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The role of technology transfer offices in shaping corporate image within the new-generation university model

O papel dos escritórios de transferência de tecnologia na formação da imagem institucional no modelo de universidade de nova geração

El papel de las oficinas de transferencia tecnológica en la configuración de la imagen institucional en el modelo de universidad de nueva generación

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Abstract
This study examines the role of technology transfer offices in shaping corporate image within the new-generation university model, focusing on a single university case. It analyzes the contributions of a Technology Transfer Office (TTO) to new-generation university transformation and their reflections on corporate image. Designed as qualitative research, the study employs a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants who were knowledgeable about the TTO and new-generation university transformation. The study group, selected through criterion sampling, included both internal university stakeholders and external institutional stakeholders. The data were analyzed through descriptive content analysis; themes were derived from participant narratives, and the findings were supported with direct quotations. The results demonstrate that the TTO goes beyond developing project culture, supporting the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and facilitating university-industry collaboration. It also acts as an interface that enhances university visibility, institutionalizes stakeholder interaction, and communicates an innovative identity to external audiences. Corporate image, in turn, appears to be shaped mainly by visibility, stakeholder experience, physical and digital transformation, and leadership. Accordingly, the study contends that TTOs should also be evaluated within corporate communication and image management.

Keywords
Technology Transfer Office, New-Generation University, Corporate Image, Stakeholder Communication, University-Industry Collaboration.

Resumo
Este estudo examina o papel dos escritórios de transferência de tecnologia na formação da imagem institucional no modelo de universidade de nova geração, com foco em um único caso universitário.

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Analisa as contribuições de um Escritório de Transferência de Tecnologia (ETT) para essa transformação e seus reflexos na imagem institucional. Com abordagem qualitativa e desenho fenomenológico, os dados foram coletados por entrevistas semiestruturadas com doze participantes conhecedores do ETT e do processo de transformação. O grupo de estudo, selecionado por amostragem por critério, incluiu partes interessadas internas da universidade e atores institucionais externos. Os dados foram analisados por análise de conteúdo descritiva; os temas foram construídos a partir das narrativas dos participantes, com achados apoiados por citações diretas. Os resultados mostram que o ETT atua além da cultura de projetos, do apoio ao ecossistema empreendedor e da cooperação universidade-indústria. Funciona como interface que amplia a visibilidade universitária, institucionaliza a interação com as partes interessadas e comunica uma identidade inovadora aos públicos externos. Conclui-se que a imagem institucional é moldada pela visibilidade, pela experiência das partes interessadas, pela transformação física e digital e pela liderança, devendo o ETT ser avaliado também no âmbito da comunicação institucional e da gestão da imagem.
Palavras-chave
Escritório de Transferência de Tecnologia, Universidade de Nova Geração, Imagem Institucional, Comunicação com Partes Interessadas, Cooperação Universidade-Indústria.

Resumen
Este estudio examina el papel de las oficinas de transferencia tecnológica en la configuración de la imagen institucional en el modelo de universidad de nueva generación, con foco en un caso universitario. Analiza las contribuciones de una Oficina de Transferencia Tecnológica (OTT) a esta transformación y sus reflejos en la imagen institucional. Con enfoque cualitativo y diseño fenomenológico, los datos se recopilaron por entrevistas semiestructuradas con doce participantes conocedores de la OTT y del proceso. El grupo, seleccionado por muestreo de criterio, incluyó partes interesadas internas y actores institucionales externos. Los datos fueron analizados por análisis de contenido descriptivo; los temas se construyeron desde las narrativas de los participantes, con hallazgos apoyados en citas directas. La OTT actúa más allá de la cultura de proyectos, el ecosistema emprendedor y la cooperación universidad-industria. Funciona como interfaz que amplía la visibilidad universitaria, institucionaliza la interacción con grupos de interés y comunica una identidad innovadora a públicos externos. Se concluye que la imagen institucional se configura por la visibilidad, la experiencia de los grupos de interés, la transformación física y digital y el liderazgo, por lo que la OTT debe evaluarse también en la comunicación institucional y la gestión de la imagen.
Palabras clave
Oficina de Transferencia Tecnológica, Universidad de Nueva Generación, Imagen Institucional, Comunicación con Grupos de Interés, Cooperación Universidad-Industria.

