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The influence of corporate social responsibility on students' emotional appeal in the HEIs: The mediating effect of reputation and corporate image

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the influence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) over higher education institutions' (HEIs) students' emotional appeal and the effect of two mediating variables, corporate image, and reputation. A sample of 211 students surveyed was obtained, and the study was conducted using partial least squares path modeling (PLS-SEM) technique. The results showed that emotional appeal is influenced by corporate reputation, corporate image, and CSR practices. These effects are not only direct and positive but significant indirect effects are also obtained, which allow the positive effects of CSR to be heightened. This paper contributes to the literature on CSR considering mediating effects of corporative image and reputation in the relationship between CSR and emotional appeal. The findings provide important implications for theory and practice, indicating consistent strategies for competitive advantage in HEIs by achieving stakeholder engagement and new lines of research in terms of emotional marketing.

KEYWORDS

corporate image, corporate reputation, corporate social responsibility, emotional appeal, higher education institutions, partial least square structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), stakeholder engagement

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there is growing competition in the higher education sector that makes it necessary for the universities to develop new strategies to compete to recruit more students, hiring the most relevant and productive faculty members, partnering with sought-after corporations, and producing and sharing relevant knowledge (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018; Plewa et al., 2016). The higher education institutions (HEIs) must face new challenges such as increased internationalization, an ever-changing labor market, a growing demand for innovative teaching and learning methodologies, the decrease of public funding, the increase in national and international competitiveness fostered by rankings, increased demand for transparency and the scrutiny of internal and external stakeholders to demand better results (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2016; El Nemar et al., 2020; Foroudi et al., 2016; Miotto et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2018). As a response to these global changes the potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts which have been effective in the business world, have gradually being applied to many universities with a view to gaining a competitive edge (Durkin et al., 2012).

In that sense, emotional marketing is a new paradigmatic approach, where management of the emotional link between the

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company and the consumer (or other market players) becomes the key exchange-stimulating feature (Rytel, 2010). Nowadays, following the foundations of emotional marketing, emotional factors are important as classic functional aspects of customer purchasing behavior. Enterprises want to establish with the customer an emotional channel of trust and mutual collaboration. In a saturated market, the desires are more important than needs and thus the state of mind, the emotions, sympathies become predominant (Consoli, 2010). Besides quality and price, the consumer wants trust, admiration, pride, and liking. Companies must focus both on generating a product or service that meets the needs of their consumers and in the customer satisfaction, not only because the product or service meets their needs, but also because the emotions and sensations that it produces. Emotional appeal is associated with stimulus that arouse emotions, that is, mental processes such as feelings of admiration, trust, pride, and liking, which may result in specific actions to affirm or cope with the emotions. Emotions are shaped by cognition, thinking, and experiences with diversified feelings to bring a change to customers behavior (Bagozzi et al., 1999). Emotional appeal suggests pleasant emotional responses that can be linked to having a good feeling about the organization (Wepener & Boshoff, 2015). In this context, a more emotionally oriented approach would be used in HEIs in an attempt to attract and retain students both in the domestic and international markets.

The implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) could constitute a strategy for generating emotional appeal. There are many definitions of CSR, but it is basically concern with the effort organizations make to improve social welfare that serves as a means of enhancing relationships with key stakeholders (Barnett, 2007). CSR, which initially focused on the contributions an organization made to society, now covers a wide spectrum of issues ranging from corporate control, business ethics, responsible sustainability of the environment, and investment in the wider community (Ahmad, 2012). In this scenario, universities are relevant actors contributing to the stakeholders and local communities development in several ways and they must set and maintain strong relationships with their key stakeholders and seek their engagement (Aversano et al., 2020). Responsible higher education practices contribute to the well-being of shareholders and the general public, but also represent a long-term value proposition for the institution itself (Kashyap, 2014). Universities are known as places in which students can gain knowledge and experience, and are platforms to promote beneficial and healthy lifestyles to students, including exposure to and practice of good CSR (Nicolescu, 2006). Some CSR activities of the universities are the same as CSR activities done by businesses, and as in a business context, CSR activities in HEIs can generate favorable impressions among stakeholders (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2015; Plungpongpan et al., 2016; Rahman et al., 2019).

There is a consensus in the literature on the importance of CSR as a valuable tangible in organizations but it is not the only tangible on which universities should focus. Currently, intangible assets such as corporate image and corporate reputation appear as very valuable elements presenting an increasing importance in the management of universities since they could play an important role in differentiation and competitive advantage against competition (Maduro et al., 2018). There is extensive literature which demonstrates that CSR has a significant positive effect on the corporate reputation and the corporate image of an organization (Famiyeh et al., 2016; Kwarteng et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2010). While university reputation has traditionally been the main indicator for the uniqueness of a HEI, with the emergence of branding, the adoption of concepts such corporate image are becoming increasingly important, as organizations and managers alike are eager to develop distinctive university identities, understand multiple meanings held by stakeholders, improve images, and enhance reputation in this highly competitive global environment (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). However, reality in universities and the perception their stakeholders have of them do not always go hand in hand, indicating that image and reputation management is a key issue not devoid of difficulties (Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018). Further research is needed to determine how these two concepts may serve as resources for gaining competitive advantage. Specifically, within the HIEs field, this relationship has not yet been empirically analyzed (Miotto et al., 2020).

Based on the ideas expressed above, arises the importance of studying CSR and its impact on emotional appeal in HEIs, including the analysis of the relationships with corporate reputation and image, which represent the net effective or emotional reaction based on the overall estimation in which an institution is held by its stakeholders. This study focuses on investigating the relationships between CSR and emotional appeal from the point of view of one on the most important stakeholder for a university: its students. To this end, our study addresses the following questions: Does CSR influence students' emotional appeal in the HEIs? Is this relationship mediated by the corporate reputation and image? The theoretical framework is proposed in the next section. Details of the sample and the survey used to collect appropriate data to test the research model proposed are presented in Section 3 and the results of testing the model are shown in Section 4. Finally, the discussion and conclusions are presented.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | CSR practices and emotional appeal

In order to develop the objectives of this study, a review of the literature has been conducted, following the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1, which shows the influence of CSR on emotional appeal, and the mediating role of corporate reputation and corporate image play in this relationship.

