

# **Developing an Integrated Process Model of Student Based Brand Equity in Higher Education Institutions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**

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## **Abstract**

*Due to exponential growth in the number of higher education institutions, competition among institutions for attracting sufficient number of students has also increased exponentially. In such a scenario, there has been paucity of marketing models that could better guide the senior management of higher education institutions on how to develop high positive brand equity for their respective institutions. This study presents a holistic integrated process model of students based brand equity in higher education institutions by reviewing extant theories of marketing such as Keller, and Aaker conceptualizations of customer brand equity, Expectation-Disconfirmation theory of Oliver and the brand relationship model of Esch, Tobias, Bernd and Patrick. The proposed model of students based brand equity developed in this study is a comprehensive model that will provide a guide map to the management of higher education institutions to effectively form high and positive students' based brand equity. Since brand equity positively affects students' admission intention, the proposed model thus guides universities management towards increasing the students' enrollment in long run. The study thus is a novel combination of theories from marketing and business domains which has not been previously covered in such a depth.*

**Keywords:** Brand Equity Sources, Students Expectations-Disconfirmation, Brand Relationship Model, SBBE.

## **Introduction**

The perceived risk associated with the purchase of a service as compared to physical good is very high. Due to the unique features of services such as intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability, consumers feel greater risk while making purchase decisions particularly for services compared with purchase decision for physical good.<sup>1</sup> The reason for the higher risk in service related purchase decision making is

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that it is very difficult to evaluate the quality of services in advance. Here brand equity plays key role and acts as risk reliever, giving consumer's greater confidence in their purchase decision making.<sup>2</sup> Although brand equity has been extensively researched in the context of physical products; less amount of research exists in service sector particularly in the higher education sector<sup>3</sup>. Being service organization, higher education provides an important context for researchers since the higher education institutions have become predominantly market oriented and students have become consumers<sup>4</sup>. Over the past 50 years, like most industries, the Higher Education (HE) sector has been equally impacted by globalization. In the past century enormous growth and expansion of higher education has been noted. In 1900, roughly 500,000 students were enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide, while by 2000, the number of tertiary students had grown to approximately 100 million people and it is believed that student number will reach 160 million by 2025<sup>5</sup>. Today universities are engaged in aggressive competition with one another for resources, rankings, reputation, staff and students<sup>6</sup>. Competition among universities to attract large number of students is increasing due to the increasing number of higher education institutions. Recently, with the auspices of the provincial government and patronage from HEC several universities in public and private sectors were established in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Now the emphasis of government is to establish one public sector university at every district level. That will put more pressure at public sector higher education institutions to differentiate themselves in order to enroll maximum numbers of students. Hence the higher education institutions should devote all its efforts to create strong brand and brand equity in order to differentiate its services from the rest of higher education institutions that will help students in choosing particular university and minimize the risk associated with selecting particular university.

Despite the recognition and importance of brand equity, there is a paucity of research on the particular nature of brand equity in higher education sector<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the extant available research has focused on this issue somehow narrowly by addressing very few aspects of students based brand equity (SBBE) such as students awareness of the higher education institutions and students image of the higher education institutions). Similarly, Amegbe, Hanu, Atunwey while investigating students based brand equity in higher education considered students university awareness, university image, students loyalty with university

and perceived quality of the HEI respectively. Recent researchers are however of the view that a holistic, actionable and multidimensional framework is missing that measure student based brand equity in higher education<sup>8</sup>. This study will take a holistic approach to measure brand equity in higher education institution by integrating various models and theories including Keller<sup>9</sup> and Aaker<sup>10</sup> models, expectation-disconfirmation theory of Oliver<sup>11</sup> and brand relationship model of Esch et al.<sup>12</sup>.

#### *SBBE Model Development for HEIs*

Earlier models of brand equity by Keller, and Aaker consider brand awareness, brand image and service quality as various sources of brand equity. However, brand relationship model of Esch et al.<sup>13</sup> specifically suggests that sources of brand equity in isolation cannot create brand equity. As they argue that this relationship is mediated by “brand relationship model” which consists of different factors including brand satisfaction, brand trust and brand love. It is also pertinent to mention that before these brand equity sources result in brand relationship model; their relationship is mediated by student’s expectation-disconfirmation. Further extant researchers have argued that for customer satisfaction, there must be certain pre-existing expectations (Expectation-Disconfirmation) and once these expectations are fulfilled, it then leads to satisfaction (Brand Relationship Model)<sup>14</sup>.

