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Strategic Brand Resilience in Higher Education: Insights from Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model

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INTRODUCTION

Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) is a crucial concept in marketing that focuses on understanding and leveraging the value of a brand from the consumer's perspective. Developed by Kevin Lane Keller, the CBBE model outlines how a brand's strength is built and maintained through customer perceptions, associations, and experiences. The model is structured into four key dimensions: brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand resonance. Each of these dimensions plays a vital role in creating a brand that is not only recognized and trusted but also deeply embedded in the consumer's daily life. By focusing on how customers perceive the brand, the CBBE model helps organizations to strategically manage brand equity, ensuring long-term brand loyalty, competitive advantage, and financial success (Li et. al., 2020; Raza et. al., 2020; Wei, 2022; Coudounaris, 2024).

In the context of higher education, the application of the CBBE model is particularly significant. As universities and colleges increasingly compete on a global scale, the perception of their brand among prospective students, alumni, employers, and other stakeholders becomes a critical determinant of success. A strong brand in higher education can influence student enrollment, retention, and overall satisfaction, while also enhancing the institution's reputation and market position Khoshtaria et. al., 2020; Pinar et. al., 2020; Gardiana et. al., 2023). By employing the CBBE model, educational institutions can systematically build and manage their brand equity, ensuring that they resonate with their target audience and foster long-term loyalty and advocacy. This approach not only supports the institution's immediate goals but also contributes to its sustainability and growth in an increasingly competitive and dynamic environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Keller's model (2019) posits that brand equity is fundamentally rooted in how customers perceive, feel about, and engage with a brand. To systematically build and sustain brand equity, Keller delineated four critical stages that organizations must navigate. These stages reflect the progressive relationship between a brand and its customers, beginning with brand awareness and culminating in brand resonance, where deep emotional connections and loyalty are established.

The first stage of Keller's CBBE model focuses on establishing brand identity, known as brand salience. This foundational level is crucial for making the brand recognizable and ensuring that it occupies a prominent place in consumers' minds. A study by Suhardi et al. (2022) highlighted that brand salience is equally significant in the context of higher education, as universities strive to enhance their visibility and recognition among prospective students. The second stage involves defining and communicating the brand's meaning through brand performance and brand imagery, as described by Roskosa & Stukalina (2022). Brand performance relates to the functional quality and features of the brand, while brand imagery encompasses the visual and emotional

representations that resonate with customers. The third stage, also discussed by Roskosa & Stukalina (2022), examines how customers form judgments and feelings about the brand, which are critical in shaping the brand's reputation. Positive judgments and feelings can significantly enhance the brand's credibility and emotional appeal. Finally, the model's ultimate stage—brand resonance—focuses on building strong, enduring relationships with customers, leading to loyalty, a sense of belonging, and a deep emotional attachment to the brand (Kuhn et al., 2008).

Customer-based brand equity in higher education

In the context of higher education, the evaluation and enhancement of an institution's brand equity have garnered increasing attention from researchers. For instance, Pinar et al. (2020) applied the brand equity dimensions to assess student perspectives at a major university in the United States, demonstrating the practical application of Keller's model in educational settings. Mourad et al. (2019) further emphasized that brand equity in higher education has become a focal point of academic inquiry, reflecting the growing importance of brand management in this sector. The work by Roskosa & Stukalina (2022) confirmed the sustained interest among researchers in exploring brand equity within tertiary education. By employing the CBBE model, institutions can systematically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their brand across the model's six dimensions, including brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgment, and brand feelings. Such assessments provide valuable insights that can guide strategic decisions regarding brand positioning, communication, and resource allocation, ultimately enhancing the institution's competitive standing and appeal (Keller, 2019).

Brand equity in the higher education context has become a focal point of academic inquiry, reflecting the evolving dynamics of the educational landscape and the increasing competitiveness among institutions (Vukasović, 2022; Rizard et al., 2022; Bacon, 2024). Traditionally, brand equity was a concept rooted in the commercial sector, where it was used to measure the value that a brand adds to a company. However, as universities and colleges face growing competition for students, faculty, and funding, the application of brand equity in higher education has gained prominence. Brand equity in this context is not merely about the visual identity or marketing slogans of an institution; it encompasses the overall reputation, perceived quality, and emotional connections that students, alumni, and other stakeholders have with the institution. This holistic approach to brand equity is vital, as it influences not only recruitment and retention but also the institution's ability to forge strategic partnerships and secure financial support.

