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Research Article

Brand Equity and Its Influence on Tertiary Enrollment: A Case of a Private Higher Education Institution in Cebu, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Evidence on the relationship between different dimensions of brand equity and students' enrollment decisions when considering private higher education institutions in the Philippines is still limited. This study analyzed brand equity and its perceived effects on the enrollment decisions of first-year students in a private higher education institution in Cebu, Philippines. The study used Aaker's five-dimensional model which consists of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty and proprietary brand assets. The study utilized a descriptive correlational design among 634 students of five colleges during A.Y. 2023–2024. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Spearman's rank order correlation and one-way ANOVA. Overall brand equity was rated as almost always achieved (M = 3.287) with proprietary brand assets being the highest rated and brand associations and brand loyalty the lowest. The strongest dimension-level relationships with perceived enrollment influence were perceived quality (ρ =.639) and brand loyalty (ρ =.635). Overall brand equity was strongly and significantly related to its perceived impact on enrollment (ρ =.781, p <.001). Selected dimensions varied significantly across colleges. The results indicate that private higher education institutions may capitalize on their established brand strengths and enhance perceived quality, meaningful brand associations and brand loyalty to support more differentiated and evidence based pre-enrollment strategies. Overall, the study suggests that to successfully build brand equity for enrollment, the institution must go beyond familiarity to the qualities, meanings, and attachments students have to the institution. This pattern is summarized in the proposed Maintain–Attain–Sustain Brand Equity Framework.

Keywords*: Brand Equity, College Choice, Enrollment Decision, Higher Education Marketing, Perceived Quality, Philippines, Private Higher Education*

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Introduction

In the Philippines, private higher education institutions (HEIs) are functioning in a highly competitive environment where learners have many schools to choose from. There are many institutions with similar academic programs, learning arrangements and tuition rates making it difficult for one school to stand out from another. This has heightened the importance of the institution's reputation with students in selecting where to enroll. Institutional branding has proved to be effective in shaping perception and decision of students on higher education institutions (Nofrizal et al., 2024; Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024). Social media has also played an important role in this process, helping institutions to communicate their strengths and build their credibility, and also providing information that students can use to compare their options (Perera et al., 2023). Consequently, when students are thinking about where to go to school, the institution's brand can influence their ideas about its identity, quality, and value compared to other schools.

Brand equity is the additional value that a brand brings to a product or service. Aaker (1991) describes it as a set of assets and liabilities associated with a brand, its name and its symbols that add or subtract value to the product or service being offered. He categorized these into five dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets. Other approaches have been developed to measure the brand equity, in particular the customer-based brand equity model of Keller (1993) and the consumer-based measures suggested by Yoo et al. (2000). Aaker's model has been chosen for this study because it makes it possible to study the dimensions separately, but also to get a general view of the brand equity, which is useful to study how students perceive a higher education institution. Recent studies indicate that awareness, image or associations, perceived quality, and loyalty continue to be regarded as important components of university brand equity (Cano-Lanza et al., 2025; Tri, 2023). Research also shows that students don't form an opinion of a university on the basis of one element of the brand. Conversely, they evaluate the institution in terms of their perception of several brand dimensions as a whole (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021). Thus, the analysis of these dimensions can help the institutions to detect the strengths of their current brand positioning and in what their communication and visibility can still be improved in the domain of private higher education (Parra García & Ortegón Cortázar, 2023).

The various dimensions of brand equity might have different roles in a student's choice of university. For example, brand awareness may help an institution to be one of the options that students consider, but familiarity alone may not be enough to make it their preferred one. The significance of recognition persists because students are more inclined to think about institutions they can easily identify by name, image, and other discernible characteristics (Yiadom et al., 2025). In addition, other research on university brand equity and student preference also shows that brand awareness interacts with perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty (Tri, 2023; Cano-Lanza et al., 2025). Similar findings have also been obtained in Indonesia, where these dimensions have been adopted to study students' perceptions of university brands (Tammubua, 2022). Social media provides another avenue for institutions to create awareness, through elevating the profile of the brand and enabling students to interact with it before they make a choice of university (Perera et al., 2023).

