



# Consumer-Based Brand Equity in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Literature (2008–2024)

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## **Abstract:**

The growing competitiveness of the higher education sector has intensified the need for institutions to build strong, differentiated brands. In an increasingly globalized and market-driven educational environment, universities are no longer viewed solely as knowledge providers but as strategic brands competing for students, faculty, and resources. This paper presents a systematic review of literature on Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) in higher education institutions (HEIs) over the period 2008–2024. The study synthesizes key dimensions such as brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and the emerging concept of brand heritage. It further examines critical antecedents including service quality, institutional reputation, marketing communication, and student satisfaction. The review adopts a thematic and chronological approach to identify evolving research trends, methodological patterns, and conceptual developments in the domain. Findings reveal that while traditional dimensions of brand equity remain relevant, contemporary research emphasizes experiential, emotional, and digital aspects of branding. The study also highlights significant gaps, particularly the limited exploration of brand heritage, lack of standardized measurement scales, and insufficient research in developing economies like India. The paper concludes by proposing future research directions and offering insights for academic administrators to strengthen institutional branding strategies and enhance long-term competitiveness.

**Keywords:** Consumer-Based Brand Equity, Higher Education, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Brand Heritage, Service Quality, Student Perception, University Branding.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The higher education sector has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, driven by globalization, technological advancements, and increasing competition among institutions. Universities today operate in a quasi-market environment where they must actively attract students, secure funding, and maintain their reputation in both national and international arenas. As a result, branding has emerged as a critical strategic tool for higher education institutions (HEIs).

Unlike tangible products, higher education is a service characterized by intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability. These unique characteristics make it difficult for prospective students to evaluate quality prior to consumption, thereby increasing the importance of brand signals such as reputation, image, and perceived quality. In this context, Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) provides a valuable framework for understanding how stakeholders perceive and evaluate university brands.

CBBE refers to the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to marketing efforts. In the context of higher education, it reflects students' perceptions, experiences, and associations with an institution, which ultimately influence their choice, satisfaction, and loyalty. Despite its importance,

research on CBBE in higher education remains fragmented, with varying conceptualizations and measurement approaches.

This paper aims to systematically review existing literature on CBBE in higher education, identify key dimensions and determinants, analyse emerging trends, and highlight research gaps. By synthesizing findings from prior studies, the paper seeks to contribute to both academic understanding and managerial practice in the field of university branding.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Brand equity is a multidimensional construct that has been extensively studied in marketing literature. Traditional models proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) conceptualize brand equity as comprising dimensions such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. While these models were originally developed for consumer goods, they have been widely adapted to service sectors, including higher education.

In the context of HEIs, brand equity is primarily understood through the lens of consumer perception, particularly from the perspective of students. The literature consistently identifies several core dimensions:

### 2.1 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to the ability of prospective students to recognize and recall a university. It plays a foundational role in the decision-making process, as students are more likely to consider institutions that they are familiar with. Awareness is often influenced by marketing communication, word-of-mouth, and digital presence.

### 2.2 Brand Image

Brand image encompasses the perceptions and associations that individuals hold about an institution. It includes functional attributes (e.g., academic quality, infrastructure), emotional attributes (e.g., campus environment), and symbolic attributes (e.g., prestige, social status). A strong brand image enhances perceived value and influences student choice.

### 2.3 Perceived Quality

Perceived quality reflects students' evaluation of the overall excellence of educational services. It includes factors such as faculty competence, curriculum relevance, infrastructure, and support services. In higher education, perceived quality is often considered the most critical determinant of brand equity.

### 2.4 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to students' commitment to the institution, reflected in their willingness to recommend it, continue engagement, and maintain long-term association as alumni. Loyalty is typically an outcome of positive experiences and satisfaction.

### 2.5 Brand Heritage

Brand heritage is an emerging dimension that reflects the institution's history, legacy, core values, and longevity. Although relatively underexplored, it has the potential to create emotional connections and enhance perceived authenticity and trust.

While these dimensions provide a useful framework, their applicability to higher education requires contextual adaptation due to the complex and experiential nature of educational services.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE (2008–2024)

### 3.1 Early Foundations (2010–2015)

The early phase of research focused on establishing the relevance of brand equity concepts in higher education. Studies during this period largely adopted traditional CBBE frameworks and examined their applicability in educational settings.

Findings consistently indicated that brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand image significantly influence students' choice of institutions and their subsequent loyalty. Among these, brand image emerged as a particularly strong determinant, often outweighing awareness-related factors. This suggests that while

awareness is necessary, it is not sufficient to ensure preference; the perceived value and reputation of the institution play a more decisive role.

Additionally, research explored the influence of socio-demographic variables such as gender, income, and educational background on brand perception. While these factors were found to have some impact, their influence was generally moderate compared to core brand dimensions.