Research on brand equity in higher education underscores its impact on various aspects of institutional success. For example, studies have shown that universities with strong brand equity are more likely to attract high-caliber students and faculty, as well as garner greater alumni support (Mourad et al., 2019). Furthermore, brand equity plays a crucial role in differentiating institutions in a crowded marketplace, where prospective students are bombarded with information and choices. A well-established brand can serve as a shortcut for decision-making, signaling quality and reliability to students and their families (Pinar et al., 2020). This is particularly important in an era where higher education institutions are increasingly viewed as service providers, and students as consumers who expect a return on their investment. By effectively managing brand equity, institutions can enhance their appeal, ensure sustained engagement with their stakeholders, and ultimately, secure their long-term viability in an increasingly globalized educational environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research approach to investigate the dimensions of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) among students of one of the public postgraduate business schools in Malaysia. A purposive sampling method was used to select the sample, ensuring that the participants were representative of the target population. Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire, which was adapted from the research conducted by Stukalina and Pavyluk (2021). The questionnaire was available in both English and Bahasa Malaysia, making it accessible to a diverse range of respondents.

The questionnaire consisted of thirty-four (34) questions divided into seven (7) sections. Section A gathered student demographic information using a nominal scale, while Sections B to G focused on the six dimensions of the CBBE model. These dimensions—brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, brand judgments, brand feelings, and brand resonance—were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated "Strongly Disagree" and 5 indicated "Strongly Agree."

To analyse the collected data, the researcher conducted both descriptive and reliability analyses. The descriptive analysis provided a summary of each CBBE dimension. Specifically, the mean was calculated to determine the average response for each item, offering insights into the general perceptions of the respondents. The mode was used to identify the most common response, highlighting the predominant perceptions for each item. Additionally, the standard deviation was examined to understand the variability of responses across the sample. To further enhance the interpretation of the data, a radar chart was utilized to visually represent the distribution of agreement and disagreement with each item's statements. This visual tool facilitated a quick and effective understanding of the respondents' inclinations towards the various dimensions of brand equity.

FINDINGS

The data were analysed based on responses gathered from 296 respondents. The gender distribution among the respondents shows a higher participation rate among females, with 60.5% (179 out of 296) compared to 39.5% (117 out of 296) for males. This suggests a stronger engagement from female participants in the survey. The age distribution is fairly balanced between the younger and middle-aged groups, with 39.2% of respondents under 30 years old and 38.5% aged between 31-40 years old. A smaller portion of the respondents, 17.6%, fall within the 41-50 years old category, while only 4.7% are above 50 years old. This indicates that the survey sample is predominantly composed of younger individuals, with the majority being under 40 years old.

Reliability analysis

Reliability analysis is essential for assessing the consistency and stability of a measurement tool across different instances. This study used Cronbach's alpha to quantify the reliability of the survey instrument, with values ranging from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate stronger reliability. A Cronbach's alpha above 0.90 is considered strongly reliable, 0.80 to 0.90 is highly acceptable, 0.70 to 0.80 is acceptable, 0.65 to 0.70 is minimally acceptable, and 0.60 to 0.65 is undesirable. Any value below 0.60 reflects poor reliability. The analysis revealed a high level of internal consistency across most constructs, with brand salience and brand performance rated as highly acceptable (Cronbach's alpha values of 0.801 and 0.847, respectively). Brand imagery and brand resonance, with alpha values of 0.728 and 0.741, fall within the acceptable range, indicating a good level of consistency among survey items. Notably, brand judgments, which encompass 12 items, demonstrated a strongly reliable alpha value of 0.910, signifying excellent internal consistency. Overall, the combined Cronbach's alpha for all 31 items is 0.937, categorizing the measures as strongly reliable and underscoring their dependability for research and analysis purposes.

Brand salience

The analysis of the brand salience dimension for the School, reveals a moderate level of brand awareness among respondents, with an overall mean score of 2.74, a mode of 3.33, and a standard deviation of 1.069. The high standard deviation of 1.438 for the statement regarding prior awareness of the brand (BSL1) indicates diverse opinions among participants. Similarly, the awareness of the Schools's vision (BSL2) and mission (BSL3) shows a range of responses, with mean scores of 2.72 and 2.71, and modes of 3 and 2, respectively. According to Keller's CBBE model, brand salience is foundational to achieving brand equity. While the data suggest that the School has established a certain degree of salience, the variability in responses indicates potential areas for improvement. Strengthening brand salience is crucial as it supports deeper dimensions such as brand performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance. By enhancing awareness and ensuring that the School stands out more distinctly in the minds of the public, especially potential students, the institution can solidify its brand equity.