#### *Sources of Brand Equity*

Keller and the Aaker models of brand equity consider brand awareness, brand image and service quality as various sources of brand equity that result in students’ expectation. Brand awareness is enhanced through promotional activities carried out by companies to promote their offerings. It is considered as the most effective and easiest way to make company offerings recognizable and differentiated. Consumers make their purchase decision quickly if they are familiar with the brand. As researchers have stated, advertisement provides confidence to the customers in their purchase decision making as it enhances their confidence and relive the risk associated with company offerings<sup>15</sup>. Similarly some scholars have studied the effect of brand service quality on customer satisfaction<sup>16</sup>. The study result shows that service quality has positive effect on customer satisfaction in such manner that the service quality first frames certain expectations and if these expectations

are exceeded by consumer experience, it then result in consumer satisfaction. The other brand equity source that strongly influences customers' expectations is brand image. Brand image is key driver towards buyers' expectation<sup>17</sup>. It motivates customers to have more confidence on the particular brand having good brand image. Brand image helps customers in their selection process as it will reduce the risk associated with their purchase decision making and increase their confidence on particular brand.

In higher education institutions, brand awareness is enhanced through marketing activities informing all stakeholders about course offerings and presenting a positive image<sup>18</sup>. Alongside the marketing activities by university, the expectations of perspective students are also influenced by Word of Mouth (WOM) of the current and graduated students as they share their experience<sup>19</sup>. The HEIs use of promotion and its portrayed message can influence the image perceived by its receivers<sup>20</sup>. The university image is defined as the combination of overall beliefs that students have towards their universities<sup>21</sup>. In a study on university image, it was find out that in order to attract potential students, universities need to develop unique image in order to gain competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market<sup>22</sup>. To these authors, this image is one of the main influences in student's willingness to apply for enrollment. The brand image of higher education institutions has deeply influenced student inclination to enroll in a given institution<sup>23</sup>. Similarly another important source of brand equity that influences the expectations of perspective students is the quality of services that university offers to their students. In the same vein, the university academics and administrative quality alongside standardized learning environment such as intellectual faculty, standardized facilities of learning and infrastructure result in higher expectation of students<sup>24</sup>. The maintenance of other essentials of quality service in education i.e. well managed and updated libraries, security systems, medical facilities, class decoration and facilitation with multimedia and sitting arrangements along with cooperation by administrative staff's play a vital role in educational support and development<sup>25</sup>. Student' perception about the quality of education has been found to be closely aligned with students' expectations and values about their program of study<sup>26</sup>.

*Students Expectation-Disconfirmation*

Expectations are the customer's significant beliefs about the product performance before the customer actual experience that are formed by company brand awareness activities, or brand image of the company. These expectations of customer work as a standard or baseline against which the actual experience of customer with the product and service is compared<sup>27</sup>. Further earlier researchers have argued that in order to get customer satisfaction, there must be certain customer expectations against which actual experience of customer will be compared and if actual experience of customer exceeds customers' expectations, then it will results in customer satisfaction otherwise dissatisfaction<sup>28</sup>. Brand experience is the actual buying behavior of customers. On the basis of brand experience, one can predict about customer satisfaction<sup>29</sup>. It has been found that if the experience of the customer with the product and service exceeds their expectations, it results in customer satisfaction. However, if the performance of product or service fail short of customer expectations, negative disconfirmation occurs that leads towards customer dissatisfaction<sup>30</sup>. In this case, customer satisfaction has been defined as an overall conclusion that customer derives after actual experience which is based on the difference between preceding expectation and the actual performance perceived after consumption<sup>31</sup>. Through positive experience with the brand, customers incline to engender positive emotional and cognitive state which eventually leads to psychological satisfaction with that brand<sup>32</sup>.