Overall, this phase laid the theoretical foundation by validating the applicability of CBBE models in higher education and highlighting the importance of perception-based factors.

### 3.2 Expansion of Dimensions and Models (2016–2020)

The period from 2016 to 2020 witnessed significant advancements in both conceptual and empirical research. Scholars began to move beyond traditional models and develop multidimensional frameworks tailored to the higher education context.

Key developments during this phase include:

- Integration of **service quality** as a central determinant of brand equity
- Inclusion of **marketing mix elements** such as promotion, pricing, and physical evidence
- Examination of **student satisfaction** as a mediating variable
- Identification of **causal relationships** among brand equity dimensions

Empirical studies using advanced statistical techniques such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) revealed that perceived quality acts as a central driver influencing other dimensions like brand image and loyalty. Marketing strategies, particularly promotional activities and digital engagement, were found to significantly enhance brand awareness and perception.

Furthermore, research emphasized the role of social media and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) in shaping brand equity. Institutions that actively engage with students through digital platforms were found to have stronger brand equity.

This phase marked a shift towards a more holistic understanding of brand equity, incorporating both functional and experiential aspects.

### 3.3 Contemporary Developments (2021–2024)

Recent research reflects a more dynamic and comprehensive perspective on brand equity in higher education. Scholars have expanded the scope to include additional dimensions such as:

- Institutional reputation
- Faculty quality
- Facilities and infrastructure
- Emotional and learning environment
- Career prospects and employability

Studies have also explored the role of **online brand equity**, particularly in the context of digital learning and virtual campuses. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the importance of digital presence and online service quality.

A key trend in recent literature is the examination of **mediating and moderating relationships**. For instance, university reputation has been found to mediate the relationship between service quality and brand loyalty, while career development opportunities moderate students' preferences.

Another significant development is the growing recognition of **brand heritage** as a strategic asset. Institutions with a strong historical legacy and well-defined core values are better positioned to build trust and emotional connections with stakeholders.

Overall, contemporary research emphasizes a multi-stakeholder, experience-driven approach to brand equity.

## 4. KEY THEMES AND SYNTHESIS

The review of literature reveals several recurring themes that collectively shape the understanding of Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) in higher education. These themes not only highlight the key determinants and dimensions of brand equity but also reflect the evolving nature of branding in the

education sector. A synthesis of the literature provides deeper insights into how institutions can strategically build and sustain strong brands.

#### **4.1 Determinants of Brand Equity**

The literature consistently identifies multiple determinants that significantly influence the development of brand equity in higher education institutions. Among these, service quality emerges as the most critical factor. In the context of higher education, service quality extends beyond academic delivery to include administrative efficiency, infrastructure, support services, and responsiveness of faculty and staff. High perceived service quality enhances student satisfaction, strengthens positive perceptions, and ultimately contributes to stronger brand equity. Students tend to associate high-quality educational experiences with institutional credibility, which reinforces both trust and long-term loyalty.

Institutional reputation is another vital determinant that plays a central role in shaping brand equity. Reputation is built over time through consistent academic performance, research output, placement records, and societal contributions. It acts as a signal of reliability and excellence, especially for prospective students who may lack direct experience with the institution. A strong reputation reduces perceived risk in decision-making and enhances the perceived value of the institution, thereby positively influencing brand equity.

Marketing communication also plays a crucial role in building and reinforcing brand equity. Effective communication strategies—ranging from traditional advertising to digital marketing, social media engagement, and alumni networks—help create awareness and shape perceptions about the institution. Consistent and transparent communication ensures that the institution's value proposition is clearly conveyed to stakeholders. In today's digital era, institutions that actively engage with their audience through multiple channels are more successful in establishing a strong and recognizable brand identity.

Another important determinant is the overall student experience, which encompasses academic, social, and emotional aspects of university life. A positive student experience enhances satisfaction and fosters a sense of belonging, which in turn leads to stronger brand attachment and advocacy. Students who have enriching experiences are more likely to recommend the institution through word-of-mouth, thereby contributing to organic brand building. Thus, student experience acts as a bridge between institutional offerings and brand perception.

#### **4.2 Role of Brand Dimensions**

The analysis of literature indicates that not all dimensions of brand equity contribute equally; rather, certain dimensions play a more dominant role in influencing overall brand equity. Among these, perceived quality and brand image consistently emerge as the strongest predictors.

Perceived quality is particularly significant in the higher education context, as students evaluate institutions based on academic excellence, faculty competence, infrastructure, and career outcomes. A high level of perceived quality enhances students' confidence in the institution and strengthens its competitive positioning. It also directly influences satisfaction and indirectly affects loyalty and advocacy.

Brand image, on the other hand, represents the set of associations and perceptions that stakeholders hold about the institution. These associations may include academic reputation, campus culture, social status, and emotional appeal. A strong and favourable brand image not only attracts prospective students but also reinforces the institution's identity in a competitive market. Importantly, brand image integrates both functional and symbolic attributes, making it a comprehensive determinant of brand equity.