It is not just knowing an institution but what do students think an institution can do for them. The perceived quality signals the type of educational experience they can expect and positive brand associations help differentiate one institution from another. Results in Vietnam reveal that students associate university image with personal values and benefits desired from higher education, suggesting that institutional image is more important than just recognition (Giang et al., 2021). A positive educational image has also been linked to students' choice of a higher education institution and might help to explain how institutional promotional activities are related to college choice (Kango et al., 2021). Likewise, perceived quality and institutional reputation have an impact on brand equity, highlighting the significance of how students perceive the quality and credibility of a university (Truong, 2021).

Brand loyalty provides a relational dimension of brand equity, which is the attachment and commitment of the students to the institution. The institutional reputation has been linked to brand equity and loyalty, but these links may differ between private and public universities (Tan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the connection between students and the institution has been associated with engagement and loyalty (Snijders et al., 2022). The favorable brand experiences and the impressions of educational services may reinforce students' attachment to the university (Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2024; Waqas, 2022). These results combined suggest that students' choice of a university is driven by more than knowledge of an institution. It is made up of what they understand the institution represents, the quality and the trust or commitment they form toward its brand (Cano-Lanza et al., 2025; Lubis et al., 2023). Therefore, brand equity may be partially related to the intention of students to select an institution through the attitudes they develop toward it (Tasel-Jurkovic & Altinbasak-Farina, 2024).

When choosing a university, students should look past the academic programs. They may also consider what the institution stands for, how it is seen as a place of study and the benefits they are likely to profit from studying there. So, university branding is more than just a recognizable name or image. Xiao et al. (2023) performed a systematic review and found several interconnected domains of university branding: brand definition, brand positioning, brand communication, and stakeholder perception. These are important to help institutions differentiate themselves, and to communicate qualities that prospective students may not be able to assess prior to enrolling, as competition for students intensifies. And social media has become a big source of information during this period. As the literature suggests, social media marketing can influence how prospective students engage with an institution through the idea of brand equity (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). Other studies have found that students' perceptions about brand awareness, image or associations, perceived quality and loyalty are associated with their university preference and choice (Tri, 2023; Cano-Lanza et al., 2025). Higher education studies in Asia have also associated brand equity and service quality with university reputation and students' intention to choose an institution (Rizard et al., 2023). In this context, student recruitment for private higher education institutions may depend not only on visibility, but also on the development of an identity that students perceive as creditable, distinctive and valuable.

It is not always easy to apply brand equity in higher education. Picking a university is not quite the same as choosing most commercial services. Students are selecting an educational experience they have not yet fully experienced. It's tough to find out its worth until you sign up. Therefore, recent studies have emphasized the significance of studying university brand equity within the framework of higher education and from the point of view of the students (Tri, 2023; Cano-Lanza et al., 2025). Second, students may not have the same view of university. Each college and program will have its own reputation, its own identity, and so on. Students may have different views of the school depending on the program/field of study they are looking at. This is supported by cross-national evidence that the value attached to the university by the students may differ between groups and national contexts (Alcaide-Pulido et al., 2024). Despite these differences, scant evidence of the students' perception of the five dimensions of brand equity and the relationship of these dimensions to the enrollment decision of the students in the colleges of a private higher education institution in the Philippines was observed. This within-institution perspective is important because college-level differences may be obscured when university brand equity is examined only at the institutional level. Examining these differences can show whether students across colleges perceive and respond to the same institutional brand in similar ways.

This study sought to address that gap in a private, non-sectarian higher education institution in Cebu City, Philippines, a long-established institution known for its licensure examination performance, particularly in engineering. This institutional positioning is relevant to the interpretation of the findings because students from the College of Engineering and Architecture constituted 48.42% of the respondents. The results may therefore reflect, in part, an institutional identity strongly associated

with engineering and licensure performance and should be generalized to other institutional contexts with appropriate caution.

