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**Author**

MAHMOOD, Ali Bassam (GRIGORIOU, Nicholas)

**Title**

When empathy hurts : Modelling university students' word of mouth behaviour in public vs. private universities in Syria / Ali Bassam Mahmoud ; Nicholas Grigoriou

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**Abstract**

This study examines and compares word of mouth (WOM) behaviour among university students in Syria. To date, little is known about this important phenomenon which is surprising given the deregulated education market in Syria that allows for private universities to compete for students alongside public universities. Using a mixed methods research design and structural equation modelling, our results show faculty individualised attention and student satisfaction were found to be positively related to university image. Further, student satisfaction and university image were found to be direct sources of students' positive WOM behaviour. We found a moderating effect of university ownership type on university image. Interestingly, we identified six themes showing how support staff empathy could be seen as a source of low student satisfaction. These were defined as deception/credibility/soft-soapers/suspiciousness: when support staff coax something out of students; confusion/role conflict: resulting from the diverse roles played by support staff while interacting with students; unfairness: when a student notices discrimination in the level of empathy between their

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peers; privacy: when support staff empathy can be perceived as a kind of intrusion;

self-congratulatory: when a support staff member shows off or praises their empathy; and support

staff/student ratio: when this ratio is seen to be small, the empathy effect reverses.(HRK / Abstract  
übernommen)