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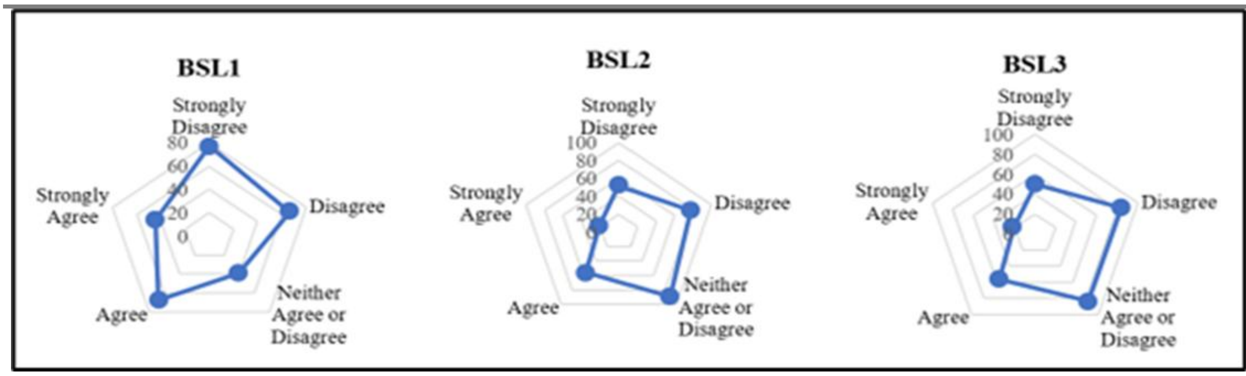

Figure 1: Illustration of brand salience as perceived evaluation Brand performance

The analysis of the brand performance for the school, as depicted in Figure 2, reveals a satisfactory level of perception among respondents regarding the brand's delivery of educational services. The overall mean score of 3.93, with a mode of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.672, indicates a relatively consistent positive perception. For instance, the statement "the school brand is exclusive compared to other graduate business schools in Malaysia" (BPR1) has a mean score of 3.55, with a mode of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.941, suggesting that while there is a general perception of exclusivity, opinions vary. The perception that the school satisfies the basic needs of the service category well (BPR2) is reflected by a high mean score of 4.05, with a mode of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.749. The belief that "The school brand completely meets my requirements" (BPR3) scores a mean of 3.99, with a mode of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.856. Finally, the school's reliability in providing quality educational services (BPR4) receives the highest mean score of 4.13, with a mode of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.677, indicating strong agreement among respondents. In the context of Keller's CBBE model, brand performance is critical as it reflects how well the brand meets customer expectations regarding reliability, features, and the effectiveness of services provided. The high scores in brand performance suggest that the school has successfully delivered its value proposition, which is essential for building strong brand equity.

