

Dilemma of University Selection for the Students of Baltistan Region, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The aim of this paper is to highlight the factors that tend to influence students' choice in the remote region of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan. No research into this very important aspect of higher education has been carried out in the region. The study provides insight into branding issues for universities in Gilgit-Baltistan and is of utmost importance for policy making by higher education institutions.

Methodology: A quantitative method with a deductive approach was used. The sample was drawn through a stratified sampling technique. The population was partitioned into two strata; the students who were enrolled in post-graduate programs and the students who were enrolled in under-graduate programs, and respondents were selected from each stratum randomly while the sample size of this study was (n=110) respondents.

Findings: Findings revealed that the choice of a university brand is influenced by teachers, parents, campus visits, university representatives, safety, campus facilities, and closeness to home.

Conclusion: The results of this study may also help universities to understand the significant factors of university selection. This study has pertinent implications for higher education management. Higher educational institutions should focus on those attributes that the students consider the most to attract more suitable students so that they can produce the best graduates and gain a positive image in the educational market of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Keywords: University Choice Factors, Baltistan Region, Higher Education Challenges, University Brand.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students from the Pakistani region of Baluchistan generally face difficulties in choosing universities and career paths. Due to the limited availability of higher education opportunities in the region, students from the region frequently travel to the other provinces of Pakistan to pursue higher education. They face the

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risk of costly and lengthy travel and subsistence expenses. Many factors influence the perception of universities and university life, such as reputation and accreditation, quality of teaching, employability and facilities, safety and employment opportunities (Qasim et. at., 2020; Goel, Rajani, 2025; Vantzou, 2024; Hai et al., 2023). Students frequently select universities because of their diversity, quality and cost, and this process takes a lot of time and energy. Due to the lack of career opportunities in schools and universities in the region, potential students may have little or no knowledge of their future educational needs and university choices. It is of the utmost importance to know how potential university students choose their universities, and what factors help them to do so. The aim of this study was therefore to examine the main factors or criteria that were considered by the students in the Baltistan region when they were applying to higher education institutions. It is important to know how potential students make their choices when choosing a higher education institution.

The emergence of educational marketing took place during the 1980s in the United States and the United Kingdom. Research in educational branding is inadequate and an evolving area in Pakistan, and this situation is encouraging researchers to carry out research in this field (Sabir et. al., 2013). In the current situation, competition between higher education institutions is growing rapidly, with both public and private universities treating students as prospects and seeking to attract the best students in order to attract and retain the best scholars and to gain a positive image and a higher ranking in society. No research is known to date on the management of the university brand in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan.

The aim of this descriptive research study is also to describe some of the factors that are considered by currently enrolled students in the Gilgit Baltistan region when choosing a higher education institution, and to complement the limited research on university branding. In their study Shah, Nair and Bennett, (2013), identified key factors influencing student choice of university as the potential for greater engagement with teachers and peers, the possibility of carrying out practical industrial experience, the professional knowledge of teachers and the possibility of dialogue in the classroom and of building links with industry as well as the small class sizes as important factors. The Shah and Brown study (cited in Bennett, 2013) suggests that the three main factors in the ranking of universities are: teaching staff; course quality; and reputation. Previous studies on branding show that it is under-reported and is a new field of research (Tas & Ergin, 2012). Understanding the factors that make universities attractive will help universities strengthen their reputation on the market. According to Keller (1993), trademarks are expressive characteristics which distinguish a product or service from its competitors. Some studies on persuasion in relation to university choice have identified several motivational factors. These factors include the reputation of the university, the quality of the programs offered, the brand image of the institution, the state of the art facilities, the location of the institution, the level of tuition fees, relations and networks with stakeholders, and visibility of the university through communication (Iqbal, Rasli and Hassan, 2012; Mupemhi, 2013; Shah et al., 2013).