1. Introduction

As the knowledge economy has deepened, universities have come to be regarded not only as institutions that provide education and conduct research but also as structures that convert the knowledge they produce into social and economic value. This transformation has made the third mission of higher education institutions visible and has moved the themes of entrepreneurship, innovation, social contribution, and regional development to the center of university governance. The new-generation university approach likewise envisages the university's transformation into a structure

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capable of opening its research results to the external environment, institutionalizing its relations with the public sector and industry, and operating within multi-stakeholder networks.

Technology transfer offices (TTOs) are among the most visible institutional instruments of this transformation. TTOs facilitate the transfer of university-generated knowledge and inventions to industry, the public sector, and wider society; they undertake functions such as project development, access to funding, intellectual property management, entrepreneurship support, and the establishment of collaboration networks. For this reason, TTOs cannot be regarded merely as technical or administrative units; they also have the character of an interface that comes into contact with the university's external environment, increases its visibility, and builds relationships with stakeholders (Link *et al*., 2008; Maredia *et al*., 2000).

Studies on corporate image and reputation in higher education indicate that how a university is perceived in its external environment cannot be explained by academic performance alone. Communication strategies, stakeholder relations, digital visibility, the physical environment, leadership, and intra-institutional experiences are also decisive in the formation of this perception. The TTO literature, by contrast, focuses mostly on patent, licensing, spin-off, and commercialization performance. The effect of TTOs on corporate image is addressed only to a limited extent. Studies that systematically examine reputation research in higher education also point to a fragmented picture, one in which conceptual depth specific to the university context still needs to be strengthened (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022).

The New Generation University Design and Transformation Project carried out at Atatürk University is one of the notable examples that make this discussion concrete. While some participants stressed that the work carried out had begun to attract public attention and that this strengthened the institution's image, others pointed out that the lack of digital visibility and promotion limited the TTO's impact. Taken together, these accounts imply that TTO activities do not merely produce results but also shape the university's image through the manner in which these results circulate.

Examining the role of the ATA Technology Transfer Office in the new-generation university model from a corporate-image perspective, the research focuses on the following questions: What are the contributions of the ATA TTO to the new-generation university transformation? By what mechanisms do these contributions affect corporate image? What strengths and weaknesses do participants identify in the TTO's capacity to shape corporate image? The article discusses, on the one hand, the effect of the ATA TTO on project culture, entrepreneurship, and university-industry collaboration and, on the other, seeks to explain through which communicative and perceptual channels this effect is reflected in Atatürk University's corporate image.

This study aims to contribute to the literature in three respects. First, it conceptualizes TTOs, differently from the approach focused on patent, licensing, and commercialization performance, as a communicative interface through which corporate image is produced in higher education. Second, in the case of Atatürk University, it evaluates the perspectives of internal and external stakeholders together. Third, it proposes an analytical framework that explains the conversion of TTO activities into corporate image through the mechanisms of visibility and success signals, stakeholder experience, physical/digital transformation, and leadership and corporate narrative.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Relationship Between Corporate Image, Identity, and Reputation

Corporate image is the general impression that forms in the minds of an institution's various stakeholders. This impression is shaped not only by visual identity elements but also by the institution's past performance, its current communication practices, and its promises regarding the future. This structure of image is closely related to the concepts of corporate identity and reputation. Corporate identity concerns how an institution defines and presents itself; image describes how this presentation is perceived by stakeholders; reputation, in turn, becomes a more lasting judgment as this perception gains stability over time (Fombrun, 1996; Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004).

This distinction is particularly important in the higher education context. Universities are not merely service-producing institutions, but structures surrounded by expectations of social legitimacy, trust, and public value. For this reason, corporate image cannot be considered independently of the university's academic performance, yet it is not limited to it either. Systematic reviews compiling reputation research in higher education reveal that the concept has developed across different disciplines and that theoretical discussions concerning universities have not yet been established in an integrated manner (Amado Mateus & Juarez Acosta, 2022).

TTOs assume an important function within this framework. A TTO's visible achievements, project outputs, entrepreneurship stories, the manner of contact it establishes with stakeholders, and the way it represents the university externally have the potential to directly affect corporate image.