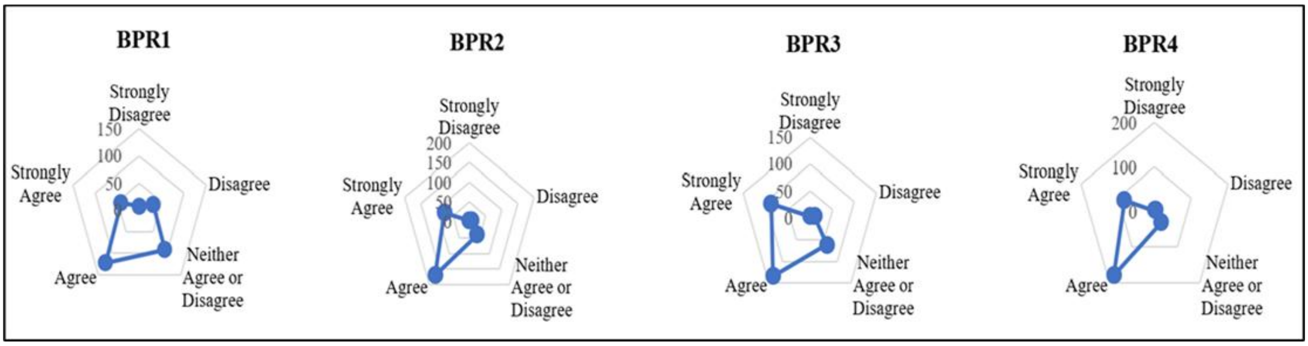

Figure 2: Illustration of brand performance evaluation Brand imagery

The brand imagery dimension for the school, as illustrated in Figure 3, reflects a generally positive image with some diversity in perceptions. The overall mean score is 3.54, with a mode of 3.75 and a standard deviation of 0.707. Respect and admiration from peers (BIM1) have a mean score of 3.36, indicating some level of endorsement, but the standard deviation of 0.972 suggests mixed opinions. Pleasant memories associated with the brand (BIM2) are more consistently positive, with a mean of 3.86 and a mode of 4, reflecting that the school often evokes positive reminiscences. Descriptions of the school as "up-to-date" and "upper-class" (BIM3) have a mean score of 3.39 and a mode of 4, but the higher standard deviation of 1.039 shows varied perceptions about the brand's modernity and class. The design aspects being eye-catching and memorable (BIM4) also receive varied responses, with a mean score of 3.55 and a mode of 4, but a standard deviation of 1.024 indicates significant variability in these opinions. Within Keller's CBBE model, brand imagery is crucial as it encompasses the intangible aspects of the brand that appeal to customers' emotions and experiences. The mixed results in the school's brand imagery suggest that while strong elements are present, there is room for improvement in creating a more consistent and powerful brand image that resonates deeply with customers, enhancing overall brand equity.

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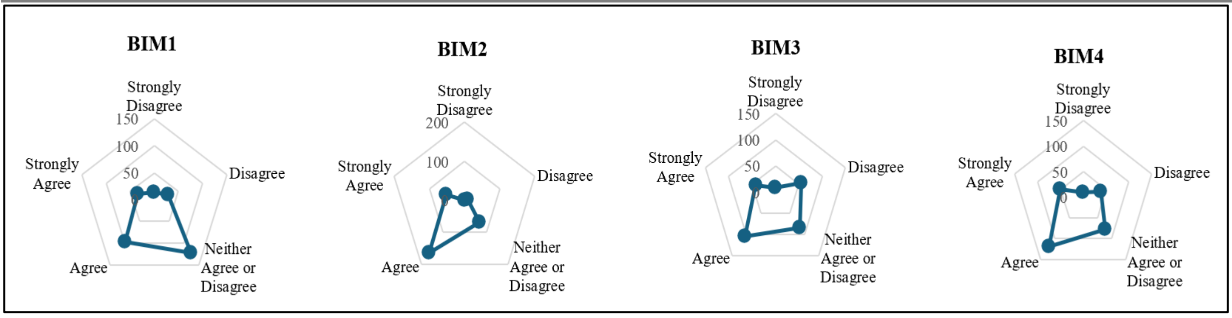

Figure 3: Illustration of brand imagery evaluation Brand judgement

The findings indicate a strong positive assessment of the academic staff, with an overall mean score of 3.94, a mode of 4, and a standard deviation of 0.611. The academic staff are perceived as highly experienced (BJG1), with a mean score of 4.49, and supportive (BJG3), with a mean score of 4.5, both with modes at 5. They are also seen as caring about students' sentiments (BJG5) and understanding their needs (BJG7), with mean scores above 4.3. In contrast, the non-academic staff receive lower scores, with means ranging from 3.3 to 3.94, indicating room for improvement in areas such as being supportive (BJG4), caring about sentiments (BJG6), understanding needs (BJG8), being inventive (BJG10), and learning quickly (BJG12). The higher standard deviations for non-academic staff judgments suggest more varied perceptions among respondents. Within Keller's CBBE model, brand judgments reflect customers' personal opinions and evaluations of the brand, which are influenced by their experiences with the brand's performance and imagery. The high scores for academic staff suggest that the school is well-regarded in terms of expertise and supportiveness, which can contribute positively to the brand's credibility and perceived quality as key drivers of brand equity. However, the lower scores for non-academic staff highlight an area where the school could focus on improving customer perceptions to strengthen overall brand equity.