Gray et al. (as cited in Tas & Ergin, 2012) conducted a study on the branding of universities in Asian countries, argued that university branding is a complex task and traditional branding techniques are inadequate. The research objectives of the paper are to describe the factors that motivate students to choose a higher education institution, to identify the relationship between parental socioeconomic conditions and university choice, and to identify whether economic opportunities influence student choice. The main questions to be addressed by the research are: what factors do prospective students consider when deciding on a university? and, Is there a relationship between the socio-economic status of parents and the universities they consider for their children? Such research could provide insight into factors that are considered influential in the decision-making process of a higher education institution. The research findings can be used to support those who wish to develop a successful brand of education in Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings of this study will help universities in Gilgit-Baltistan to identify key student motivation factors in their choice of higher education institution, in order to strengthen and support their institutions by incorporating these important factors. The research findings will contribute to knowledge on the issue of branding of universities. This will enable university marketing managers to

gain a sustainable competitive advantage over their competitors. Moreover, the results can help parents and advisors understand the important factors in university choice and help them to choose the most suitable university for their students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as any name, sign, symbol, design, term, or combination thereof, which gives identity to a good or service and distinguishes it from other goods or services (Keller, 2013). David Aaker proposes in his book “Building a Strong Brand” that the brand is a “mental box”, and that it is about the images, feelings and thoughts that are emotionally attached to the brand in the consumer's memory (1996). Studies have identified a number of factors and attributes related to the order of precedence that influence students' choice of university. There are many reasons to investigate factors influencing student decision-making. Knowing these factors helps the institution to understand the reasons for choosing one institution over another, and in turn helps it to develop effective marketing strategies. This understanding of factors can also help institutions to identify student expectations and to develop effective strategies to improve student confidence, satisfaction and value-added (Shah et al., 2013).

Understanding these persuasion factors or attributes will help universities to strengthen their brand reputation on the market. According to Keller (1993), brand attributes are descriptive characteristics which characterize a product or service. The recruitment and attraction of the brightest university students require more effective and innovative marketing practices and for this purpose, universities focus on educational branding (Tas & Ergin, 2012). Public and private university prospects think through a wide range of measures when it comes to the choice of colleges/universities to study. However, the genuine behavior for the admission might not provide a direct reflection of the significance they give to certain selection criteria (Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012). Influencing factors such as the possibility of greater interaction with peers and teaching staff, current market knowledge of teaching staff, the possibility of gaining practical industry knowledge and experience and the small student-to-teacher ratio were cited as key factors in students' decision to study in private higher educational institutes (Shah, Nair and Bennett, 2013). Many other factors are also relevant, such as costs (Juhaidi, Fuady, et. al., 2024), reputation and quality of education, employability and quality of facilities (Qasim et. al., 2020). Other factors influencing the outcome are culture and security (Goel et. al., 2024), institution location, cleanliness (Vantz, 2024), programs offered, response time and staff support (Funeka et. al., 2024), and recruitment advice (Hai et al., 2023). The author, Ming, (2010) identified some of the factors that make students choose a particular higher education institution as independent variables that influence their choice of the institution, are the programs offered, the institution's reputation, the facilities, the fees, the availability of scholarships, future job opportunities, the institution's representatives and the visits by students to the institution.

Gatfield, Barker and Graham (1999) identified the same factors as those considered important by international students when choosing a university: quality of teaching, resources, campus life and leadership. In his study, Mazzarola, (1998), suggested that factors that are likely to be the basis for the success of institutions, such as resources, coherence and image, are important predictors of market success. In addition, Gray, Shyan and Llanes (2003) identified five main factors for brand differentiation: the learning environment of universities (i.e., Excellent staff, facilities on campus, research resources), the reputation of the institution (i.e., brand name, success and quality of the university), the career prospects of graduates (i.e., employability, income and recognition by employers), and the integration of cultures (i.e., freedom of religion, diversity of cultures) as the main dimensions of brand positioning for higher education institutions. Price, Matzrof, Smith and Agahi (2003) found that the facilities provided on the premises have a significant influence on student choice. These studies focused on identifying factors that help to market and promote the brand name to attract more students. According to Sharma, Rao and Popli (2014), brands play an important role in the choice of business schools and business leaders need to be aware of the varying effects of brands on brand reputation and importance in the minds of stakeholders.

