Role of Brand Awareness, Brand Image and Perceived Quality in Private Universities

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Abstract
Competition among private universities in Malaysia seems to be getting fierce and tough. The number of service providers increased, which provides more advantages to the students. Students have more bargaining power due to ample choices and options before deciding. This study measures three independent factors: brand awareness, brand image and perceived brand quality of higher education institutes toward student choices for enrolment. Three hypotheses were developed to measure a direct relationship between the variables toward student intentions to register. Data were collected among the new students from the private universities within Klang valley. 5 Likert scales were used to measure respondents' feedback. The results revealed that all three aspects positively influenced the intention to register. Such development will contribute to the world of academics in understanding the student's preferences and evaluating the education providers. The result could be used as a guideline for the marketing teams in preparing their marketing strategy.

Keywords: Brand image, Brand awareness, private universities

Introduction
Securing a place at a tertiary institution is a big step in advancing one's education. About half a million students graduate high school yearly (Sani, 2020). Most will begin planning their future and looking at study options (Education, 2018). There is ample choice in terms of programmes at public and private higher-learning institutions that cater to hands-on students and the academically inclined (Sani, 2020). They must take into account their interest and what the future holds. Students should choose their programmes wisely. Applicants generally base their selection of courses on what they hear from friends and relatives and the reputation and specialisation of their respective universities (Hassan, Shamsudin, Hasim, Mustapha, Zakaria, et al., 2020). The quality of programmes should be a key factor. The quality of universities can be seen in the QS World University Rankings and local MyQuest Rating (Trisha, 2022).
The increasing number of education service providers leads to tough competition. Malaysia's private universities are becoming increasingly competitive (Hassan & Shamsudin, 2019). The latest statistics indicate that Malaysia has 20 public institutions, but there are 47 private universities in the country. Besides, thirty-four university colleges and eleven branches of international universities are also present (Sia & Abbas Adamu, 2021). As a result, students now

have more options due to the increased number of higher education institutes (Hassan et al., 2019). The tight enrollment competition has hampered efforts to attract new students (Wan et al., 2018). According to prior studies, a student's decision to enrol in a university is influenced by various factors such as curriculum, location, facilities, or even the employment rates of the university's alumni while choosing a university (Azzone & Soncin, 2020; Sim et al., 2021; Vulperhorst et al., 2022). On the other hand, studies have looked at the impact of a university's brand on prospective students' enrollment decisions (Foroudi et al., 2019; Kaushal & Ali, 2020; Khoshtaria et al., 2020). Conversely, enrolment in recent years has been less than encouraging due to Covid19 (Deraman et al., 2021). Enrollment in higher education institutes has been declining for the last two years (Lim, 2021). Such situations may lead some private universities to face the dilemma of closing down should there be no aggressive actions to attract the number of students (Asia Setinel, 2020). At the same time, local students appear to be shifting their concentration away from pursuing a bachelor's degree and toward pursuing skills and vocational training (Menon, 2022). Because of these circumstances, universities must improve their market positioning to continue operating successfully in the education sector (Hassan et al., 2021).

Intention to register
According to previous research, students choose institutions to attend based on their future career goals (Hassan et al., 2019). Studies show that most students choose a programme based on their interests, hobbies, and financial resources (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). It is typical for students to carefully consider all of the benefits and drawbacks of the option and seek advice from close friends and family members before making a choice (Ali et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on accessible and suitable positions, some students will also concentrate on university or faculty competence (Angliss, 2022).

In most cases, students aspire to attend a prestigious and well-known educational institution (Roga et al., 2015). Previous research suggested a connection between family members and friends in the decision-making process about higher education (G. Assefa & Stansbury, 2018). According to (Wong et al., 2020), students between the ages of 17 and 19 may not be able to make educated decisions and perhaps will rely more upon their surroundings to make decisions for them. According to recent studies, students focusing on the categories of universities with a high brand value, frequent advertisements, and a topic of discussion would be selected as the top choice (Girard & Pinar, 2020; Shah et al., 2021).