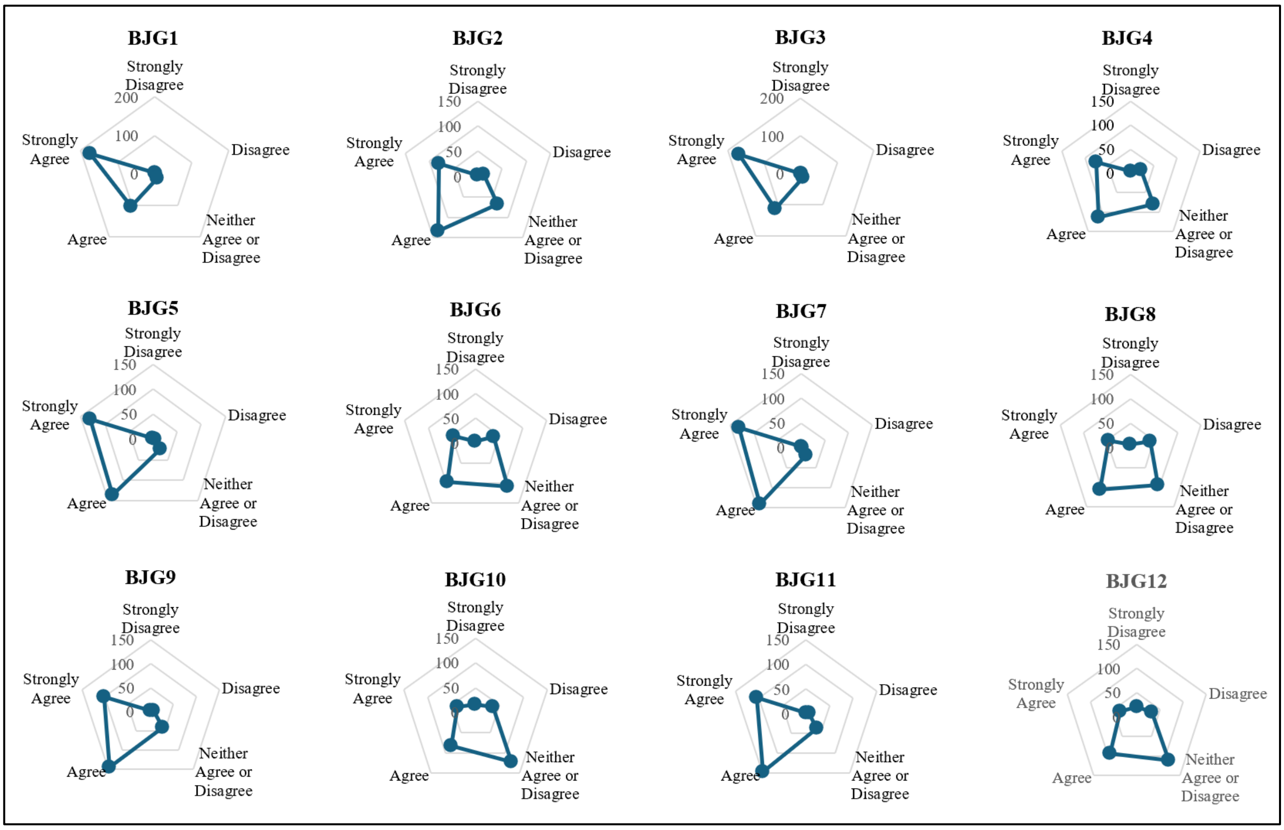

Figure 4: Illustration of brand judgement evaluation Brand feelings

Evaluation on the brand feelings reveals a strong emotional connection of the respondents with the brand. The overall mean score is 4.11, with a mode of 4 and a standard deviation of 0.615, indicating a consistently positive emotional response. Respondents feel that the school brand provides a sense of social approval (BFL1), with a

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mean score of 4.14, while self-respect (BFL2) has an even higher mean score of 4.24. Both have modes of 4 and similar standard deviations around 0.73, suggesting that these feelings are widely held among the respondents. The brand's respect for maintaining personal (BFL3) and professional identities (BFL4) also scored well, with means of 3.99 and 4.08, respectively, and modes of 4, reflecting a positive perception of the brand's impact on individual identity. In the context of Keller's CBBE model, brand feelings are critical as they represent customers' emotional responses and reactions to the brand. The high scores in this construct suggest that the school is successful in eliciting positive feelings, which can significantly enhance brand equity by fostering loyalty and attachment to the brand. These feelings can differentiate the school from competitors and contribute to a strong and unique brand presence in the minds of customers.