Emotional appeal constitutes a stimulus for customers' purchasing intentions as it awakens their positive or negative emotions (Kotler & Turner, 1997). Previous research shows that emotional appeal directly influences stakeholders behavior, through cognitive processes such as attitude, motivation, and trust (Chen, 2016; Hu et al., 2013; Passyn & Sujan, 2006; Wadie, 2018). According to Wepener and Boshoff (2015), emotional appeal refers to the customer's positive feelings, such as respect, trust, appreciation, admiration, and pride for the institution. In the academic context, emotional appeal between the stakeholders

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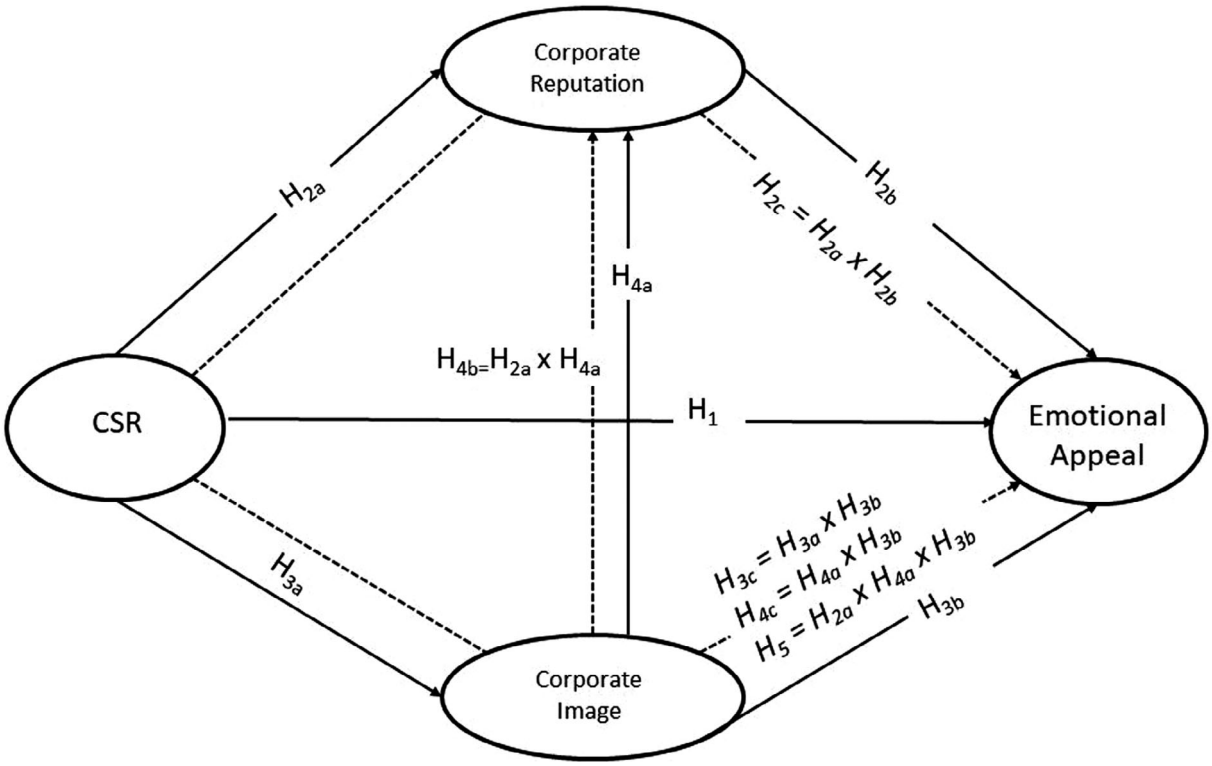

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model and hypotheses. *Source*: Authors

of a university is based on the direct experience or information that comes from others and leads to an emotional tie between the institution and partners (Park et al., 2014). So, the stakeholders such as students can build an emotional bond operationalized in terms of trust, esteem, admiration, and good feelings in order to preserve relationships in the context of universities (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). Increasing emotions between HEIs and students influence their continuance intention and spread positive word of mouth, such as several studies evidence (Han & Ling, 2016; Lee & Hong, 2016; Liu & Mattila, 2017; Yoo & MacInnis, 2005). Therefore, generating emotional appeal among students is an essential factor in the performance of a university.

There are several studies that support the significant effect of social responsibility on emotional appeal (Park et al., 2014; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). Implementing CSR practices help nurture customer' trust in the institutions and its services (Castaldo et al., 2009). From the perspective of stakeholders, such as students, CSR initiatives can influence creating emotional appeal based on confidence in the experience and integrity of the institution (Park et al., 2014). Institutions that act responsibly can influence the perception of trust, admiration, good feeling, and esteem felt by their stakeholders (Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). In fact, HEIs that organize community participation and environmental responsibility projects, generate the social benevolence of customers, which in turn should positively affect emotional appeal. If students perceive that their institution is socially responsible, they can acquire an emotional appeal that includes feelings and emotional ties of belonging within the institution (Eccles et al., 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Based on the information provided above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. CSR positively affects emotional appeal.

