39	39.00	23	23.00	32	32.00	3.81
Female	0	0.00	3	6.00	24	48.00	10	20.00	13	26.00	3.66
Male	0	0.00	3	6.00	15	30.00	13	26.00	19	38.00	3.96
Total Mean of All Statements (100 Participants)											3.05

1. **Plenty of Social Activities:** The mean score for this statement is 3.48, indicating a generally positive perception. Other Nationalities group rated this factor the highest which is 3.67, followed by Middle Easterners (3.51), and Africans (3.29). Females (3.52) rated this aspect slightly higher than males (3.44).

2. **Affordable Rental Housing:** The mean score of 1.92 highlights dissatisfaction with rental housing affordability. Africans (1.86) reported the lowest satisfaction, followed closely by Others (1.93) and Middle Easterners (1.97). Females (1.98) reported slightly higher satisfaction than males (1.86).

3. **Not Far from Where My Family Lives:** The overall mean score is 1.92, indicating dissatisfaction with proximity to family. Middle Easterners (2.11) expressed the highest satisfaction compared to Others (1.83) and Africans (1.80). Males (2.02) rated this factor higher than females (1.82).

4. **Identity and Sense of Space:** With a mean score of 3.28, respondents generally feel positive about their identity and sense of space. Other Nationalities rated it the highest (3.40), followed by Africans and Middle Easterners (both 3.23). Females (3.32) rated this higher than males (3.24).

5. **The City is Well-Established in Terms of Higher Educational Offerings:** The mean score of 3.75 indicates a positive perception of educational offerings. Middle

Easterners (4.00) had the highest satisfaction, followed by Africans (3.74) and Others (3.47). Females (3.82) rated it higher than males (3.68).

6. Has Historical and Natural Sites: A mean score of 3.49 suggests a positive view of historical and natural sites. Middle Easterners (3.54) and Africans (3.51) rated this factor slightly higher than Others (3.40). Females (3.56) rated this higher than males (3.42).

7. Rich in Culture and Art: The mean score is 3.20, reflecting a moderately positive perception. Middle Easterners (3.37) rated it the highest, followed by Africans (3.26) and Others (2.93). Males (3.28) rated this slightly higher than females (3.12).

8. The City Has a Good Transportation System: The overall mean score of 3.06 indicates a neutral perception of transportation. Middle Easterners (3.23) rated it higher than Africans (3.09) and Others (2.83). Males (3.16) rated this slightly higher than females (2.96).

9. Safe and Trustworthy Environment: A mean score of 3.78 reflects a positive perception of safety. Other Nationalities rated this the highest (4.03), followed by Africans (3.71) and Middle Easterners (3.63). Males (3.90) rated this higher than females (3.66).

10. The city is Easy to Navigate and Friendly for Disables: With a low mean score of 1.99, participants are dissatisfied with accessibility for navigation and disabilities. Other Nationalities had the highest satisfaction (2.17), followed by Middle Easterners (2.09) and Africans (1.74). Males (2.20) rated this higher than females (1.78).

11. The city is Rich in Green Spaces: The mean score of 3.03 suggests a neutral perception. Middle Easterners (3.23) rated this factor the highest, followed by Africans (2.97) and Others (2.87). Females (3.12) rated this higher than males (2.94).

12. Clean and Well-Maintained: The mean score of 3.06 indicates moderate satisfaction. Middle Easterners (3.34) rated it the highest, followed by Africans (2.97) and Others (2.83). Males (3.20) rated this higher than females (2.92).

13. The City Has a Good Healthcare Facilities: The mean score of 3.01 reflects a neutral perception. Others (3.23) expressed the highest satisfaction, followed by Middle Easterners (3.03) and Africans (2.80). Males (3.02) rated this slightly higher than females (3.00).

14. The City Has a Diverse and Flavorful Cuisine: The mean score of 3.81 indicates a strong positive perception. Middle Easterners (4.03) rated this the highest, followed by Africans (3.74) and Others (3.63). Males (3.96) rated this higher than females (3.66).

The overall mean score across all statements is 3.05. Satisfaction levels varied based on nationality and gender, with notable differences in factors. Participants are generally satisfied with cuisine, safety, and higher education offerings, which stand out as key strengths of the city. Housing affordability, proximity to family, and disability navigation are major areas of concern and need attention. Other aspects, such as cultural richness, social activities, and green spaces, show moderate satisfaction and could be further improved to enhance the overall experience of the city (Figure 3).