The research questions guiding this study were: (1) What is the level of the Institution's brand equity among first-year students, in terms of brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty, and proprietary brand assets? (2) What is the level of influence of each dimension on the students' decision to enroll? (3) How do students rank the media that built their awareness of the Institution and the factors that shaped their perception of its quality? (4) Do the level of brand equity and its influence on enrollment differ significantly across the Institution's colleges? (5) Is there a significant relationship between the level of brand equity and its influence on enrollment? Moreover, two null hypotheses were tested at the .05 level of significance: there are no significant differences across colleges in the level of agreement on, and the level of influence of, each brand equity dimension (H_{01}); and there is no significant relationship between the level of agreement on each brand equity dimension and its influence on enrollment (H_{02}).

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study. In a competitive higher education environment, institutions use brand building to differentiate themselves and communicate qualities that prospective students may value when considering enrollment.

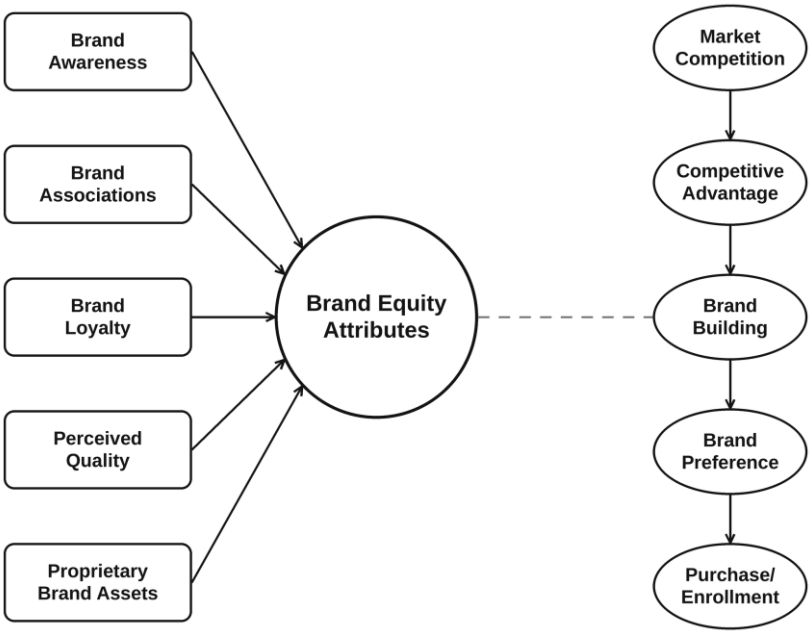


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Brand building contributes to brand equity, represented in this study by the five dimensions shown on the left of the figure. Brand equity is theoretically associated with brand preference and, ultimately, with purchase or, in the context of higher education, enrollment. The study measured the five dimensions directly and examined their association with enrollment through students' own ratings of how strongly each dimension influenced their decision to enroll. Because these ratings were self-reported, the study examines perceived influence on the decision to enroll rather than enrollment behavior itself. Brand preference was treated as the theoretical link between brand equity and enrollment and was not measured as a separate variable.

Methods

Research Design and Respondents

The study used a descriptive-correlational design. The respondents were students who enrolled as first-year students in the first semester of Academic Year 2023–2024 in five of the Institution's colleges: the College of Arts, Sciences, and Education (CASE), the College of Computer Studies (CCS), the College of Engineering and Architecture (CEA), the College of

Management, Business, and Accountancy (CMBA), and the College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences (CNAHS). The combined first-year population of these colleges was 4,456 students. Using Slovin's formula with a .05 margin of error, the minimum required sample was 368. A sixth college, with a first-year population of 42 students and a computed allocation of three respondents, returned no valid responses and was therefore excluded from the sampling frame.

Because the questionnaire was sent to the full accessible population rather than to a fixed quota, 634 valid responses were received, and all were retained to maximize the available data and improve the precision of the estimates. The distribution of responses across colleges did not follow proportional allocation: CASE, CCS, and CEA exceeded their computed allocations, while CMBA (37 against 41) and CNAHS (15 against 38) fell below theirs. The lower response from CNAHS may have been partly due to students being on clinical duty during the data-gathering period. The unequal response rates across colleges also raise the possibility of non-response bias. Weighting or post-stratification was not applied because the study retained all valid responses from the accessible population rather than drawing a proportionally allocated sample. The aggregate analyses were therefore based on the observed responses, while the ANOVA was used to examine differences across colleges and college-level findings were interpreted with caution. Results for CMBA and CNAHS were therefore interpreted with appropriate caution.