2.2 | Corporate reputation in higher education

Corporate reputation is considered as one of the key bases on which to build the success of an organization (Kay, 1995). Corporate reputation can be considered as an important intangible asset of an organization that is stemming from the firm's past positive interactions with stakeholders (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Fombrun (1996) defined corporate reputation as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals." Reputation has long been acknowledged as providing important benefits to the organization by enhancing firm performance (Gatzert, 2015; Lee & Roh, 2012; Roberts & Dowling, 2002), competitiveness (Awang & Jusoff, 2009), loyalty (Caruana & Ewing, 2010), and advantageous public opinion (Fombrun & Gardberg, 2000). In the academic context, reputation can be defined as "a subjective and collective recognition, perception, attitude and evaluation of HEIs among all key stakeholder groups (internal and external) during a certain period, that is based on their past behavior, communication and potential to satisfy expectations in comparison with the competition" (Sontaité & Bakanauskas, 2011). Currently, in the HEIs sector, the

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reputation represents an intangible capital and a valuable asset and is recognized as playing an important role in differentiation and competitive advantage against competition (Maduro et al., 2018). In fact, reputation is critical for institutions wishing to attract and retain students in today's competitive higher education setting because it acts as a key contributor to perceived quality, reduces uncertainty for stakeholders and guides evaluations of key stakeholders, such as students (Plewa et al., 2016). Therefore, managing reputation properly may be crucial for public universities to achieve their social and economic objectives in the medium and long term (Miotto et al., 2020).

There are numerous studies that show a relationship between organizational reputation and CSR (Bianchi et al., 2019; Maduro et al., 2018; Ruiz & García, 2021; Sánchez-Torné et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2014). Reputation is very much linked with sustainability and social responsibility. Only organizations that provide positive economic, social, and environmental impacts for all stakeholders may be considered well reputed (Miotto et al., 2020). Stakeholders believing in carrying out business operations that exercise social responsibility would be more likely to associate themselves with such a firm's social practices, and more importantly, will strategize and sustain these practices in the most profitable way to the firm, so they benefit from its reputation (Singh & Misra, 2021). From the customer perspective, researchers have found that customer perception of a firm's CSR activities is positively related to their evaluation of its reputation (Zhu et al., 2014). According to Maden et al. (2012), CSR has a positive effect on reputation, which in turn has positive effects on the behaviors of customers, employees, and investors. In HEIs, customers (i.e., the students) are the most important stakeholder group (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2015). The students give good reputations to those organizations that are perceived as socially responsible (Maden et al., 2012; Miotto et al., 2020) and become more loyal and less price conscious (Fombrun, 1996).

Based on the above arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. CSR positively affects HEI reputation.

Reputation is a valuable asset because it reduces stakeholders' uncertainty and concerns (Fombrun et al., 2000), increasing the trust in product or service quality, value, and differentiation. Reputation is a strategic resource for developing credibility, trustworthy, and support among different internal and external stakeholders (Araci & Emine, 2015; Feldman et al., 2014; Melewar, 2003). In fact, a positive corporate reputation results in enhanced affective commitment (Carmeli et al., 2006), mediated by commitment and trust and emotional experiences, with influence in behavioral intentions (Fombrun et al., 2004; MacMillan et al., 2005). Corporate reputation can influence stakeholders (Çekmecelioğlu & Dinçel, 2014). In institutions with higher reputation, certain factors like the pride to be a member of the organization and confidence contribute to the retention of stakeholders (Sinan & Kavas, 2015).

There are previous studies that show the relationship between corporate reputation and organizational commitment and identification (Bozkurt & Yurt, 2015; Işık & Zincirkıran, 2016). A positive corporate reputation has many profits for institutions. For instance, attracting and retaining talented stakeholders to the institution and increasing their satisfaction and loyalty (Alniacik et al., 2011; Arikan et al., 2016; Feldman et al., 2014; Karatepe & Ozan, 2017; Maden et al., 2012). According to Bartikowski and Walsh (2011), in the service firms, such as HEIs, a positive reputation stands for a quality signal, which improves the probability that customers engage in favorable behaviors towards the firms, that is, customers have more tendencies of trust, loyalty, and identification for the firms with high corporate reputation. A favorable corporate reputation affords customers with repeated positive reinforcement, which generates commitment-inducing emotional links (Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011; Bennett & Gabriel, 2001; Einwiller et al., 2006). In the HEIs context, when the customers, that is, the students, perceive an HEI with a high reputation, they develop positive thoughts and feelings about the institution.

Therefore, we pose the following hypothesis:

H3. HEI reputation improves emotional appeal.

2.3 | Corporate image

In addition to reputation, corporate image is another important intangible asset that appears as a very valuable element presenting an increasing importance in the management of universities (Maduro et al., 2018). Corporate image is considered as the ideas and feelings linked to enterprise by individuals or groups, which are affected by material and immaterial organizational elements, communication, and value systems (Mackelo & Drūteikienė, 2010). Bromley (2000) defines corporate image as the collective state of mind that shapes organizations' communications efforts to represent itself in public. While academic literature on corporate identity is plentiful, the literature on university identity is in short supply (Aghaz et al., 2015; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015). In recent years, interest in corporate identity has increased significantly in both the academic and business worlds (Awugah et al., 2018). This is because a good image can attract the whole public to using the products and services offered (Mohamad et al., 2007).

Corporate image can be built through deliberate actions and efforts by universities to communicate with and influence stakeholders. In this context, the stakeholders cover a wide range of audience from opinion leaders (business, media, thinktank, education specialist, government/political) to students and potential students (Ansoglenang et al., 2018). However, reality in universities and the perception their stakeholders have of them do not always go hand in hand, indicating that image management is a key issue not devoid of difficulties (Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018). There is still little knowledge about the critical factors to manage the university image more efficiently. One of the aspects that can help generate a positive image can be the CSR.