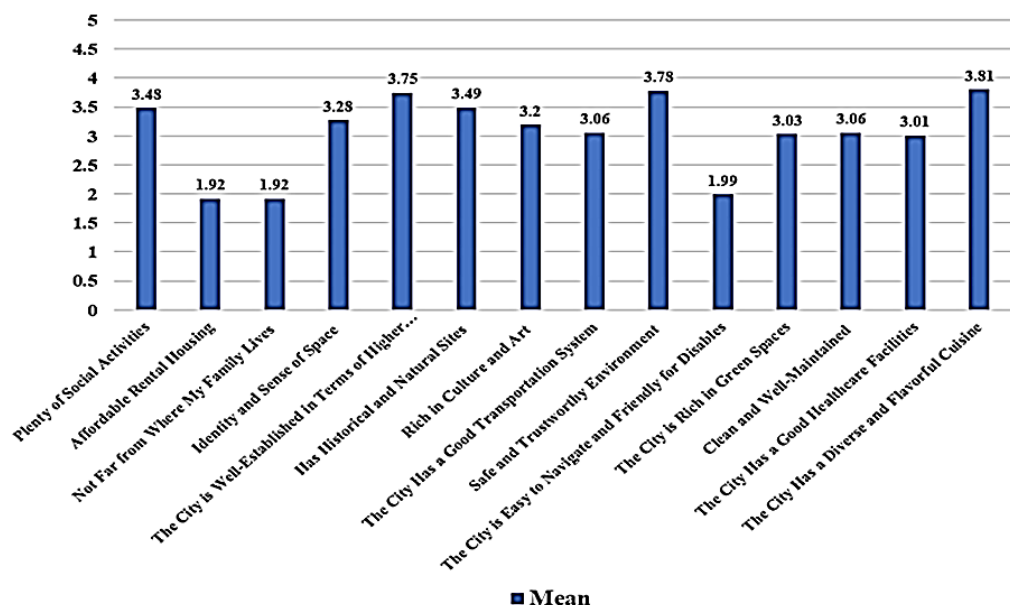


Figure 3: Mean score of each statement

6. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on city branding and student satisfaction, offering insights into the intersection of urban development and higher education. The results highlight critical elements influencing students' satisfaction of Nicosia, while drawing parallels to global trends and theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature. This study shows the importance of universities in city branding. Popescu (2012) explained that the cities are the center of knowledge and that's because the universities are acting as pivot of innovation and creativity. Nicosia has a high score for offers of higher education institutions align with findings of Liu (2019) which focused on the development of culture and economic, identifying them as key drivers to create a relationship between urban environment and universities. Domański (2017) highlighted that the cities should include the higher education institutions to their branding strategies. Moreover, Brandt & De Mortanges (2011) supported the importance of the heritage benefits in branding of the cities as the reflection of positive cultural and historical attribute. Juarez et al.'s (2023) emphasize that the discrimination of the cities is cultural possessions in city branding potential, as for Nicosia these factors shape the basis for its brand identity.

Students rate both housing affordability and urban accessibility with dissatisfaction which reflects the international efforts, as Wilkins et al. (2012) and Saygın (2023) propose that cities should offer an inclusive urban strategy to improve livability. In particular, Nicosia's low rates on accessibility and affordability highlight the challenges faced by many cities striving to balance economic growth with equitable access to resources, as noted by Roostika (2017). The enhancement should be done on factors such

as green spaces and public transportation as these two score moderate satisfaction. Chan et al. (2021) explained that the availability of urban mobility is crucial in branding strategies of cities especially the cities that have young demographic population. These results show the need of providing the sustainable transportation and open green spaces. The city branding must be inclusive as the variation of findings demonstrate the different preference among various demographic. Students from Africa low rate the accessibility and affordability, while students from Middle East high rate the richness of culture and safety, this determine that how the different economic and culture backgrounds form different perception. Thus, Mogaji's (2019) observed that the cities should address their branding efforts to serve different student populations. The differences in gender preferences noted that the males scored slightly higher with navigation and safety, which reflect different challenges in designing urban environment. As Roostika (2017) reported that the shape of urban experience relays on different perception of inclusivity. The results shows that the gender specific concerns are significant in terms of improving lighting and transportation safety which can reflect positively on Nicosia branding.

Zenker et al. (2017) stated that the branding of the cities is a complicated relationship among the stakeholders, which is showcasing the higher educational institutions, cultural heritage and urban environment of Nicosia. The findings support Miotto et al. (2020), who stressed on improving the reputation of universities in order to sustain the competitiveness. Nguyen et al. (2024) highlighted that loyalty and satisfaction of the students along with service quality are crucial for the growth of universities. In the case of Nicosia, the services quality will ensure the loyalty and satisfaction of students not only towards the university but to the city as well. The loyalty keeps the enrollment of future students as it ensures positive word-of-mouth which is enhancing the reputation of the city and universities. The knowledge city concept introduced by Mogaji (2019) is relevant, branding efforts of Nicosia can have strong integration between urban environment and the higher educational institutions. This aligns with Hospers (2020) idea of creating adaptive environment that the cities can compete in global landscape.