Brand awareness serves as a foundational element in the brand-building process. Without awareness, even institutions with high quality and strong image may fail to attract students. Awareness ensures that the institution is included in the consideration set of prospective students. However, awareness alone is insufficient; it must be complemented by positive perceptions and experiences to translate into preference and choice.

Brand loyalty is generally considered an outcome rather than a direct driver of brand equity. It reflects the extent to which students remain committed to the institution, recommend it to others, and maintain long-term associations as alumni. Loyalty is typically built over time through consistent positive experiences

and satisfaction. While it may not directly initiate brand equity, it plays a crucial role in sustaining and reinforcing it.

### 4.3 Emerging Trends

The landscape of higher education branding is rapidly evolving, with several emerging trends reshaping how institutions build and manage brand equity. One of the most significant trends is the increasing importance of digital branding and online engagement. With the widespread use of the internet and social media, students rely heavily on digital platforms for information and interaction. Universities are now leveraging websites, social media channels, virtual tours, and online events to enhance visibility and engagement. Digital presence not only influences awareness but also shapes perceptions and experiences. Another important trend is the growing role of experiential and emotional factors in shaping brand equity. Modern students seek more than just academic knowledge; they value holistic experiences that contribute to personal growth, social interaction, and emotional well-being. Elements such as campus life, extracurricular activities, cultural diversity, and support systems significantly influence students' emotional connection with the institution. This shift indicates a move from purely functional branding to experience-driven branding.

The influence of social media and peer interactions has also become increasingly prominent. Platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube enable students to share their experiences, opinions, and reviews, which in turn influence the perceptions of prospective students. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has emerged as a powerful tool in shaping brand image and credibility. Institutions must therefore actively manage their online reputation and engage with stakeholders in meaningful ways.

Finally, there is a noticeable shift towards student-centric branding strategies. Universities are increasingly recognizing students as primary stakeholders and focusing on their needs, expectations, and experiences. This involves personalized communication, student engagement initiatives, feedback mechanisms, and continuous improvement of services. Student-centric approaches not only enhance satisfaction but also strengthen emotional attachment and long-term loyalty.

## 5. RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain:

- Limited exploration of brand heritage as a core dimension
- Lack of standardized measurement scales specific to HEIs
- Insufficient research in developing countries, especially India
- Need for longitudinal studies to capture changes over time
- Underexplored perspectives of prospective students, alumni, and employers

Addressing these gaps can significantly enhance the theoretical and practical understanding of brand equity in higher education.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this review carry significant implications for both academic research and institutional practice. By synthesizing existing literature on Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) in higher education, this study not only strengthens the conceptual understanding of the domain but also provides actionable insights for institutional stakeholders.

### 6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a comprehensive and integrated synthesis of CBBE research within the context of higher education institutions. Given the fragmented nature of prior studies, this review consolidates diverse perspectives into a coherent framework, thereby enhancing conceptual clarity and facilitating a more structured understanding of brand equity in educational services.



One of the key theoretical contributions lies in tracing the evolution of brand equity dimensions over time. While early studies largely relied on traditional constructs such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand image, and brand loyalty, recent research reflects a shift towards more nuanced and context-specific dimensions. The inclusion of factors such as institutional reputation, student experience, emotional environment, and digital engagement highlights the dynamic nature of brand equity in higher education. This evolution underscores the need for continuous refinement of existing models to ensure their relevance in changing educational landscapes.

The study also identifies and emphasizes emerging constructs such as brand heritage and digital brand equity, which remain relatively underexplored in the literature. Brand heritage, in particular, offers a promising avenue for extending traditional CBBE models by incorporating elements of legacy, history, and institutional identity. Similarly, the increasing importance of digital platforms necessitates the conceptualization of online or digital brand equity as a distinct dimension. These emerging constructs provide opportunities for researchers to develop more comprehensive and contextually grounded theoretical models.

Furthermore, the review highlights several research gaps, thereby suggesting clear directions for future inquiry. There is a need for the development of standardized and validated measurement scales specifically tailored to higher education. Additionally, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine the evolution of brand equity over time, as well as comparative studies across public and private institutions or across different cultural contexts. Expanding the scope of research to include multiple stakeholders—such as prospective students, alumni, employers, and faculty—can also provide a more holistic understanding of brand equity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Consumer-Based Brand Equity has emerged as a critical determinant of success in higher education institutions. While traditional dimensions such as awareness, image, and perceived quality remain central, the evolving educational landscape demands a broader and more integrated approach.

The increasing importance of digital engagement, experiential value, and brand heritage highlights the need for institutions to adopt innovative and student-centric branding strategies. Future research should focus on developing comprehensive models and standardized measurement tools that capture the unique characteristics of higher education.

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