There is a consensus in the previous literature about CSR is seen as crucial in creating attractive corporate image (Ali et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2015; Green & Peloza, 2011; Gürlek et al., 2017; Kim

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et al., 2020). CSR activities are a key device for achieving proper stakeholder communication and can ensure greater corporate transparency and, through this, a higher level of engagement with different stakeholders (Golob & Bartlett, 2007). When organizations behave in accordance with social expectations, they manage to increase their visibility and credibility, and therefore, to provide image awareness and trust among stakeholders (Deephouse et al., 2017; Rindova et al., 2005). It is important to efficiently communicate the institution's CSR actions to increase the customers' positive perception and attitude, in order to build a positive image (Martínez et al., 2014). Lu et al. (2019) arguments that the CSR practices usually create a stakeholder's strong belief that the company follows high ethical standards and takes society's wellbeing seriously. This, in turn, has positive impacts on the establishment of a positive corporate image. Green and Peloza (2011) stress that socially responsible companies earn positive image in the society due to the fact that they gain more mass media attention and form positive stakeholder attitude towards the company. The socially responsible actions of HEIs seem to act as signals to develop good impressions and obtain sustainable competitive advantages that help the growth of the corporate image (Miotto et al., 2020). Therefore, the CSR practices facilities HEIs to improve their corporate image. In consequence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. CSR positively affects corporate image.

Corporate image can be considered an important key for institutions because it has an impact on the consumer behavior (Balmer et al., 2010; de Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000; Hsieh et al., 2004). Several studies argue that the corporate image influences the perception of quality, credibility, and purchase intentions, that is, it affects consumers' product evaluation (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Hsieh et al., 2004; Souiden et al., 2006). According to Kennedy (1977), corporate image has an emotional dimension that is manifested by feelings and mindsets towards a firm. Because of this, corporate image plays a fundamental role in service companies, since due to its intangibility, the quality of services can be more difficult to evaluate by consumers (Fombrun, 1996; Grönroos, 1982; Mudambi et al., 1997). In service companies, each meeting service provides the customer the basis for developing a cumulative image of the company, helping it to build customer loyalty (Selnes, 1993). According to Rindova and Fombrun (1999), loyalty is assumed to be positively affected by favorably perceived images. Many authors state that a good corporate image helps create and keep a loyal relationship with clients (Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013; Souiden et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2009).

In the academic context, when students perceive a favorable institutional image, their degree of loyalty increases (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Helgesen & Nesset, 2007; Kheiry et al., 2012; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001b; Tamuliene & Murzaite, 2013). As a result, their identity with the university grows, thereby resulting in shared goals, identities, and values between the university and students (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Developing a strong corporate image leads to increased student loyalty and support and therefore, builds student retention (Palmer et al., 2016; Souiden et al., 2006). A strong corporate image brings emotional and functional benefits (Skinner et al., 2010), because it helps customers to be more attached to the company, thus creating feelings of attachment and an emotional bond (Aaker, 2004; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dennis et al., 2016). For example, if a university has a high position in a university ranking, its stakeholders will identify it as leading institution in its field. Students or parents who perceive through a university ranking that a university is good, will develop more positive feelings towards that institution, such as greater confidence and greater motivation to study one of its programs. Similarly, when an HEI is involved with its community, for example, by conducting research to find solutions to local problems, with financial help for students during Covid-19 pandemic, or with volunteer programs, it can create emotional ties with its stakeholders. Therefore, in the HEIs context, when the stakeholders perceive an HEI with a strong corporate image, they develop emotional attachment about the institution.

Based on the above arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. Corporate image positively affects emotional appeal.

Alessandri (2001) stated that repeated impressions of an organizational image can form a reputation of the organization over time. If consumers have a positive image of a company, this will positively affect their feelings and evaluations of the company and the company's reputation will improve (Walsh et al., 2009). The emotional component of corporate image and corporate reputation may share a close relationship because of the psychological dimensions which contribute to their formation (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001a). This relationship between organizational image and reputation has been endorsed in previous research (De Chernatony, 2001; de Leaniz & del Bosque Rodríguez, 2016; Fombrun, 1996; Foroudi et al., 2014; Heinberg et al., 2018).

University with good image will get a competitive advantage and also increased their reputation (Mohamad et al., 2007). It can be considered that the image of the university and its reputation are strongly related since both are perceptions of its stakeholders. Alessandri et al. (2006) found that a university's solid image gives rise to a more favorable reputation among its students. Based on Wilkins and Huisman (2015) that argue "as universities have become more exposed to competitive market forces, marketing has become more important in contributing to the creation of favorable institutional images that will help attract students, staff and resources", Foroudi et al. (2016) propose that once students have a positive university image, a university's reputation will be maintained or improved.

To verify these ideas, we pose the following hypothesis:

H6. Corporate image positively affects reputation.

To conclude, Figure 1 shows the conceptual model and the hypotheses established in this study.

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3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Sample

The population of this research is all university students belonging to Degree in Early Childhood Education and Degree in Primary Education at a faculty of the University of Murcia (Spain) with a total of 490 students enrolled. The University of Murcia has more than 34,000 students and is a university with national and international recognition. It offers study programs in various areas including Arts and Humanities, Engineering, Health Sciences, Sciences, and Social and Law Sciences. In recent years, this University has seen its competition increase at the local level, with two other universities in the same region, and at the national level, with a great increase in the higher educational offer. On the other hand, the University of Murcia has given a great boost in its internationalization strategy that seeks to attract foreign students. These factors imply that the University of Murcia is a clear example of HEI that needs to develop new approaches to compete and, therefore, this university is a suitable candidate to carry out this research. The data were obtained in April 2019 through a survey conducted in class. Two hundred eleven complete responses were obtained.

The Table 1 shows the sample composition according to the gender, age, and degree.

Previous to the start of the fieldwork, a pretest was carried out with 15 students to make sure that the questionnaire was understandable. Moreover, In addition, we have taken into account and analyzed three types of bias: social acceptance bias, nonresponse bias, and common method bias. With respect to the first, as stated by Fisher (1993) the survey was administered anonymously. In order to reduce the nonresponse bias, the earlier response was compared with the latest answers. For this purpose, the responses were divided in two group. A group with the 85% of the first responses and another group with the rest. The ANOVA test revealed that there are no significant differences between these groups, and therefore there was not a nonresponse bias issue. Finally, since all variables used in this model are drawn from the same source, the existence of common method bias must be checked. For this purpose, we carried out the Harman's single factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The findings reveals that four factors (KMO: 0.912; Bartlett sphericity test Sig. 0.000) explain 66.66% of the total variance of the model. The main factor only explains 23.458% of the variance. Therefore, the common method variance bias is not important in this study. Nevertheless, further research should use data from different data sources, in order to avoid these potential issues.