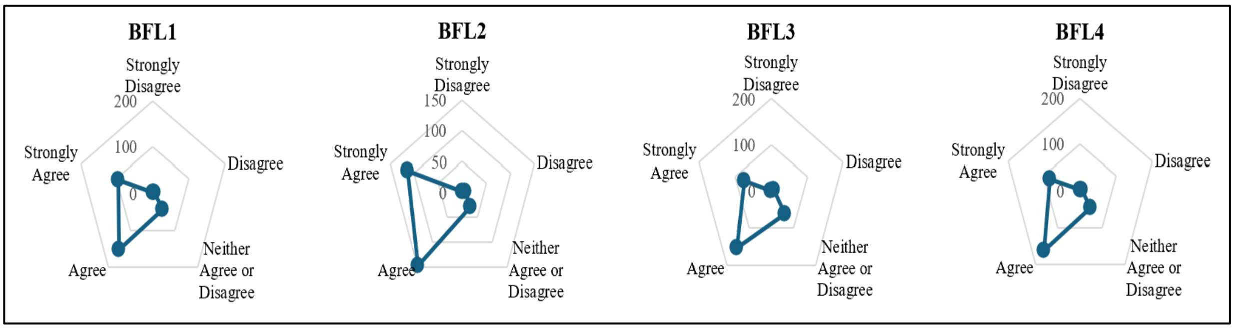

Figure 5: Illustration of brand feelings evaluation Brand resonance

The brand resonance results for the school show a strong connection and loyalty to the brand, with an overall mean score of 3.95 and a mode of 4, indicating high engagement among respondents. Loyalty to the school brand is evident, as the mean score for this aspect is 4.09, showing that many respondents feel a strong allegiance. The emotional bond with others who use the brand also scored positively, with a mean of 3.91, though some variation in responses suggests not everyone shares this sentiment. Interest in brand activities was slightly lower, with a mean of 3.58, indicating that while respondents are interested, their engagement in following news about the brand may not be as strong. The highest score was for willingness to recommend the school (mean of 4.21), reflecting strong advocacy. Figure 6 further illustrate this, showing that most respondents are loyal to the school, feel a bond with others who use the brand, and would recommend it. However, some respondents remain neutral in their loyalty, emotional bond, and interest in the brand's news, suggesting opportunities for improvement to increase engagement and loyalty across the board.

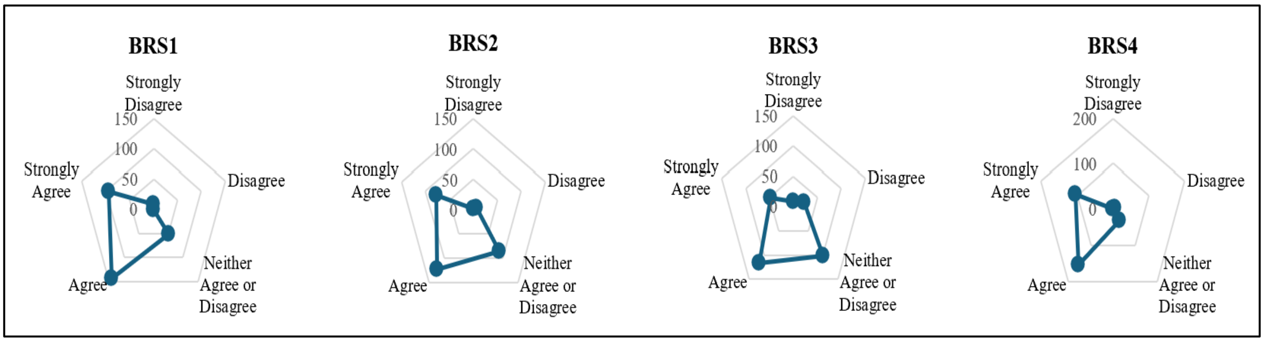

Figure 6: Illustration of brand resonance

DISCUSSIONS

The findings from the analysis provide a comprehensive view of the school's brand equity, reflecting its strengths and areas for improvement across the various constructs of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model. This model evaluates brand equity through dimensions such as brand salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance, all of which are crucial in understanding how a brand is perceived by its customers.

The analysis of brand equity of the business school understudy reveals both strengths and areas for improvement, particularly in the context of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model. Brand salience, which serves as the foundation for brand equity, was found to be moderate among respondents, with noticeable variability in awareness levels. This inconsistency suggests that while the school has some visibility, its presence may not be as strong or consistent as needed to support other dimensions of brand equity. A lack of strong salience can hinder the potential of brand performance and resonance (Chen, 2019; Esteky & Kalati, 2024; Ghobehei et al., 2019; Jois & Chakrabarti, 2025; Minh & Mai, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2019; Wahab et al., 2024; Waqas, 2022). The data implies that the school could benefit from strategies aimed at boosting brand recognition, particularly in reinforcing its mission and vision across its target audience.