2.2 The Stakeholder Approach in Higher Education and the Formation of Image

Higher education institutions are multi-stakeholder structures. Students, academics, administrative staff, alumni, industrial organizations, public institutions, the media, and the local community constitute both the internal and external stakeholders of the university. The stakeholder approach holds that an institution's success depends not only on its own internal performance but also

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on the quality of the relationship it establishes with these stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). For this reason, corporate image in universities is fed by a multi-layered process composed of the experiences of different stakeholder groups rather than the perception of a single target audience.

Research on stakeholder relations in higher education indicates that these relationships extend beyond legitimacy, contributing to value creation, the development of sustainable competitive advantage, and the determination of strategic orientation (Langrafe *et al*., 2020). This logic also applies to technology transfer offices.

In their study on stakeholder management in university TTOs, Aerts *et al*. (2022) find that this contribution is often produced through everyday communication and interaction practices rather than formal plans. The authors note that, in the TTOs examined, stakeholder management was typically conducted according to situational needs rather than within an institutionalized framework, while online and offline communication proved decisive for success. This finding lends support to the view that the TTO's effect on corporate image stems not only from technical competence but also from the quality of contact established with stakeholders.

2.3 The New-Generation University and the Interface Role of the TTO

The concept of the new-generation university does not represent a sudden break; rather, it reflects the current stage in the historical transformation of the university's function.

After the Second World War, the acceleration of globalization, the decline of public funding, and the deepening of university-industry collaboration gave rise to the third-generation university understanding. This framework coincides with the Triple Helix approach; it explains the emergence of hybrid intermediary institutions such as the TTO at the intersection of university, industry, and government (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Huyghe *et al*., 2014).

The Triple Helix approach has in recent years been expanded with the Quadruple and Quintuple Helix models (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; Carayannis *et al*., 2012).

More recently, the concept of the fourth-generation or thematic/transformative university has foregrounded the university's proactive transformation of its environment, thematic specialization, and interdisciplinary work (Lukovics & Zuti, 2015). Within this genealogy, the new-generation university can be read as an advanced extension, in the Turkish context, of the third-generation/entrepreneurial university model. TTOs, too, are both an instrument of this transformation and one of its visible faces in the public eye (Odabaşı, 2006; Wissema, 2009).

2.4 Digital Visibility and Corporate Image

Visibility occupies a central place in the formation of corporate image. The more systematically and intelligibly a university's research outputs, examples of social contribution, project achievements, and collaboration models are conveyed to target audiences, the more the corporate perception is strengthened. Current research examining the effect of digitalization on higher education demonstrates that effective websites, high-quality information presentation, the use of social media, and electronic word-of-mouth communication are significantly associated with university image (Luque-Martínez *et al*., 2026).

In a similar vein, Stoica *et al*. (2025) emphasize that reputation management in higher education should be considered not only through performance indicators but together with stakeholder perceptions and strategic communication. This framework also coincides with the study's field findings. Participants stated that there is a disconnect between the value the ATA TTO produces and the manner in which this value is conveyed to stakeholders, and that improvement is needed particularly in the area of promotion, advertising, and digital visibility.

This role of visibility in image production can also be placed on a theoretical foundation within the framework of signaling theory. Signaling theory proposes that, under conditions of information asymmetry between parties, qualities that cannot be directly observed (quality, competence, innovativeness) are conveyed to the other party through observable signals (Spence, 1973). In the adaptation of the theory to organizational research, the relationship among the signaler (the institution), the signal itself (the visible output), and the receiver of the signal (the stakeholder) is modeled as the mechanism through which corporate perception is formed (Connelly *et al*., 2011). Within this framework, the TTO's project achievements, patents, awards, and activities covered in the press can be read as signals that carry information to external stakeholders about the university's unobservable innovation capacity. The failure to make the produced value visible, in turn, interrupts this signal flow and limits image production.

2.5 Related Studies and the Gap in the Literature

Studies conducted on technology transfer offices are shaped around three main strands of research: performance outputs, the interface/intermediation function, and entrepreneurial university transformation. These strands clarify the position of the present study within the literature.