TABLE 1 Sample composition

Student's characteristics	%
Gender	
Male	24.10
Female	75.90
Age	
Between 19 and 24	91.9
Between 25 and 30	6.2
Between 31 and 45	1.9
Degree	
Early childhood education	61.15
Primary education	38.85

3.2 | Variables

The variables used in the survey have been chosen on the basis of previous literature. All the measures were collected through a seven-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 7 (absolutely agree). The questionnaire constructs were operationalized and measured as follows:

- *Corporate social responsibility* was measured by using three items based on Dursun and Altin Gumussoy (2021), Fombrun et al. (2000), and Miotto et al. (2020), that captures the responsibility for the environment, the influence on society, and the development of activities of a charitable nature with the community.
- *Corporate reputation* was measured in terms of a five-items scale adapted from Alessandri et al. (2006), Fombrun et al. (2000), Foroudi et al. (2014), and Vidaver-Cohen (2007), to determine the degree to which the university offers a high quality education, attracts intelligent and highly motivated students, has high quality faculty, has strong prospects for future growth, and is a leader in university studies that it imparts.
- The three items used to measure *corporate image* were adapted from prior work by Arpan et al. (2003), Mohamad et al. (2007), and Wilkins and Huisman (2015), to quantify the degree to which the university has visibility in the mass media, is a responsible member of the community and receive positive reports from the media.
- Finally, *emotional appeal* was measured through a latent variable constructed with four items adapted from Alessandri et al. (2006), Dursun and Altin Gumussoy (2021), and Fombrun et al. (2000) that reflect students' trust, feelings, esteem, and admiration for the university.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Statistical procedure

According to Cepeda-Carrion et al. (2019), this research is formed by four composite type A. For this reason, we have chosen partial least squares path modeling (PLS-SEM) technique for testing the research hypotheses. This technique is particularly suitable in this model because it can estimate multiple and complex structural relationships between variables and analyze the mediating effect. Moreover, PLS-SEM do not need a large sample to get correct results (Van Riel et al., 2017). The model was projected form a causal perspective (Hair et al., 2016). For this purpose, SmartPLS 3.3.3 (Ringle et al., 2015) has been used for the PLS-SEM analysis. To test the hypotheses, a bootstrap method based on 10,000 subsamples has been used.

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Although the sample is not too large ($n = 211$), the statistical power of the research has been validated using G*Power 3.1.9.2 software (Faul et al., 2007). Assuming a significance level of 5%, a statistical power of 80%, four constructs in this research and an effect size of 0.15, we have carried out an analysis "a priori." According to the result, 77 observations would be necessary to validate the effects found in this study (Cohen, 1988). Thus, the sample of this model is sufficient.

4.2 | Measurement model assessment

In order to evaluate the measurement model, the contructs were assessed in terms of reliability and validity. All results are reported in the Table 2.

The standardized factor loadings have been used to measure the individual reliability of the items. These factor loading must be greater than 0.7, as it states by the popular rule of thumb (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All indicators except one comply with this rule. However, this indicator should not be removed as its value (0.68) is very close to the shortcut value (Barclay et al., 1995). Equally, the construct reliability was measure through the analysis of the Cronbach's alpha, the composite reliability, and the Dijkstra-Henseler rho ratio (Chin, 1998; Dijkstra, 2014). The results reveal that all the contructs have a satisfactory reliability as the values are above 0.7. The same conclusion is drawn when examining the convergent validity. The results show the average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5 in all construct (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, the results also confirm a predictive relevance of the model. Since, through a blindfolding procedure (omission distance of 9) a confirmatory composite analysis test has been carried out. As can be observed in the Table 2, Q^2 values are above 0 (Tenenhaus et al., 2005).

In order to measure the discriminant validity the Fornell-Larcker's criterion, and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) has been used. The results are reported in the Table 3. As it can be seen, the correlations between each pair of constructs did not exceed the square root of the AVE of each construct. Thus the Fornell-Larcker's criterion is fulfilled (Henseler et al., 2014). On their part, the level of HTMT between each pair of construct varies from 0.623 to 0.783. In no case is exceeded the maximum value of 0.85 established (Henseler et al., 2016). The findings prove the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Finally, the quality of the model has been proved by analyzing the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The result obtained (0.075) does not exceed the shortcut value of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1998).

4.3 | Structural model assessment

The next step has been to analyze the structural model. The results are presented in the Table 4 and Figure 2. In order to continue with

TABLE 2 Measurement model results

Constructs	Code	Mean	*SD*	Loading	*t****	Q^2	α	ρA	ρC	AVE
CSR							0.799	0.819	0.881	0.711
	CSR-1	4.787	1.510	0.823	21.685					
	CSR-2	4.801	1.660	0.832	31.687					
	CSR-3	4.028	1.454	0.873	49.309					
Corporate reputation						0.160	0.832	0.854	0.88	0.597
	CR-1	5.090	1.287	0.775	19.886	0.155				
	CR-2	3.981	1.394	0.744	21.054	0.089				
	CR-3	5.118	1.408	0.684	12.658	0.086				
	CR −4	4.872	1.407	0.842	40.766	0.280				
	CR-5	4.028	1.508	0.809	32.882	0.190				
Corporate image						0.280	0.727	0.745	0.844	0.644
	CI-2	4.659	1.410	0.852	38.84	0.357				
	CI-3	4.398	1.559	0.766	20.328	0.183				
	CI-4	4.602	1.534	0.787	22.278	0.302				
Emotional appeal						0.497	0.934	0.935	0.953	0.835
	EMT.APP.-1	3.517	1.676	0.933	95.881	0.449				
	EMT.APP.-2	4.460	1.692	0.866	44.996	0.488				
	EMT.APP.-3	3.716	1.659	0.944	113.04	0.504				
	EMT.APP.-4	4.066	1.696	0.911	71.966	0.546				

Note: Significance and standard deviations (*SD*) performed by 10,000 repetitions Bootstrapping procedure. Q_B^2: cross-validated redundancies index performed by a nine-step distance-blindfolding procedure.
Abbreviations: AVE, average variance extracted; α, Chronbach's alpha; ρ_A, Dijkstra–Henseler's composite reliability; ρ_C, Jöreskog's composite reliability.
***All loadings are significant at a 0.001 level.