2.1 *Significance of the Study*

The research findings of this study can be used to support those who want to develop successful brands of education in Gilgit-Baltistan. The findings of this study will help universities in Gilgit-Baltistan identify the key factors that motivate students to choose higher education institutions, so that they can strengthen and support their institutions by incorporating these important factors. Research findings will contribute to knowledge on the topic of branding of universities. This will allow university marketing managers to gain a sustainable competitive edge over their competitors. In addition, the results may help parents and advisors to understand the important factors in university choice and to help them choose the most appropriate university for their child. This study has relevant implications for the management of higher education. Higher education institutions should focus on those attributes that students consider most relevant to attract more eligible students in order to produce the best graduates and to have a positive image in the Gilgit-Baltistan education market.

2.2 *Study Objectives*

The research objectives of the paper are to describe the factors that motivate students to choose a higher education institution, to identify the relationship between socio-economic background and university choice and to determine whether economic opportunities influence student decision-making. The main questions to be addressed by the survey are: what factors do potential students consider when deciding on a university? And, Is there a relationship between parents' socioeconomic status and the universities they consider for their children? The purpose of this study was therefore to examine the main criteria or factors that are taken into account by students in the Baltistan region when applying to universities. Understanding the decision-making process that prospective students use when choosing a university is crucial. This descriptive research study also aims to complement the limited literature on university branding by describing some of the factors that are taken into account by current students in the Gilgit-Baltistan region when choosing a higher education institution.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Thousands of students pass their inter-level education from a number of educational institutions in Gilgit-Baltistan every year. In Pakistan, students who have completed 12 years of school, meet the minimum requirements for admission to a university. This study was conducted using a quantitative research approach with descriptive techniques. The respondents were students in their first year at the Skardu campus of Karakorum International University. A structured questionnaire was adopted to collect the basic data from respondents. The population for this study was therefore composed of students who had completed secondary school. Respondents to this survey included first year students of undergraduate and postgraduate levels at the Skardu campus of Karakorum International University.

The sample was taken using a stratified sampling technique. The population was divided into two groups; postgraduate students and non-graduate students, and sample unit was randomly selected from each group, while the sample size in this study was 110. At universities, 73% and 27% of students are enrolled at both undergraduate and postgraduate level respectively. Similarly, 63% and 37% of the respondents were male and female respectively. A chi-square goodness of fit shows ($X^2=2.531$, $df=1$, $p>.05$) that the composition of two strata in our sample does not differ significantly from the hypothesized values that were supplied for this study, and also for the gender the result of chi-square fit ($X^2=0.209$, $df=1$, $p>.05$) showed that the sample was representative of the population.

4. RESULTS

A total of 110 questionnaires were distributed to students at the KIU Skardu campus. Of these, 96 respondents completed and returned a questionnaire. So, the response rate was 87%. The Statistical Programme for the Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0) has been used for the preparation and analysis of the data. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to determine the normality of the data and it was found that the data were not normal, therefore non-parametric tests were used to analyze the data.

Table 1 shows that of the 96 respondents, 65% were male and 33% were female students. The last degree percentage was recalled by the respondents. The respondents' average score on their most recent academic degree was 59%. On average, respondents travel 12 kilometers to get to the university campus, according to data collected from them about the distance between their homes and the campus. When asked about their parents' educational backgrounds, the respondents' mothers and fathers both had less than a high school diploma (27% and 45%, respectively), according to the data collected. When asked about their parents' occupations, the majority of mothers were unemployed, while the majority of fathers were ordinary government employees. Findings from the questions, "Is there any relationship between the socio-economic status of the parents and the college or university consideration by the students?" There is no such relationship between these variables.

Table 1: *Demographic information of respondents*

	Male (%)	Female (%)	Other information
Gender of respondents	65	33	
Last degree %			59%
Distance from home to univeristy			12KM
Education of Parents			Less than high school
Occupation of Father			Ordinary government employee

Table 2: *Pearson Chi-Square Crosstab Test among education and occupation of parents*

	Mothers' education	Fathers' education	Mothers' occupation	Fathers' occupation
Chi-square	25.714	25.279	23.743	39.026
df	30	30	24	36
Sig.	0.69	0.711	0.476	0.335

Referring to Table 2, a chi-square crosstab analysis shows that no statistical relationship exists between educational and occupational background of parents and choosing a university by their children ($X^2 = 25.714$, $df=30$, $p>.05$), ($X^2 = 25.279$, $df=30$, $p>.05$), and ($X^2 = 39.062$, $df=36$, $p>.05$), ($X^2 = 23.743$, $df=24$, $p>.05$).