Studies conducted in the past have revealed that a university's reputation and the quality of its products are important variables to consider as one of the criteria used in students evaluations for admission to universities (Azham & Tg Ahmad, 2020; Shaari et al., 2019; M. S. Yusoff et al., 2021). Students will generally choose their preferred universities based on a few alternatives before concluding. Researchers have proposed that educational institutions improve their standing by enhancing awareness-related programming to ensure that all students know about the institutions' branding (Cao et al., 2021; Imari et al., 2020). This ensures that all students know about the institutions' branding (Shamsudin et al., 2019). Advertisements or other types of communication that minimise the facets of education in which students are engaged or impacted are more likely to persuade school leavers students to adopt a particular viewpoint (Huybers et al., 2015).

Brand Image
In today's world, branding is an essential component of the success of any organisation (Hassan et al., 2020). Branding is one strategy that may be used to boost a company's visibility and reputation while also promoting the programme and faculties it provides and gaining an advantage over rivals. However, in the past, businesses in the education sector, such as universities, did not place sufficient importance on brand recognition (Prakasam et al., 2019).

At one point, educational institutions paid a minimum amount of attention to branding for various reasons, including lower levels of competition and less need to construct a reputation (Harshani Perera, 2021; Melanthiou et al., 2017). Because students always go to public or private institutions as their first choice when looking to further their studies at a higher level, enrollment at educational institutions never poses a problem (Meens et al., 2018).

In addition, there are costs associated with branding, including the procurement of materials and payments made to advertising agencies (Drori, 2015). The university does not have any plans or provisions in place to handle branding issues with resources. Besides, successful branding requires a professional's support (Buono & Fortezza, 2017).

At the same time, the university is entirely focused on producing graduates in various specialised fields. The employability of graduates, partnerships between universities and industries, and the impact of research were not major concerns in the past (González-Romá et al., 2018; Pak et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2017). There is a widespread belief among university staff and administration that branding is a "self-lifting basket" activity that can lead pride to produce waves and cause authenticity to be lost (Pigden & Moore, 2020).

Others believe that because the institution is not a commercial concern, it does not have to compete with other organisations. According to Hassan et al., (2019), university administrations need to take steps to promote their respective institution brands. As a result, this viewpoint was taken. Research, partnership with industry, and other activities of a similar nature serve at the same time as a forerunner to a new era of universities that adopt a greater role in society and become a public concern (Abbas et al., 2021; Khan & Hemsley-Brown, 2021).

Nevertheless, there have been some significant shifts in the past few years. Activities related to branding are increasingly given a high priority at private educational institutions (Foroudi et al., 2020). The university is a private institution; therefore, its achievements, output, and effects should be communicated to the general public and all relevant stakeholders (Hannan, 2021b). In this regard, university faculty and staff must develop a work culture that has a significant impact. It works to change the unfavourable opinions that stakeholders and the general public have of universities' role in society.

Perceived brand quality

People have been taught to believe that only the top institutions can deliver an education of the highest quality due to the current rankings games among universities (Hannan, 2021a). According to Khoshtaria et al., (2020), a high-quality educational experience is directly related to the university's reputation. Therefore, one of the solutions is to hire reputable academicians in particular fields. Some educational institutions use and market their teaching staff as an element of brand-building and attractiveness strategies (Hannan, 2021b). A distinguished teaching staff member can hold students' attention and organise a stimulating and educational classroom session (Pinar et al., 2020) to preserve a better educational quality.

To improve the overall quality of education, universities need to evaluate their students' performance (Camilleri, 2019). Students' achievements offer irrefutable proof that their educational system successfully prepares them for the future. For instance, colleges and universities might have to revise their course offerings and make other modifications to boost the overall quality of education and accelerate the learning process (Y. Yusoff et al., 2019).

For the university to maintain its standing in the modern world, its instructional practices must be improved to provide timely and pertinent information to its students (Merchant et al., 2015). Another tactic that may enhance teaching methods is for educators to cultivate a cordial and professional connection with their students. It is often possible for students to improve their performance in both academics and extracurricular activities just by keeping strong relationships with their lecturers (Bano & Vasantha, 2019).

Implementing technological advances and providing amenities that are up to date on campus can improve the quality of education it offers. One example of this would be the implementation of digital learning (Camilleri, 2019). The use of technology can enable an educational experience that is both productive and pleasant.