*Brand Relationship Model*

Customer satisfaction is the consumer's reaction to the evaluation of the perceived incongruity between preceding expectations and the actual performance of the product as observed after its consumption<sup>33</sup>. When the performance of the product and services meet the customers' expectation, it results in customers' satisfaction. In the context of higher education, students' satisfaction can be defined as a short-term attitude resulting from an evaluation of students' educational experience, services and facilities. Student satisfaction refers to the favorability of a student's subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education<sup>34</sup>. Prior study finds a significant positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer trust on the product<sup>35</sup>.

As stated by Schau, Muniz and Arnould<sup>36</sup>, brand trust is the confidence of customer on certain brand to perform its stated function. Brand trust is more important in relation to the product and services carrying high risk purchase decision where the situation is uncertain; there is information irregularity and fear of opportunism. Here brand trust plays a key role in relieving the risk associated with the product and services and giving customer confidence in their purchase decision making<sup>37</sup>. In the educational sector, students' trust may be understood as the students' confidence in the university's integrity and reliability. Students' trust is developed through personal experiences with the educational institution. The students' trust may be understood as their confidence in its integrity and reliability, and it is based on the personal experiences of students with faculty members<sup>38</sup>. Previous studies show that brand trust is crucial in the development of customer emotional attachment to the brand and is the major factor that enhances the performance of the product<sup>39</sup>. Previous studies also evidence that brand satisfaction develops brand love and also a positive relationship exists between brand trust and brand attachment<sup>40</sup>. This statement is supported by Tsiotsou who asserts that customer trust has positive influence on customer emotional attachment towards the brand<sup>41</sup>. This emotional attachment is sometimes referred to as brand love<sup>42</sup>. This is supported by Moussa who contends that brand attachment and brand love are "the two facets of the same single penny"<sup>43</sup>. The customer emotional attachment with certain brand is a passionate connection with feelings deep connected, love and enthusiasm<sup>44</sup>. This emotional attachment of customer with the brand leads towards the customer psychological attachment with the brand that is referred to as brand loyalty. As Pedeliento et al. expressed that brand attachment is positively related to brand loyalty and also brand love leads towards the brand loyalty<sup>45</sup>.

#### *Brand Loyalty*

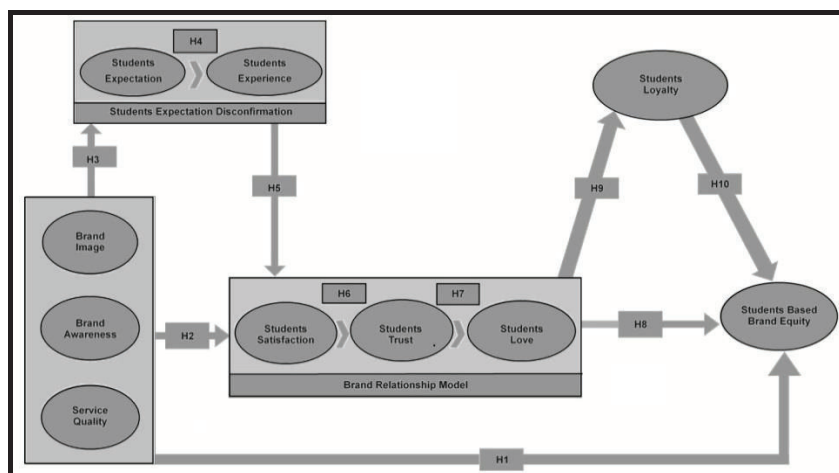
As earlier stated, loyalty towards a brand is expressed as deeply held commitment to prefer certain brand and to recommend it to others. Similarly, according to Giddens and Hofmann, brand loyalty is the customer psychological state of mind when customer is ready to pay premium price for particular brand and recommend it to others<sup>46</sup>. In the context of higher education, students loyalty provides competitive advantage to higher education institutions and it is considered as a key factor as it helps in retention of existing students and compel them to get

enroll back in future<sup>47</sup>. In the study conducted by Mohd, it was found that brand loyalty has the greatest contribution to the development of brand equity. Similarly there has been empirical support which evidences that both brand associations and brand loyalty had a significant effect on brand equity<sup>48</sup>.