Responding to questions on values and objectives, the findings showed that 84% of students said that they already thought about pursuing a university degree in their family after finishing secondary school. The majority of those surveyed, 38.9% began considering going to univeristy after completing their higher secondary education.

When asked if they wanted to pursue higher education, 74% of respondents said "yes," compared to just 6% who said "no," and the remaining respondents said they were not sure. A university education is a valued goal for the majority of respondents (74 %) who want to continue their education, whereas obtaining just a degree was the primary goal for the remaining respondents. "What is the impact of economic opportunities on students' program choice?". Based on the answers to this question, the majority of students (58 %) believed that the economy and their future employment prospects had an impact on their program choice.

Students with different programs and future employment opportunities differed significantly, according to a chi-square crosstab analysis ($X^2 = 14.190$, $df=5$, $p<.05$). The Department of Educational Development accounted for 77% of respondents who said that economic opportunities influenced their program choice, followed by Master of Business Administration (71%) and Bachelor of Business Administration (67%) and BS-Computer Sciences (33%). In order to give these students market-oriented knowledge and maximize their satisfaction, these departments ought to have more connections with the market.

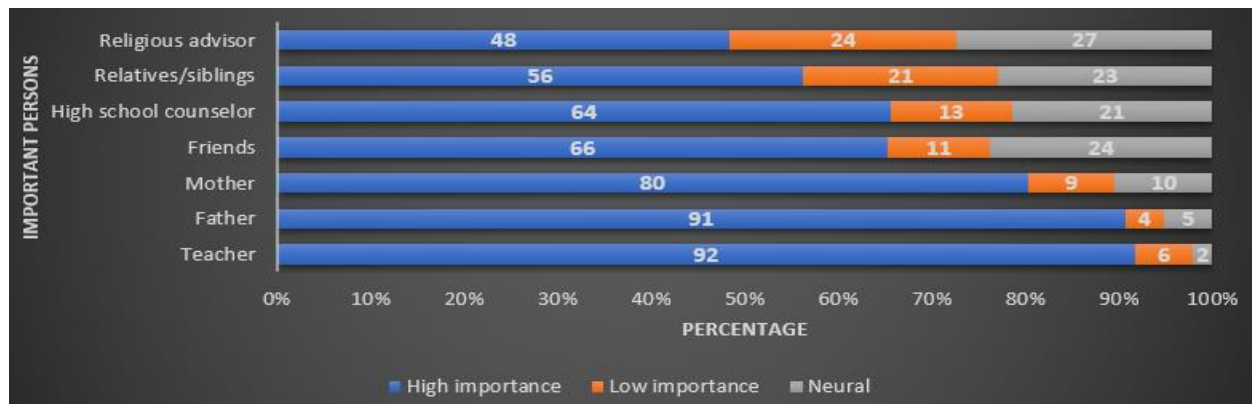


Figure 01: *Important persons*

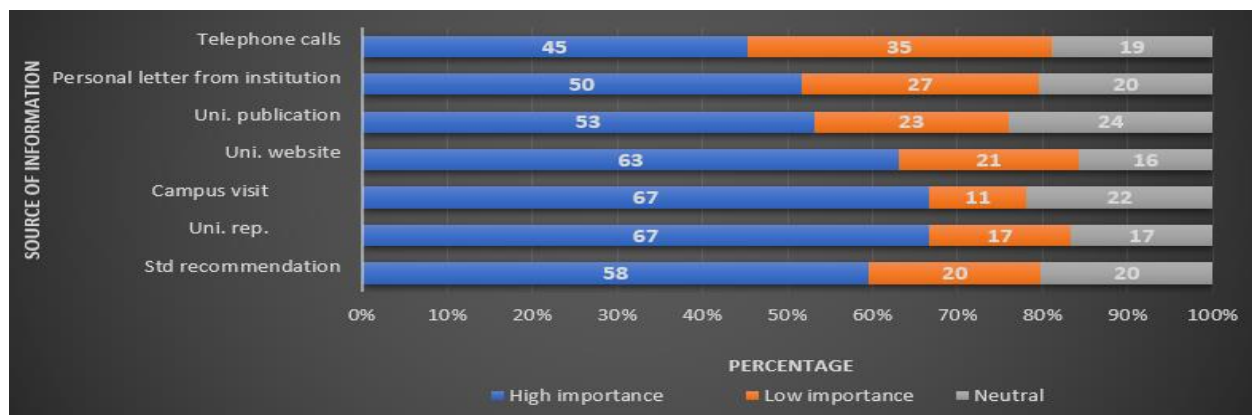


Figure 02: *Sources of information*

According to Figures 1 and 2, students ranked teachers (92 percent), fathers (91 percent), and mothers (80 percent) as the most important people while they ranked visits to campus (67 percent), university representatives (67 %), and recommendations from previous students (58 %) as information sources.