The dominant strand of the literature evaluates TTOs through quantitative indicators such as patents, licensing, spin-off production, consultancy income, and the number of projects (Ustundag *et al*., 2011; Ranga *et al*., 2016). Although this approach is valuable for understanding measurable

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outputs, it largely leaves out of scope the office's effect on the university's perception in the external environment.

The second strand conceptualizes the TTO as an interface and knowledge broker positioned between university, industry, and government (Olaya Escobar *et al*., 2014; O'Kane, 2018; Clayton *et al*., 2018). Current studies also reveal that knowledge transfer offices do not merely commercialize research outputs but assume broader roles in transformative innovation processes (Zhou & Tang, 2020; Borrás *et al*., 2024; Chen *et al*., 2025).

The third strand treats the TTO as an instrument of entrepreneurial and new-generation university transformation (Baş, 2015; Özgün Bürken, 2018). However, the implications of this transformation for the university's image remain largely implicit. The limited theoretical and practical attention given to marketing and branding in TTOs also confirms this gap (Taecharungroj, 2025).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach and employed a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is a research design oriented toward revealing how a particular phenomenon acquires meaning in individuals' experiences (Jasper, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

3.2 Study Group and Sampling

The study group consists of twelve participants who had knowledge about the activities of the ATA TTO and Atatürk University's new-generation university transformation. The participants were determined using criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. Accordingly, a pool was first formed of institutional representatives and academics considered to be directly related to the research problem, and the individuals in this pool were then selected through evaluation together with experts knowledgeable about the subject.

While the larger part of the study group consists of academics and specialists working at Atatürk University, representatives from regional development institutions such as KUDAKA, DAP, and KOSGEB were also included in the interviews. In this way, the aim was to reflect in the research not only the intra-university perspective but also that of external stakeholders. The principal criterion for participant selection was that they had direct knowledge and experience of the ATA TTO and the new-generation university transformation.

The composition of the participant group is presented in Table 1. The academic participants represent different title levels ranging from professor to assistant professor, and this diversity ensures

that perspectives from different institutional positions regarding the transformation process are reflected in the research.

Table 1

Profile of the Participants

Code	Role	Title	Institution	Duration
P1	Academic	Assistant Professor	Atatürk University	28 min.
P2	Academic	Professor	Atatürk University	33 min.
P3	Academic	Professor	Atatürk University	25 min.
P4	Specialist	Specialist	KUDAKA	36 min.
P5	Academic	Professor	Atatürk University	38 min.
P6	Academic	Professor	Atatürk University	34 min.
P7	Specialist	Specialist	DAP	30 min.
P8	Academic	Associate Professor	Atatürk University	35 min.
P9	Academic	Associate Professor	Atatürk University	27 min.
P10	Academic	Assistant Professor	Atatürk University	31 min.
P11	Academic	Professor	Atatürk University	36 min.
P12	Specialist	Specialist	KOSGEB	31 min.

Note. Participants were anonymized and coded as P1–P12. The interviews lasted an average of 32 minutes. The table was compiled from the study's participant list.

3.3 Research Process

The data were collected using the semi-structured interview technique. The interview form consisted of eight questions. These questions focused on the role of TTOs, the functions of the ATA TTO in project culture, entrepreneurship, university-industry collaboration, and intellectual property, as well as its contribution to new-generation university transformation and corporate image.

Before the interviews, participants were informed that the audio recording would be used only within the scope of this research, that personal information would not be carried into the text, and that the process was based on the principle of voluntariness. To enable participants to express themselves more comfortably, the interviews were conducted in their own work environments, and an attempt was made to establish a relationship of trust through approximately 5–10 minutes of conversation before each interview. A total of twelve interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted an average of 32 minutes. All interviews were conducted with audio recording and were then transcribed into written text.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

The interview form was developed by the researcher in line with the aim of the research and by drawing on current literature in the fields of technology transfer offices and corporate image in higher education. In order to ensure the content validity and intelligibility of the questions, the

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opinions of two field experts experienced in qualitative research and higher education studies were sought, and the form was finalized in line with the suggestions received.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview texts were analyzed through descriptive content analysis. Participant statements were read repeatedly, units of meaning related to the research questions were coded, and similar codes were combined under higher-order themes. The analysis was not limited to conveying what was said; it also interpreted through which mechanisms the data affected corporate image. To increase coding reliability, the data set was read twice at different times and the codes were compared.