### *Student-Based Brand Equity*

Brand equity is defined as an “added value with which brand endows a product”<sup>49</sup>. Brand equity differentiates the firms from others in the market place. Moreover with the increase in tuition fees in public sector higher education institutions, students consider themselves as customers of higher education institution and they expect value of their money from these institutions. It has been found that students increasingly regard themselves as customers due to changes in funding systems that rely heavily on tuition fees across the world<sup>50</sup>. The decision related to institution selection therefore involves higher perceived risk due to the difficulty associated with evaluation before actual purchase<sup>51</sup>. It is brand equity that plays key role in relieving the risk associated with the university selection. WISAL 17 APRIL 2019

### **Conceptual Framework**



### *Proposed Hypotheses*

H1: Brand equity sources have positive impact on students based brand equity.



H2: Brand equity sources have positive impact on brand relationship model.

H3: Brand equity sources have positive impact on student's expectation disconfirmation.

H4: Positive relationship exists between student's expectation and positive student's experience.

H5: Students experience with university has positive effect on student satisfaction.

H6: Student's satisfaction with university has positive effect on student's trust on universities.

H7: Students trust on university has positive effect on students brand love.

H8: Students brand love has a positive effect on students based brand equity.

H9: Students brand love has a positive effect on student's loyalty.

H10: Students loyalty has a positive effect on students based brand equity.

#### *Contribution of the Study*

The study presents a holistic model of students based brand equity in HEIs which has earlier been lacking. The model developed thus provides both theoretical and practical implications.

#### *Theoretical Contribution*

Theoretically, the study attempts to model students based brand equity in HEIs using a composite of various marketing theories including students-expectation disconfirmation theory, Aaker and Keller models of brand equity as well as brand relationship model. Earlier researchers have conventionally used the two or four variables of the Aaker and Keller models respectively. However, the current study develops a holistic model of students based brand equity incorporating multiple perspectives mentioned earlier. Thus, the newly developed model of students based brand equity will more deeply study the students based brand equity and will thus provide a more clear view of the students based brand equity. The model thus developed really contributes to the body of knowledge on students based brand equity which is a new phenomenon in marketing literature.



*Managerial Contribution*

Practically, the holistic model of the study will provide a guiding map to the senior management of higher education institutions on how to develop as well as better manage the students based brand equity of their respective institution. Currently, there has been exponential growth in the number of universities such that survival of each institution has become the top most priority. Each university competes for attracting large number of students. Research states that positive equity of a university significantly affects the students admission seeking behavior, however, the two students based brand equity models of Keller and Aaker which are being used are quite conventional and very narrow in scope which incorporates only two variable (University Image, and University Awareness) and four variables (University Image, University Awareness, Students Loyalty, and Students perceived quality of university) respectively. Therefore, this study will provide a comprehensive view of students based brand equity and hence will provide a better guideline about how to increase the equity of their institutions and hence to attract greater number of students.

*Conclusion and Future Recommendations*

Taking inspiration from HEC Pakistan Vision 2025 and realizing the role of tertiary education in economic development of the country, higher education commission has developed HEC Vision 2025. Number of public sector universities will be increased from existing 99 in 2015 to 195 by establishing 96 new universities by 2025. Out of these, 72 new public sector universities will be established in less served areas. In recent times, with the support of higher education commission Pakistan and the autonomy of provinces, many public and private universities were established in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and there exists at least one public sector university at district level. With the increase in number of public sector universities; there will be huge competition among public sector universities to attract quality number of students. Higher education needs to distinguish their services in order to gain competitive advantage through building students based brand equity. Although in previous studies many attempts have been made to measure students based brand equity by using Keller and Aaker models of customer based brand equity in higher education institutions. These models however seem to be very narrow in the scope as Aaker and the Keller models of brand equity provides only few sources of brand equity that results in students based

brand equity. Recent researchers are however of the view that a holistic, actionable and multidimensional framework is missing that measure student based brand equity in higher education. This study proposed a holistic and comprehensive model of students based brand equity in HEIs by integrating various theories and models including models of Keller, Aaker, expectation-disconfirmation theory, and brand relationship model. The proposed model can be used as a guiding frame for developing students based brand equity in higher education from students' perspective in a more holistic way which was missing in the previous studies. As this study is more of a conceptual nature in which effort is made to develop a new model of students based brand equity in higher education, hence future research should empirically test this model in the higher education. This will give additional insight as to which of the model factors is more influential in developing students based brand equity.

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