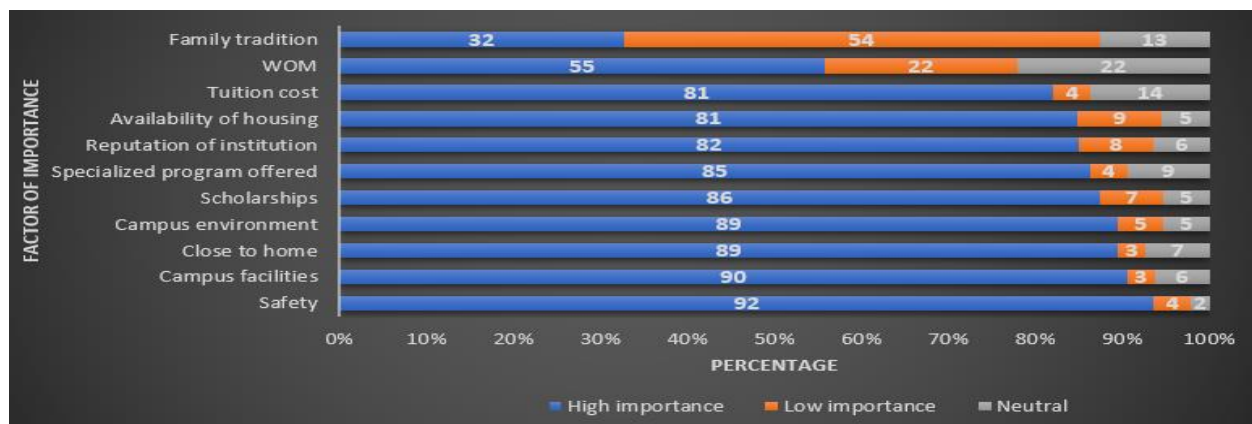


Figure 03: *Influencing factors for university choice*

According to Figure 3, the most significant factors influencing a student's decision to attend a university are: safety (92 %), campus amenities (90 %), campus environment and proximity to home (89 %), scholarships (86 %), specialized programs offered (85 %), institution reputation (82 %), housing availability, and tuition (81%).

According to a chi-square analysis, there was a significant difference between male and female respondents regarding important people, information sources, and other factors that influence their choice of university: mother (male 71% and female 97%), religious advisor (male 39% and female 69%), and university reputation (male 77% and female 100 %). There was an insignificant difference between male and female respondents regarding teachers (male 89 % and female 97 %), fathers (male 57 % and female 73 %), university websites (male 57 % and female 73 %), recommendations from former students (male 63 % and female 73 %), proximity to home (male 87 % and female 94 %), campus facilities (male 86 % and female 100 %), safety (male 90 % and female 100 %), campus environment (male 86 % and female 97 %), specialized programs offered (male 82 % and female 94 %), housing availability (male 88 % and female 79 %), and tuition fees (male 84 % and female 79 %). The majority of female students consult their mothers, religious advisors, and show concern about the university's reputation when choosing a university for their further education. As a result, the university administration should pay particular attention to these factors in order to draw in more qualified female students, while the other factors are equally important for both male and female students.