Overall, in the context of education the branding of the cities is stressing on the interplay between students' satisfaction and urban environment of the city. Hence, the advantages from cultural wealthiness and various offers from universities while specifying shortage in accessibility and affordability is crucial to improve Nicosia image. The universities in Nicosia and the city itself can secure better appeal internationally and attract more international students, once the United Nations Security Council acknowledge the TRNC. Further restudies can discuss long-term directions to evaluate the impacts of urban involvement on student satisfaction, also comparative analysis across cities with same educational profiles. Nicosia has possibilities to set itself as a sample city that successfully integrate urban environment and higher education institutions by aligning its strategies of city branding with global practices. The exceptional context of Nicosia as a separated city with a politically complicated status presents advantageous opportunities for comparative studies. Existing literature emphasizes the significant of analyzing student satisfaction not solely in isolated urban context but also throughout cities that share homologous geopolitical or structural challenges. Moreover, researchers have emphasized the significant of longitudinal approaches to best understand how developing urban infrastructures impact the branding and attractiveness of educational cities through time.

Tracking adjustments in urban image, public services, and physical improvement alongside student satisfaction may offer deeper awareness into how cities can thoughtfully position themselves regardless of spatial or political limitations.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research on branding city of Nicosia and its impact on the satisfaction of the university students gives understanding about the relation between urban environment and educational institutions. Moreover, it asserts of showing as educational center by integrating the cultural heritage, diverse higher educational offerings and urban infrastructure. Students in general show satisfactions in some domains such as safety, educational infrastructure and cultural richness. However, there were areas need improvement as students express their dissatisfaction like housing affordability, urban transportation and accessibility. By stressing on inclusivity of city and disparity in culture and economic, the study demonstrate the importance of integrating different demographic population needs. To ensure equitable experience of urban environment for all international students, there is a need for policies to tailor the nationality and gender-based variations. It is essential that for Nicosia to set itself as educational center, investment in transportation, housing and green spaces are needed. Improving these elements will enhance the livability and boost its position as a knowledge based urban center. This research offers a foundation for further studies into long-term effects of urban plans on satisfaction of students. This process will make Nicosia to compete internationally and adapt branding strategies by combining higher education institutions with urban development goals. As the main users of various urban spaces, students' understanding into public services, mobility, housing, and recreational needs can provide valuable input for forming adaptive and responsive urban strategies. Emerging research emphasizes the potential of participatory planning platforms, student-led forums, and data-driven tools such as geospatial mapping, satisfaction surveys, and real-time feedback systems to generate dynamic response loops between city authorities and students. These mechanisms not exclusively enhance the inclusiveness of urban decision-making but also participate to the evolving competitiveness and identity of educational cities like Nicosia. By actively involving the student population, cities can better integrate services and infrastructure with the ambitions of their academic communities, thereby reinforcing their functionality and appeal as university-centered urban settings. The following are valuable recommendations based on the findings:

- **Enhance Inclusivity of Multiculture:** Programs can be designed to ensure the different necessity of student population, more particularly international students, guarantee equitable access to all amenities of the city. Reside multicultural events and programs to improve the relation between residents and international students while creating sense of belonging.
- **Urban and Academic Strategies:** Collaborating between planners if the city and the educational institutions in order to include the universities in the branding strategies of the city. Nicosia can be highlighted in marketing campaigns and be introduced as a higher educational destination.

- Students Loyalty and Services Quality: Ensuring quality in services, enhancing students' satisfaction and urban environment is crucial for development of Nicosia as an educational centre. Increasing the feeling of loyalty among enrolled students by providing exceptional experience will enhance the enrolment of prospective students, positive word-of-mouth and city's reputation.
- Focusing on Liveability and Sustainability: Positioning Nicosia as a thinking leader in implementing sustainable practices such as eco-friendly transportation and green building projects. Promoting universities researches which are focusing on urban liveability and sustainability.
- Engaging Students in City Development: Providing platforms for students to express their opinions of urban growth and integrate their needs in the process of city development. A collaboration with organizations of students to create programs that lead the city towards stronger connection with students.
- Assessing Branding Impact: Evaluating the city branding efficiency via surveys from students. Employ feedbacks collected from students to constantly improve the strategies of city branding, ensuring to meet with the needs of students and international urban directions.

By fulfilment of the recommendations, Nicosia has an ability to identify current challenges while strengthens its position as a major centre of higher education that is sustainable, comprehensive, and attractive to students internationally.

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