At the end of this process, the findings were gathered under two main themes: (1) the contributions of the ATA TTO to the new-generation university transformation and how these contributions are reflected in the perception of corporate image; (2) under the main themes, sub-mechanisms such as visibility, stakeholder experience, physical and digital transformation, and leadership became prominent.

In qualitative research, conducting the data collection and interpretation process transparently is important for increasing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Krefting, 1991). In this study, the interviews were conducted in participants' work environments, the main points were summarized to participants at the end of the interview and confirmation was obtained, and the process was evaluated by two experts.

3.6 Research Ethics

Ethics committee approval for the data collection process used within the scope of the study was obtained by decision no. 59, taken at session no. 6 dated 27.07.2020 of the Atatürk University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee. The committee's decision stated that there was no ethical or scientific objection to the conduct of the research.

4. Findings

As a result of the descriptive content analysis, the findings concentrated on three axes: the ATA TTO's contribution to the new-generation university transformation, the mechanisms that feed corporate image, and the areas of expectation that limit image production.

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4.1 The ATA TTO's Contribution to the New-Generation University Transformation

Participant narratives position the ATA TTO as a central rather than peripheral element of the new-generation university transformation. The development of project culture, support for the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the establishment of university-industry collaboration channels, and the management of intellectual property processes are the main headings of this contribution. The statements “I think the ATA TTO has contributed 90 percent to the new-generation university transformation” (P1) and “It cannot be done without the TTO” (P2) point to a shared perception of the office as a founding actor in the transformation process.

The most striking pattern in the findings is that participants commonly described the TTO through the vocabulary of interface and bridge. The majority of participants described the TTO as a transition point positioned between the university and the external environment; the expressions “the universities' doors opening onto industry” (P1), a structure that “carries the accumulated knowledge at the university to the outside” (P3), and an office serving “a bridge function” (P5, P6, P11, P12) made this perception concrete. The convergence of different stakeholder positions on the same image indicates that the TTO has established itself in institutional memory primarily as a point of contact.

This point of contact is not one-directional. One participant defined the TTO as an organization that transfers the university's knowledge to society and at the same time carries production and knowledge from society to the university (P8). This two-way flow positions the TTO not merely as a channel that delivers the university's outputs to the outside but as an intermediary that organizes the mutual circulation of knowledge.

Concrete activity outputs also support this role attributed to the TTO by participants. The “AtaÜni-San 100 Yüze” program, which brings academics and industrialists directly together, was cited as one of the emblematic applications of the transformation (P9, P12). The increase in project applications, the strengthening of industry consultancies, the improvement in the entrepreneurship and innovation index, and the increase in patent/utility model applications were also evaluated as indicators of the TTO's contribution (P6, P10, P12).

Participant statements show that the ATA TTO assumes a facilitating role that reduces the distance between the researcher and the external stakeholder and renders the process intelligible and manageable. The statement “The ATA TTO is the very link of the projects carried out at the university, of the culture of entrepreneurship, and of university-industry collaboration” (P1) summarizes the office's central position in the project and collaboration ecosystem.

Participants also emphasized that the TTO produces a perception of accessibility. The statements “The ATA TTO is a living place; there is continuity in the flow of information” (P7) and

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"I know that their communication with the environment in terms of university-industry collaboration is good" (P12) reflect a perception of the office as a functioning point of contact rather than a bureaucratic unit. The need for improvement in the areas of promotion, digital visibility, and inter-institutional collaboration was nonetheless also expressed (P5, P9).

4.2 Mechanisms That Feed Corporate Image

4.2.1 Visibility and Success Signals

Participant narratives show that the ATA TTO's effect on corporate image is produced first of all through visibility. The projects supported by the TTO, the university-industry matches, the entrepreneurship activities, and the work carried out within the scope of the transformation have rendered the university more visible at the local, regional, and national levels. One participant's statement, "Thanks to the work it has carried out, Atatürk University has begun to attract considerable public attention; this shows that the institution's image has been positively affected" (P9), points to the role of success signals in image production.