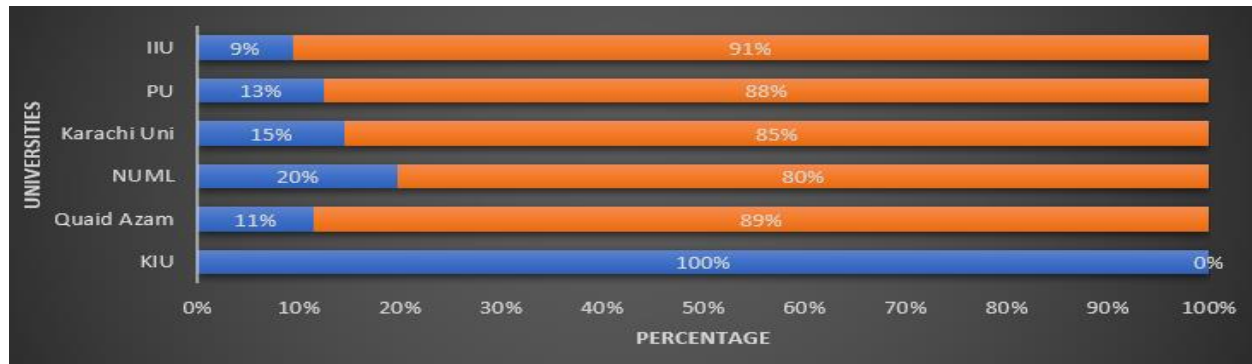


Figure 04: *Universities applied for admission*

The majority of students reported considering and applying to only two or three universities, according to Figure 4: Karachi University (KU), National University of Modern Languages (NUML), and Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU). Consequently, these universities have become the most promising rivals of the Baltistan region's universities.

The majority of students reported that they were unable to attend their first-choice university because of factors like "too far distance from home (73 %)," "cost factor (21 %)," and "GPA low (5 %)," as illustrated in Figure 5.



Figure 05: *Reasons for not attending first choice university*

According to the findings, students in the Baltistan region do not want to be admitted too far from their homes in order to be safe and to keep the cost of their higher education to a minimum. It is also dangerous due to road conditions and expensive for them to travel to other cities in the country. It also demonstrates that the majority of students did not initially choose Karakoram International University (Skardu Campus); instead, they were forced to enroll in their hometown due to financial and geographic constraints.

When asked, "How do they feel now about their choice?" the majority of students (47 %) said they were completely happy with their selection, with only 12% expressed dissatisfaction. Additionally, 41% of students said they were feeling good about their university choice.

5. DISCUSSION

A quantitative method was employed to investigate the main factors that first-year students at Karakoram International University, Skardu Campus, took into account when making their university selections. Findings indicate that when students are choosing a higher education institution, their parents and teachers have the greatest influence. It was discovered that the main sources of information and persuasive factors were the university's website, campus visits, and reputation. The students were also influenced by the recommendations of former students of a university. The respondents also ranked proximity to home, the availability of scholarships, the campus environment, campus facilities, campus safety, and the specialized programs offered as important considerations when making their decision. Marketing plans need to be developed to highlight the aspects of the school that students value. In their individual investigations, other researchers like Qasim et. al., (2020), Goel, Rajani, (2025), Vantzou, (2024), Hai et. al., (2023), Shah et. al. (2013a), Mupemhi (2013), and Iqbal et al. (2012) also reported comparable results. The study's unique factors, however, are the campus environment, safety, and teachers, who fall under the category of influential people. Patton (2000) also discovered that word-of-mouth was the most significant factor in choosing a university, which was followed by other related factors like campus amenities, courses offered, distance, and fee ratios. Similarly, Shahid, Shafique, and Bodla (2012) found that word-of-mouth was the most important factor when choosing a university, along with the university environment and social conditions, which are also the foundation of positive word-of-mouth. International students differ from domestic students in seven areas, according to studies on their university preferences: on-campus housing, family recommendations, academic and faculty reputation, involvement in intercollegiate athletics, printed materials or videos, and need-based financial aid (Alfattal, 2017).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the finding of this research, universities nationwide may need to consider some important implications, particularly for those that offer higher education services. The findings suggest that parents and teachers have the greatest influence over students' choices of higher education institutions. Therefore, it is advised that in order to obtain and preserve a competitive edge over rivals, universities should emphasize parents and teachers in addition to other crucial characteristics in their marketing campaigns. It is also recommended that university administration handle branding as a strategic issue and that, in order to improve the university's reputation among students, an organization-wide strategy for providing high-quality services is required. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used at a higher level to conduct more extensive research. The study could be expanded, for example, by calculating the consumer-based brand equity model, which could be utilized to enhance positioning and university brand perception.

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Conflict of Interest

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