In addition to the aspects discussed thus far, maintaining the institutions of higher learning in a healthy state is an additional step that may be taken to improve the overall quality of the educational experience (Nguyen et al., 2019). Always work to make improvements across the board at the university to maintain its position as the best. It is necessary to acquire and update new skills and information; capitalise on this opportunity by modifying and developing new programmes and classes to keep up with the changing nature of the world (Chaudhry et al., 2017).

Brand awareness
The degree to which students are familiar with a particular brand, product, or service is measured by "brand awareness". It is essential since it allows the universities to increase their marketing reach and communicate with new prospective students (Sulkowski et al., 2020). The level of competition is extremely high, and getting the attention of those who might become students is essential to the university's progress toward its goals. Students will immediately follow a brand on social media if they are already familiar with the products or services offered by that business and the brand itself (Tran et al., 2020). In addition, the public's perception of the university's reliability and expertise will indirectly improve if such a measure is taken (Foroudi et al., 2017).

A well-executed brand or product awareness plan helps to build loyalty, enabling the brand to grow a large customer base that is actively involved and, consequently, makes the business more sustainable (Rachmadhani et al., 2018). When the brand awareness approach capitalises on the university's capabilities, this may be an excellent way to interact with more people and build warm leads for the future. Investigating important topics to students can help educational institutions connect their brand messaging and marketing efforts centred on brand recognition (Dulek & Saydan, 2019).

Increasing brand recognition is a long-term aim for any higher education marketing campaign. Doing so will involve significant effort and resources from your marketing team. Nevertheless, according to the findings of a recent study, prospective students conduct research on higher education by consulting various internet sites at various phases of the process. The participation of currently enrolled students in various aspects of student marketing provides the institution with a more genuine voice across digital media (Tran et al., 2020).

Methodology
Design and Data
This quantitative study included a cross-sectional survey of private universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The rationale is that Kuala Lumpur is a well-known educational city in Malaysia. This study consists of measurements between three independent variables (brand image, perceived brand quality and brand awareness) towards intention to register.

This survey's data was collected utilising Google form apps to deliver online questions to voluntary respondents. This study was carried out between September and December of 2021. Only 90.67 per cent of the nearly 400 responses to this survey contained completed questionnaires that can be used for further analysis.

Data was distributed to first-semester students in private universities. Fresh students were asked because they are still new in the universities; hence sharing some stories about their university journey would be more interesting.
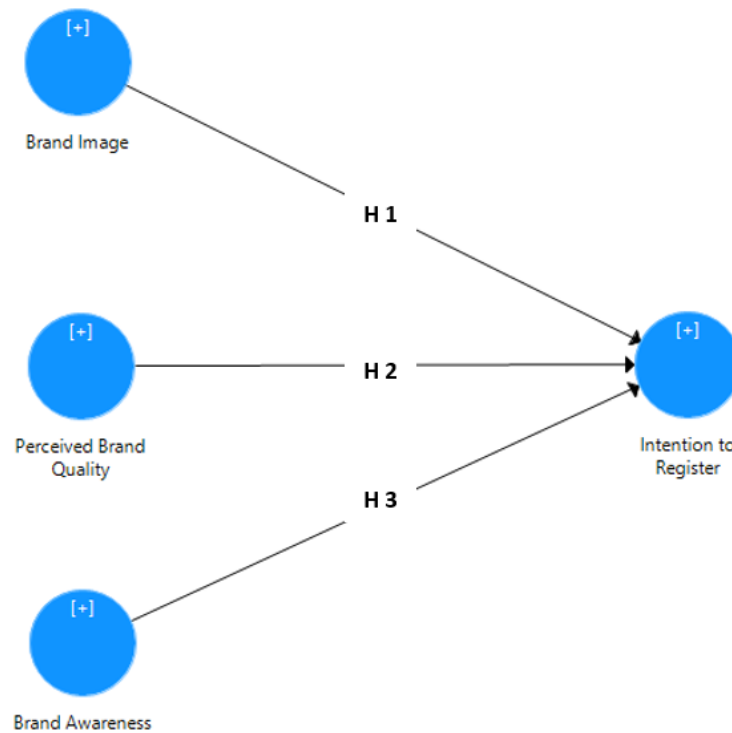
Figure 1: The research framework

This study was designed based on a review of the related literature and adapted from previous studies. Consequently, we merged questionnaires from (Hassan & Shamsudin, 2019) to quantify intention to register (ITR), brand awareness (Ali et al., 2021), and brand image (Lee et al., 2019), and perceived brand quality (Altaf et al., 2017). The instruments were distributed entirely in English. We utilised a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