Brand performance results, on the other hand indicate that the school is generally perceived as delivering on its educational promises effectively, though there is variability in how exclusive the brand is seen compared to other graduate business schools. While the institution meets expectations, it may struggle to clearly differentiate itself in a competitive market. Enhancing its unique value proposition is essential to maintain and elevate its brand equity (Jha & Sarabhai, 2024). Similarly, the findings on brand imagery show a mixed perception. Although the school projects a positive image, variability in how respondents perceive its modernity and class indicates potential misalignment between the institution's intended brand image and audience expectations. This inconsistency suggests that the school should refine its branding to present a more unified and appealing identity.

Another key insight is the strong positive assessment of the academic staff, which plays a critical role in building credibility and perceived quality. However, the lower scores for non-academic staff highlight a potential weakness that could affect the overall brand experience. The disparity in perceptions between academic and non-academic staff underscores the need for the school to ensure consistency in customer interactions across all departments (Mousavi et al., 2024; Klink et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps would improve the overall experience and strengthen brand equity.

The findings related to brand feelings show that the school has successfully established a strong emotional connection with its audience, particularly in terms of social approval and self-respect, which are key to fostering brand loyalty. However, maintaining and nurturing these emotional connections is crucial for the school to sustain its competitive edge, as emotional bonds are critical for long-term brand success (Choi et al., 2024). Finally, the brand resonance results indicate high levels of loyalty and advocacy, suggesting that the school has created a deep psychological bond with its customers. However, the relatively lower interest in ongoing brand activities and news points to a gap in continuous engagement, which, if addressed, could further enhance brand resonance and deepen customer relationships.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the brand equity of the school through the application of Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model. The findings indicate that the school has established a solid foundation in terms of brand performance, judgments, feelings, and resonance, reflecting strong brand loyalty, positive perceptions of academic staff, and a good overall emotional connection with its students. However, areas such as brand salience and imagery show variability and suggest opportunities for enhancement, particularly in creating a more consistent and recognizable brand identity. The disparities in perceptions, particularly between academic and non-academic staff, highlight the need for more uniformity in service delivery to ensure a holistic positive brand experience. Overall, while the school demonstrates strong brand equity, there are critical areas that require strategic focus to further solidify its brand in the highly competitive higher education market.

Moving forward, the school should prioritize initiatives to enhance brand salience by increasing visibility and awareness among potential students. This can be achieved through targeted marketing campaigns that emphasize the institution's mission, vision, and unique selling propositions, ensuring consistent communication across various platforms. To address the variability in brand imagery, the school should also refine its brand identity to create a more cohesive and appealing image. This may involve updating branding materials, enhancing the visual appeal of marketing content, and clearly communicating the brand's modernity and class. Additionally, the lower scores for non-academic staff performance highlight the need for investment in training and development programs aimed at improving customer service skills. This will help ensure consistent service quality across all touchpoints, enhancing the overall brand experience for students. To maintain high levels of brand resonance, the school should further explore strategies to strengthen ongoing engagement with the brand, such as regular updates on brand activities, creating interactive content, and fostering a community that encourages active participation from students and alumni.

In terms of future research, longitudinal studies should be conducted to track changes in brand equity over time, providing insights into the long-term effectiveness of branding strategies and the evolving perceptions of the school brand. Comparative studies between the school and other leading business schools in Malaysia and internationally could offer valuable benchmarks, helping to identify best practices in achieving brand equity. As digital platforms become increasingly important in higher education, future research should also investigate the impact of digital branding efforts on brand equity, examining the effectiveness of social media campaigns, online content, and digital engagement strategies. Additionally, further research should explore how brand equity perceptions differ across various demographic groups, such as age, gender, and educational background, allowing the school to tailor its branding efforts to the specific needs and preferences of different student segments.

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Conflict Of Interest Statement

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

Authors' Contributions

Zurina Ismail supervised the research progress, wrote the manuscript, anchored the review, revisions and approved the article submission. Anissa Ibrahim and Nur Asyikin Abdul Najib out the research, and performed analysis of the data.

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