Instrument

The instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire. Part 1 comprised 25 statements with five items for each brand equity dimension. Items were rated on a four-point agreement scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree) based on what respondents knew and perceived of the Institution prior to enrollment. In Part 2, respondents rated the contribution of each brand equity dimension to their decision to enroll on a four-point scale (1=None to 4=High). Five sources of knowledge were rated by respondents who said the knowledge of the Institution influenced their decision from 1 (most influential) to 5 (least influential): digital marketing; out-of-home ads; paid partnerships with media outlets; career talks, school campaigns and school visits; and exhibits, competitions and conferences. Likewise, the respondents who thought that perceived quality influenced their decision ranked the following five quality factors: autonomous status and accreditation, licensure performance, student and graduate employability, industry linkage and international affiliations, and price.

Two content validation experts rated each item for relevance and clarity. A dry run with 20 non-academic scholars of the Institution, who did not take part in the main study, was conducted to assess the instrument's reliability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .703 for brand awareness, .905 for perceived quality, .910 for brand associations, .918 for brand loyalty, .928 for proprietary brand assets, and .928 for the overall 25-item scale.

Data Collection

The President of the Institution granted approval to conduct the survey on January 12, 2025, and also gave approval to obtain the names and email addresses of the target cohort from the Institution's enrollment office for research purposes only. The questionnaire was sent out by email from January to March 2025 and distributed online, and reminders were sent to those who did not respond. The survey was administered after the cohort had enrolled, therefore responses were retrospective based on respondents' recall of the factors that led to their decision to enroll in AY 2023-2024.

Data Analysis

Weighted means were used to describe the level of each brand equity dimension and perceived influence on enrollment. Agreement means were interpreted as almost always achieved (3.26–4.00), sometimes achieved (2.51–3.25), sometimes not achieved (1.76–2.50), or almost never achieved (1.00–1.75), while influence means were interpreted as high (3.26–4.00), moderate (2.51–3.25), low (1.76–2.50), or no influence (1.00–1.75). Mean ranks were calculated for the media and quality factors. Lower mean ranks indicate greater influence. The five colleges were compared on the composite score for each dimension using a

one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) (df = 4, 629), and the relationship between the agreement and influence scores for each dimension was examined using Spearman's rank-order correlation (ρ). Correlations were considered to be moderate (.40-.59), strong (.60-.79) or very strong (.80 and above). All tests were performed at the .05 level of significance using JAMOVI.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol, informed consent form, and questionnaire underwent review by the Institution's ethics review committee and were approved before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed that refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study would have no effect on their academic standing. The questionnaire did not collect names or student numbers. Email addresses, which were automatically recorded by the online form, were used solely to prevent duplicate submissions and were removed before data analysis. Results were reported only in aggregate. Because one of the authors heads the Institution's marketing function, safeguards were observed to minimize potential conflicts of interest: the author held no teaching, grading, or disciplinary authority over the respondents, the instrument was content-validated and pilot-tested before use, and the data were analyzed using predetermined statistical procedures.

Results and Discussions

Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents by college. Almost one-third of the respondents (31.07%) belonged to CCS while almost half of the respondents (48.42%) belonged to CEA. These two colleges, which accounted for most of the respondents, were consistent with the large enrollment base in engineering and computing programs at the Institution.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by College (n = 634)

College	Frequency	Percentage
College of Engineering and Architecture (CEA)	307	48.42
College of Computer Studies (CCS)	197	31.07
College of Arts, Sciences, and Education (CASE)	78	12.30
College of Management, Business, and Accountancy (CMBA)	37	5.84
College of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences (CNAHS)	15	2.37
Total	**634**	**100.00**

Table 2. Level of Brand Equity and Its Influence on the Decision to Enroll (n = 634)

Brand Equity Dimension	Agreement *M*	Interpretation	Influence *M*	Interpretation
Brand Awareness	3.383	Almost always achieved	3.054	Moderate
Perceived Quality	3.360	Almost always achieved	3.165	Moderate
Brand Associations	3.108	Sometimes achieved	3.306	High
Brand Loyalty	3.113	Sometimes achieved	3.178	Moderate
Proprietary Brand Assets	3.471	Almost always achieved	3.065	Moderate
Overall	3.287	Almost always achieved	3.154	Moderate

Note. Agreement: 3.26–4.00 = Almost always achieved; 2.51–3.25 = Sometimes achieved; 1.76–2.50 = Sometimes not achieved; 1.00–1.75 = Almost always not achieved. Influence: 3.26–4.00 = High; 2.51–3.25 = Moderate; 1.76–2.50 = Low; 1.00–1.75 = No influence.