The Structural Model Estimation

We used a "multivariate data analysis" method to look at all of the data. As a requirement for structural model analysis, this study used two main calculations: the outer and the inner models. The outer model estimation considers convergent validity, discriminant validity, and a composite reliability assessment based on SEM-PLS criteria. When the loading factor is greater than 0.70 and the average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.50, this means that the model is convergently valid (Hair et al., 2020). The construct is said to be discriminantly valid when the cross-loading value is higher than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2020). For the model to be reliable, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) must be higher than 0.70. In addition to outer model calculation, this study used the inner model test of structural model calculation.

This study assessed the structural model for collinearity, looked at the path coefficient, calculated the level of R-square (R2), estimated the effect size (f2), and checked the predictive relevance (Q2). The R2 shows how stable the model is based on the criteria of stable (0.67), moderate (0.33), and unstable (0.19). The f2 shows the size impact of the model, with small (0.02), medium (0.50), and large (1.0) being the most important (0.35). Also, the requirements to reach Q2 when Q2 is greater than 0 show that the model is useful for making predictions, and the same is true for Q2. We used SmartPLS apps (version 3.0) and structural equation modelling with partial least squares to find the significance of hypotheses at the level of 5%.

Findings

Four hundred questionnaires were distributed with a response rate of 90.67%. Higher rates were mainly due to the cooperation of student associations. The questionnaires were distributed during the first week of orientation week and managed by the seniors. As a result, most responses were in their first year of research and were predominated by female students (69.97 per cent). It can be seen from the table that the respondents to this question are still knowledgeable and competent in articulating their university selection process.

The structural (inner) model estimation

This research utilised PLS estimation to build a structural model by estimating the inner model for further analysis. The model passed the test for validity and dependability. This is designed to demonstrate the inter-construct linkages. All data were analysed with 500 bootstrap samples over 309 cases.

Table 1: Results of measurement (outer) model.

Construct	Items	Loading	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Intention to Register (ITR)	ITR1	0.760	0.815	0.834	0.703
	ITR2	0.840			
	ITR4	0.871			
	ITR5	0.825			
	ITR7	0.861			
	ITR8	0.871			
Brand Image (BI.)	BI3	0.849	0.802	0.831	0.773
	BI4	0.896			
	BI5	0.897			
	BI6	0.874			
Perceived Brand Quality	PBQ1	0.816	0.899	0.825	0.712
	PBQ2	0.836			
	PBQ3	0.830			
	PBQ4	0.864			
	PBQ5	0.872			
Brand Awareness (BA)	BA1	0.900	0.825	0.844	0.772
	BA2	0.712			
	BA3	0.925			
	BA4	0.932			
	BA5	0.907			

Table 2: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio

	Brand Awareness	Brand Image	Intention to Register	Perceived Brand Quality
Brand Awareness				
Brand Image	0.827			
Intention to Register	0.754	0.772		
Perceived Brand Quality	0.758	0.749	0.717	

This study also estimated discriminant validity, as suggested by Henseler et al. (2015), using the heterotrait-monotrait. The discriminant validity is achieved when the ratio is less than 0.90. As informed Table 2, it shows that the ratio for each construct ranges from 0.827 to 0.717, indicating confirming the discriminant validity

Hypothesis testing
Table 3 and Figure 2 provide information regarding the estimation of the hypothesis in this study using a significance threshold of 5%. Overall, this research supported all three hypotheses.

Table 3: Path coefficients and results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Measurements	Coefficient	T Statistics	P Values	Decisions
H1	Brand Awareness → Intention to Register	0.160	2.187	0.029	Accepted
H2	Brand Image → Intention to Register	0.639	11.243	0.000	Accepted
H3	Perceived Brand Quality → Intention to Register	0.428	4.877	0.000	Accepted