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the evaluation of the model, the existence of a collinearity problem has been ruled out. For this purpose, the variance inflation factor (VIF) has been checked. The results show that this indicator varies from 1 to 1.838. Therefore, all values are below the commonly established value threshold of 3.3 (Hair et al., 2019).

The next step taken has been to analyze the sizes and significance levels of the path coefficients. Thus, a bootstrap (10,000 resamples) has been applied. This generates standard errors and *t*-statistics to evaluate the statistical significance of the path coefficients (Hair et al., 2016).

The analysis of path coefficients and levels of significance reveals that all the direct effects are significant. The findings show that the direct effect of CSR on emotional appeal (H1; $\beta = 0.318^{***}$), corporate reputation (H2; $\beta = 0.286^{***}$), and corporate image (H4; $\beta = 0.599^{***}$) are positive and significant, suggesting H1, H2, and H4 are supported. In the same way, the effect of corporate reputation on emotional appeal (H3; $\beta = 0.477^{***}$) is positive and significant, supporting H3. Finally, it can be noted that the effect of corporate image on emotional appeal (H5; $\beta = 0.111^{*}$) and corporate reputation (H6; $\beta = 0.411^{***}$) are also positive and significant, supporting H5 and H6. The mediating effect is analyzed further.

The predictability in the structural model was examined by analyzing the R^2 value for the endogenous variables. R^2 has become an essential measure in PLS-SEM when measuring the explanatory power of the model. This value establishes the proportion of variance explained by each endogenous construct (Santos-Jaén et al., 2021). In accordance with Chin (2010), the results reveal a substantial explanatory power of

TABLE 3 Discriminant validity

		I	II	III	IV
I	CSR	**0.843**	*0.623*	*0.761*	*0.726*
II	Corporate reputation	0.533	**0.773**	*0.718*	*0.783*
III	Corporate image	0.599	0.583	**0.803**	*0.688*
IV	Emotional Appeal	0.638	0.710	0.579	**0.914**

Note: HTMT ratio over the diagonal (italics). Fornell–Lacker criterion: square root of AVE in diagonal (bold) and construct correlations below the diagonal.

TABLE 4 Structural model results

	Path	*SD*	*t*	f^2	95 CI		H	Supported
Direct effects						VIF		
CSR → Emotional appeal	0.318	0.061	5.228***	0.152	[0.215:0.415]	1.695	H1	YES
CSR → Corporate reputation	0.286	0.074	3.387***	0.086	[0.162:0.403]	1.560	H2	YES
Corporate reputation → Emotional appeal	0.477	0.061	7.802***	0.351	[0.381:0.581]	1.644	H3	YES
CSR → Corporate image	0.599	0.046	13.157***	0.560	[0.521:0.673]	1.000	H4	YES
Corporate image → Emotional appeal	0.111	0.067	1.642*	0.017	[0.003:0.215]	1.838	H5	YES
Corporate image → Corporate reputation	0.411	0.077	5.324***	0.178	[0.287:0.541]	1.560	H6	YES
Indirect effects						VAF		
Individual indirect effects								
CSR → Corporate reputation → Emotional appeal	0.136	0.038	3.544***		[0.076:0.201]	21.32%		
CSR → Corporate image → Emotional appeal	0.066	0.041	1.594*		[0.004:0.091]	10.34%		
CSR → Corporate image → Corporate reputation	0.246	0.055	4.520***		[0.163:0.342]	46.24%		
Corporate image → Corporate reputation → Emotional appeal	0.196	0.051	3.866***		[0.123:0.290]	30.72%		
CSR → Corporate image → Corporate reputation → Emotional appeal	0.118	0.034	3.483***		[0.071:0.181]	18.50%		
Global indirect effects								
CSR → Emotional appeal	0.320	0.043	7.466***		[0.254:0.395]	50.16%		
CSR → Corporate reputation	0.246	0.055	4.485***		[0.163:0.343]	46.24%		
Corporate image → Emotional appeal	0.196	0.051	3.866***		[0.123:0.290]	64.05%		
Total effect								
CSR → Emotional appeal	0.638	0.047	13.581***		[0.557:0.711]			
Corporate image → Emotional appeal	0.306	0.058	5.254***		[0.212:0.405]			
CSR → Corporate reputation	0.532	0.052	1.143***		[0.446:0.619]			

Note: R^2 adjusted [99% CI in brackets]: Emotional Appeal: 0.600 [0.515; 0.690]; Corporate image: 0.451 [0.359; 0.559]; Corporate reputation: 0.280 [0.194; 0.382]. Blindfolding Q^2 index as shown in Table 3; Standardized path values reported; f^2: size effect index; 95CI: 95% bias corrected confidence interval; VIF: inner model variance inflation factors; VAF: variance accounted formula × 100 represents the proportion mediated. Significance, *t*-Student, and 95% bias-corrected CIs were performed by 10,000 repetitions Bootstrapping procedure. Only total effects that differ from direct effects are shown. $^{*}p < 0.05$. $^{***}p < 0.001$.