In a similar vein, the assessment "with the achievements it has obtained, it appears in the local, regional, and national press, and thus the institution's image comes to the fore" (P11) points to a dual function of visibility, one that operates not only as promotion but also as a producer of institutional legitimacy and appreciation.

4.2.2 Stakeholder Experience and Trust

The fact that the TTO is one of the university's first points of contact with external actors strengthens the shaping of corporate image through experience. The process that academics, public institutions, or industry representatives experience with the TTO is evaluated along the axes of accessibility, speed, attentiveness, and professionalism, and this evaluation often spreads to the university as a whole.

Participants' expectations, in the form of "it should be a place students frequent" (P2), "we could organize joint training" (P4), and "it should bring entrepreneurs with ideas together with experienced firms" (P12), also point to the quality of the relationship the TTO establishes with stakeholders. From this point of departure, stakeholder management can be evaluated not only as institutional legitimacy but also as the everyday ground of image production.

4.2.3 Physical and Digital Transformation

The third mechanism that feeds corporate image is physical and digital transformation. Participants emphasize that the infrastructure improvements, physical renewal, and digitalization efforts carried out at the university together with the transformation process enabled the institution to be perceived as a contemporary structure open to development. The statement “An institution's image is affected by factors such as the institution's employees, the person at the head of the institution, and the institution's physical structure; with this transformation, both the facilities and incentives provided to employees and the restructuring of the physical infrastructure positively affected the institution's image” (P10) reflects the essence of this mechanism.

Another participant's assessment, “the structural transformation in particular draws attention” and “because the activities carried out motivate academics and students, they return to the university positively as institutional image” (P8), indicates that the transformation is perceived not only as a spatial process but also as one that generates motivation and belonging. At the same time, the lack of digital integration was also emphasized; it was stated that online tools should be used more effectively and that activities should be made visible. This asymmetry points to the dependence of image production on the joint operation of physical and digital visibility channels.

4.2.4 Leadership and Corporate Narrative

The fourth mechanism that feeds corporate image is leadership. In the interviews, it is emphasized that the commitment to transformation at the rectorate level not only produces organizational results but also affects the university's external perception. The statement “The manager's insistence is the key to the transformation” (P3) reflects a perception of leadership as the fundamental element that makes the transformation possible. The same participant states that the rector's determination has brought successful work to the university and has brought the institution's image closer to where it should be.

When the emphasis on leadership combines with visibility and structural transformation, it produces a corporate narrative. Participants state that the transformation is not merely a change imposed from above but a process seen and appreciated by stakeholders. This finding underscores that corporate image is shaped not only by outcomes but also by the vision and the shared narrative within which those outcomes are produced.

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4.3 Expectations and the Limits of Image Production

Although participants evaluated the ATA TTO's contribution largely positively, they also pointed to certain deficient areas that limit the office's capacity to shape corporate image.

The first and most frequently voiced expectation concerns the lack of promotion and visibility. The criticism is directed not at the quality of the output produced but at the way it is communicated to stakeholders. The second expectation gathers around digitalization and digital integration; participants emphasized "the absence of digital integration with the university" (P8) and the need to render TTO activities visible (P3).

The third expectation is communication directed toward students and prospective entrepreneurs. It was suggested that the TTO should be "a place students frequent," that it should communicate its opportunities more clearly (P2), and that it should organize periodic "idea camps" (P7). These expectations point to the fact that image is built not only in the eyes of external stakeholders but also through the internal stakeholder experience.

The fourth expectation concerns inter-institutional collaboration and scale. Participants demand the strengthening of coordination between the TTO and the university's other units (P6, P8), joint work with different institutions and TTOs (P4), and the extension of the scale of activity beyond regional boundaries (P5). Participants also mentioned attracting large-scale firms to the technopark and increasing the technopark's contribution to employment and internationalization through patent commercialization. (P10, P11).

5. Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

When this study evaluates the role of technology transfer offices within the university from a corporate-image perspective, it reaches two fundamental conclusions. First, the effect of the ATA TTO cannot be explained solely through technology transfer and commercialization activities. The findings indicate that the TTO assumes an interface function that increases the university's visibility, facilitates its relationship-building with stakeholders, and carries its innovative identity to the external environment. This conclusion is consistent with current studies arguing that TTOs do not consist merely of structures that convert research results into economic value (Zhou & Tang, 2020; Borrás *et al*., 2024).

The second fundamental conclusion is that corporate image does not arise automatically from TTO activities. The project, patent, collaboration, and entrepreneurship outputs produced by the TTO carry significant potential, but this potential remains limited when it is not supported by visibility strategies, stakeholder experience, digital communication, and corporate narrative.

This second conclusion can also be read within the framework of signaling theory. The image production that participants described through “achievements appearing in the press” and “attracting public attention” can be interpreted as the signal flow that the theory predicts: TTO outputs function as signals that carry information to external stakeholders about the university's unobservable innovation capacity (Spence, 1973; Connelly *et al*., 2011). The criticism that participants directed at the lack of promotion and digital visibility can also be re-read within this framework: the problem lies not in signal production but in signal transmission, which also coincides with the branding gap previously pointed to in the literature (Taecharungroj, 2025).

Another important conclusion of the research is that, in the case of Atatürk University, corporate image is not perceived merely as a matter of external appearance. Participants consider image, alongside visibility, together with employee motivation, leadership, structural transformation, physical infrastructure, and communication. This finding reinforces the view, frequently emphasized in the public relations literature, that corporate image should be evaluated not as a superficial promotional activity but as the reflection of the institution's identity, performance, and relationships in stakeholders' minds.

This article's contribution to the literature lies in its conceptualization of the TTO not only in the context of commercialization and innovation performance but as a communicative interface through which corporate image is produced in higher education. The study therefore proposes an analytical framework that explains the relationship between the TTO and corporate image along the axis of visibility, stakeholder experience, physical/digital transformation, and leadership. The addition of the public and civil society to the innovation system in the Quadruple Helix approach (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; Carayannis *et al*., 2012) strengthens the reading of the TTO as a communicative interface between the university and the public. This function is also related to the social-engagement dimension of the third mission (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

The study nonetheless carries certain limitations. The research is based on a single university case and the views of a limited number of participants. For this reason, it is not possible to generalize the findings to all universities. Moreover, because the study was conducted in a qualitative design, the quantitative measurement of the effect of TTO activities on image has remained outside the scope of this article. Comparative studies to be conducted in different universities in the future may show more clearly how this relationship is shaped in different institutional contexts.

In conclusion, the ATA Technology Transfer Office is not merely a structure providing technical support in Atatürk University's new-generation university transformation but a strategic institutional actor that affects the university's visibility, credibility, and innovative identity. The

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research findings demonstrate that the TTO's contribution to corporate image emerges through visible success signals, the quality of the contact established with stakeholders, the perception of contemporariness created by physical/digital transformation, and the corporate narrative supported by leadership. For this reason, the TTO's criteria of success should be evaluated not only by the numbers of patents, licenses, or projects but together with stakeholder satisfaction, visibility, digital accessibility, and corporate representation capacity.

The study underscores the need to strengthen the communication dimension of TTO activities. Sharing success stories through the corporate website, social media, the local/national press, and regular events, and communicating commercialized work and examples of collaboration more systematically, will increase the TTO's capacity to shape corporate image. It is recommended in particular that the language of information directed toward students and prospective entrepreneurs be clarified and that the TTO's character as a "place to frequent" within the university be strengthened.

Strengthening intra-university digital integration and rendering the coordination between the TTO and other units visible and traceable will positively affect both the internal stakeholder experience and the external stakeholder perception. Maintaining regular communication/training programs for academics and students in the areas of intellectual property, entrepreneurship, and project development will also contribute to feeding corporate image from within. In addition, the TTO's contribution to corporate image should be measured regularly through surveys, focus group interviews, media visibility analysis, and digital interaction indicators.

Three directions stand out for future research: comparative designs covering the TTOs of more than one university, quantitative studies that test the effect of TTO outputs on image on the basis of signaling theory, and longitudinal research that tracks the relationship between media visibility and stakeholder perception over time.

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