To be considered significant, the magnitude of path coefficients must exceed 0.1. (Hair et al., 2019). Table 3 indicates that all path coefficients in contextual constructs satisfy the condition in the structural model. In addition, the brand image influences the intention to register more than the perceived brand quality and brand awareness. This highlights the significance of the brand image underlying the decision-making that students make during their process of applications. This further demonstrates the importance of establishing brand image, as it may impact how future students make decisions.
To further examine the model's hypotheses, t-statistics are evaluated. As shown in Table 3, three of the hypotheses, namely brand image towards intention to register (H1), perceived brand quality towards intention to register (H2), and brand awareness towards intention to register (H3), were found strongly supported. The lack of branding in developing countries affects competitive pressures that have yet to reach the necessary critical mass (Molla and Licker, 2005).
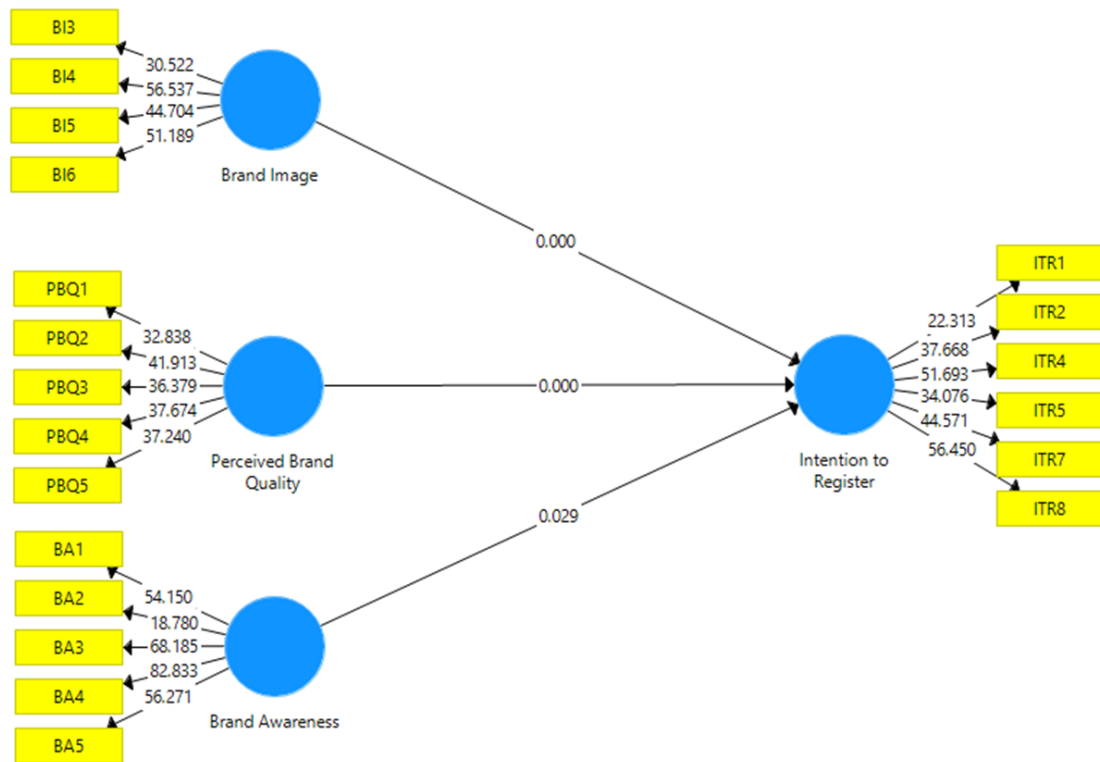
Figure 2: Structural model assessment results.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The main purpose of this study is to measure the impact of the brand on the intention to register. The results indicated that all three factors positively influenced the intention to register with brand image among the top compared to brand awareness and perceived brand quality. This finding contradicts the prior study by (G. Assefa & Stansbury, 2018; Keinänen et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2014). The brand image of a private university is crucial as students and parents look up high on the top brand image universities. The good brand image was always associated with good facilities and high-quality graduates. Each player will strive to capture future customers' intentions during the tough competition. Therefore, perceived brand quality brings additional advantages as the decision-making was sometimes biased towards their perception.

The result for brand awareness seems to parallel some recent past studies (Cattaneo et al., 2018; Turan & Kara, 2018; Zhu & Reeves, 2019). Brand awareness was found to be positively significant towards intentions to register.

The results revealed that private universities must prioritise brand image. Students seem to be looking forward more aggressively as compared to other constructs. Universities may need to create a positive image for the public. At the same time, it helps to promote some ambitions among the younger ones to register with the universities regarding decision-making.

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