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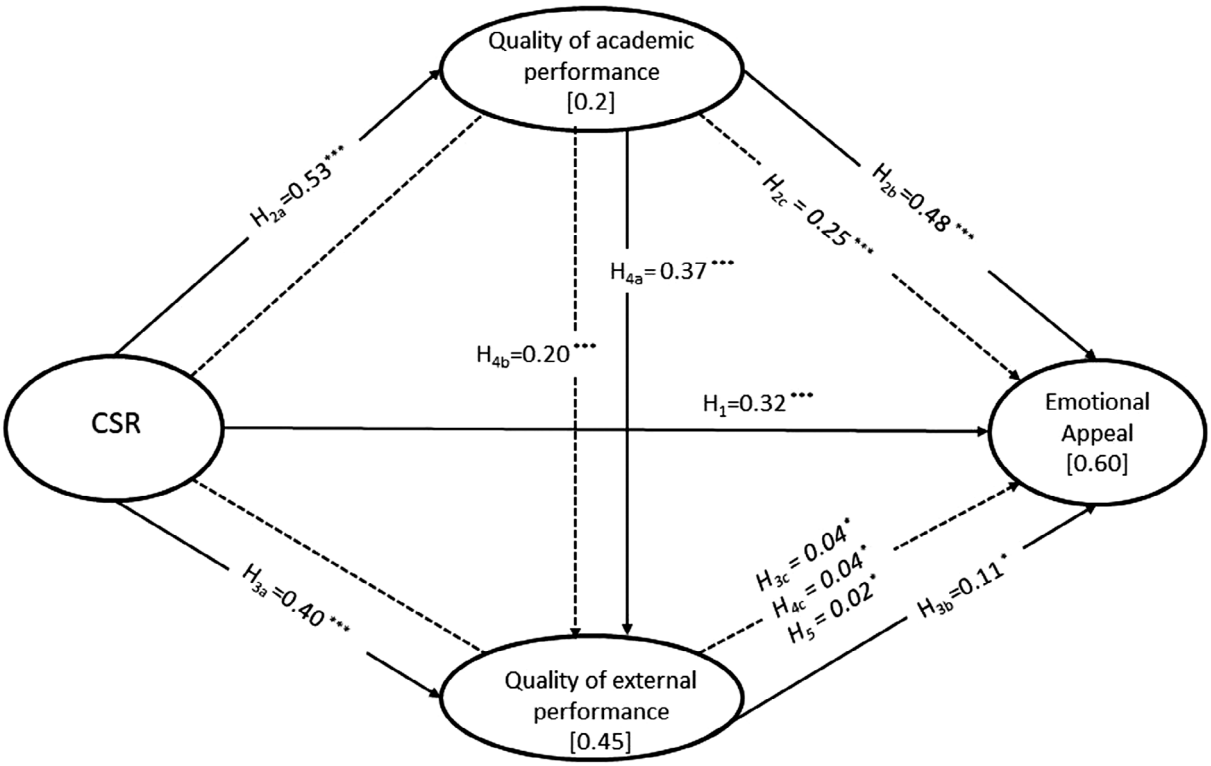

FIGURE 2 Results/standardized paths reported (R2-adjusted in brackets). *$P < 0.05$; **$P < 0.01$; ***$P < 0.001$. *Source*: Authors

emotional appeal and a moderate explanatory power for the rest of endogenous variables. Finally, the contribution of each exogenous variable to the R^2 of the endogenous variables has been analyzed through the f^2 effect, which shows the relative ability of exogenous variables to predict R^2 in an endogenous variable (Faraz et al., 2021). It can be observed that all of them exceed the cut-off of 0.02, except the effect of corporate image on emotional appeal. Moreover, the effect of CSR on corporate reputation and the effect of corporate reputation of emotional appeal are large and the rest are moderate (Cohen, 1988).

4.4 | Multiple mediation analysis

According to Chin (2010), a bootstrapping technique with 10,000 samples has been applied in order to verify the indirect effects. This technique produces for the individual indirect effect and the sequential mediation 95% bias-corrected. In addition, with the aim to establish the size of the indirect effect in relation to the total effect, the variance accounted for (VAF) which sets the size of the indirect effect on the total effect (Hair et al., 2014) have been calculated. The results are shown in the Table 4 above.

Furthermore, this study shows relevant indirect effects that contribute to the results obtained in the conceptual model. In this respect, the findings reveals as the indirect effects of CSR on emotional appeal through corporate reputation and corporate image are both positive and significant ($\beta = 0.136^{***}$ and $\beta = 0.066^{*}$ respectively, plus a sequential indirect effect $\beta = 0.118^{*}$). Regarding the VAF, the indirect effect of CSR on emotional appeal is about 50.16% of the total effect, with 21.32% through corporate reputation, 10.34% through corporate image, and an additional 18.50% sequentially. This demonstrates the existence of partial mediation of corporate reputation and corporate image on the relationship between CSR and emotional appeal. Similarly, the indirect effect of CSR on corporate reputation through the corporate image is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.246^{***}$, VAF = 46.24%), advising partial and complementary mediation, as both direct and indirect effects exist and are significant (Nitzl & Chin, 2017). Finally, it can be proved the indirect effect of corporate image on emotional appeal through corporate reputation. The results ($\beta = 0.196^{***}$, VAF = 30.72%) reveal a partial mediation.

In short, the results show that the relationship between CSR and emotional appeal is mediated by corporate reputation and corporate image. The further universities involve in CSR, the better the emotional appeals of their students becomes. Moreover, when the mediating variables are considered, the effect of CSR on the emotional appeal increases.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examines how CSR practices contributes to an increase in students' emotional appeal in the HEIs, and whether this relationship is mediated by corporate reputation and corporate image. For this purpose, an empirical study was conducted with a sample of 211 university students.

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While most studies in the field of HEIs focus on analyzing how to improve stakeholder satisfaction or the quality of the services they offer, this study proposes a different approach based on emotions. In a saturated market such as that of universities at an international and national level, where material and personal resources can be matched, the emotions became predominant. Therefore, the first contribution of this research is to propose an emotionally oriented approach as a strategy to achieve competitive advantages in universities.

The second contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the subject is derived from the proposed model with six hypotheses to examine the relationships between CSR practices and students' emotional appeal using PLS-SEM. The results show that emotional appeal is influenced by corporate reputation, corporate image, and CSR initiatives. These effects are not only direct and positive but significant indirect effects are also obtained, which allow the positive effects of CSR to be boosted. Therefore, student's emotional appeal in HEIs is promoted by the good practices of CSR, but this effect is also furthered by favorable corporate image and reputation. Our results are consistent with other previous studies, in which academicians and practitioners agreed that CSR initiatives are essential by verifying their significant impact on consumers' preferences, attitudes, and behaviors (Boccia & Sarnacchiaro, 2018; Waheed et al., 2020), which can create feelings and emotional ties between the institution and consumers (Eccles et al., 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004; Park et al., 2014). Furthermore, corporate image and reputation facilitate CSR practices that enable institutions to build affective attitudes among their stakeholders and thus lead to greater emotional appeal (Lee et al., 2015; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007). Hence, the results of our study suggest implications for the theory and research on CSR and emotional appeal by incorporating into the literature the roles that corporate image and reputation play as boosters in the relationship between CSR and emotional appeal in HEIs.

From a managerial perspective, the results provide insights into the adoption of CSR to enhance the emotional appeal of stakeholders. Therefore, HEI managers must consider the following implications. Since many stakeholders (i.e., the students) are more attracted to institutions that incorporate CSR initiatives, HEI managers must develop CSR plans to create emotional bonds with them. It is essential that universities ensure that all stakeholders are aware of their CSR activities in order to increase their confidence in the organization. To contribute to the mutually beneficial relationships that they can develop with their stakeholders, both internal and external, HEI managers must develop effective communication strategies for the university's CSR initiatives (Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

It is necessary to note that communication should be action-based, reflecting the notion of a good organization that communicates well. Thus, it is avoided to unleash the skepticism of the interested parties, without damaging the trust, reputation, and legitimacy (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). HEI managers must promote listening, mutual understanding, and shared responsibility and for this, they must develop processes of two-way communication that strengthen relationships with stakeholders (Devin & Lane, 2014; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Encouraging stakeholder engagement through CSR contributes to stakeholder perception of their organizations' reputation for "doing good" (Ali et al., 2010).

HEI managers must recognize the link between effective CSR communication and strengthening emotional appeal and design and implement corporate CSR strategies based on motivating their stakeholders to become brand ambassadors on social media, communicate CSR with external audiences, involve their stakeholders in projects related to CSR and promote the understanding of their stakeholders of the reasons for CSR in their organizations (Jiang & Luo, 2020). On the other hand, managers must orientate their organizational culture towards one that increases awareness of initiatives, including all stakeholders, thus improving participation in CSR programs and increasing identification with the organization (Brunton et al., 2017).

The positive influence of corporate image on reputation and emotional appeal has been confirmed. Consequently, HEI managers must make an analysis of the strategic plans and the policies and programs presented and see if they are aligned with the actions necessary to promote the corporate image. To improve the corporate image of universities, their managers must ensure that the university has visibility in the media, including the social networks most used by students such as Twitter, Instagram, or Tik Tok. In addition, a communication policy should be developed aimed at receiving positive reports from the media. On the other hand, it is important to participate in actions that convey that the university is a responsible member of the community. For this, HEI managers must be aware of the need to adapt their strategic programs to the specific needs that may arise in the face of changes in the environment. For example, in the current Covid-19 pandemic situation, we need academic institutions to be able to develop the best solutions, in accordance with the needs of society, making them visible on the university's website and on social networks to achieve competitive advantages and build emotional ties with stakeholders. Furthermore, in a changing socioeconomic environment, universities must be adaptive institutions (Sporn, 2001) that know how to adopt new procedures to manage the relationship with the environment and new authority structures that integrate their different stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Similarly, since this study demonstrates the impact of corporate reputation on emotional attractiveness, HEI managers must continually focus on serving their stakeholders with high-quality educational services and faculty, with integrity and honesty. In addition, actions must be taken to attract highly motivated and intelligent students. For this, it is vital to try to be a leader in the university studies that are taught. On the other hand, it is important to plan and convey the prospects for future growth. Finally, managers must periodically evaluate the corporate reputation of their universities to take appropriate corrective actions.

To attract and retain students and obtain competitive advantages, HEIs must build solid strategies that foster dialog with their students, involving them in socially responsible projects with visibility and transparency in the means, in order to provide a good corporate image and a solid reputation for the institution. In this way, students develop greater loyalty, trust, and commitment to the institution (Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011; Walsh et al., 2009) and engage in

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positive word-of-mouth communications by sharing their experiences with others, developing an emotional bond with the university.

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations that could point to future lines of research. First, considering our sample of 211 university students, the findings are limited to students belonging to Degrees in Education. Hence, the results cannot generalize to other degrees or other HEIs. Future studies should validate the findings and investigate their applicability in other degrees and compare the results obtained. In addition, the study is carried out in a single university. Although this university may have similar characteristics to others, it would also be convenient to validate the results with universities with different features, such as the size, or the type of studies offered. Second, the sample only includes students' opinions. Thus, future studies can use a larger number of views from different stakeholders (such as academic and administrative staff, alumni, and parents of students) to confirm our results. Third, the study has been conducted by means of transversal data, so the time effects in the proposed model have not been reviewed. It is necessary to apply longitudinal studies in order to do this (Zheng et al., 2019).

This study sheds new lines of research that could help strengthen the literature on the relationship between CSR and emotional appeal. This study promotes the concept of CSR and encourages academics to reveal a greater understanding of the influence of CSR in terms of emotional marketing and customers (i.e., students) behavior, based on feelings such as trust, admiration, pride, and linking. It also provides important elements that have a mediating effect, such as reputation and corporate image, which need to be explored further to improve greater differentiation strategies between HEIs.

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