Most respondents (77.76%) reported that they themselves made the decision to enroll in the Institution, while 15.30% identified a parent as the primary decision-maker (mother, 8.83%; father, 6.47%). The remaining respondents identified siblings, relatives, friends, or mentors.

Level of Brand Equity and Its Influence on Enrollment

Table 2 presents the level of agreement on each brand equity dimension and its perceived influence on the decision to enroll. Overall brand equity was rated as almost always achieved (M = 3.287). Proprietary brand assets recorded the highest mean (M = 3.471), followed by brand awareness (M = 3.383) and perceived quality (M = 3.360), all rated as almost always achieved. In contrast, brand loyalty (M = 3.113) and brand associations (M = 3.108) were rated as sometimes achieved.

At the item level, students most strongly recognized the Institution as an educational institution (M = 3.749), followed by its official logo (M = 3.667), its identity as a private, nonsectarian school (M = 3.659), and its mascot (M = 3.595). Awareness was comparatively lower for its student services (M = 3.087) and achievements and affiliations (M = 3.013). The weakest brand loyalty item concerned willingness to remain with the Institution even if its price were higher than that of other universities (M = 2.645). The weakest brand association items concerned whether the Institution came quickly to mind (M = 3.035) and whether its seal and logo came to mind when discussing schools (M = 3.006). These results suggest that the Institution's brand is well recognized and associated with quality, but its comparatively lower brand association and loyalty scores indicate that recognition and perceived quality do not necessarily translate into equally strong brand salience and commitment.

The pattern is reversed on the level of influence. The lowest level of agreement was found for brand associations, but they were perceived to have the most influence (M=3.306, high influence), followed by brand loyalty (M=3.178) and perceived quality (M=3.165). The highest agreement ratings were for proprietary brand assets (M=3.065) and brand awareness (M=3.054). Conversely, these had the lowest perceived influence ratings. This contrast suggests that students' knowledge of the Institution and its visible brand assets may be less relevant to enrollment decisions than the meanings students attach to the Institution, their perceptions of the quality of the Institution, and their attachment to the Institution's brand. A similar pattern has been observed in another service context, where customer preference was associated not simply with familiarity but with experiential considerations. Narsico and Narsico (2023) found that service quality and customer rapport contributed to satisfaction and subsequent referrals, suggesting that preference may be strengthened by the value customers associate with their service experience.

Table 3. Mean Ranks of Awareness Media and Quality Factors

Item	Mean Rank	Rank
Panel A. Media that built awareness of the Institution		
Digital marketing	2.23	1
Out-of-home advertisements	2.70	2
Paid partnerships with media outlets	2.98	3
Career talks, school campaigns, and school visits	3.46	4
Exhibits, competitions, and conferences	3.63	5
Panel B. Factors that shaped the perception of quality		
Autonomous status and accreditation	2.30	1
Licensure performance	2.44	2
Student and graduate employability	2.67	3
Industry linkage and international affiliations	3.19	4
Price	4.41	5

Note. Items were ranked from 1 (most influential) to 5 (least influential); lower mean ranks indicate greater influence. Rankings were given by respondents who reported that awareness (Panel A) or perceived quality (Panel B) influenced their decision to enroll.

This finding supports the distinction between brand recognition and the deeper meanings attached to a brand. This contrast may be described as a familiarity trap in higher education marketing: being well known can place an institution among students' choices, but familiarity alone may not be sufficient to influence their final enrollment decision. Awareness may help place an institution among the alternatives considered by prospective students, but the enrollment decision appears to depend more strongly on the qualities and associations students attach to the institution. This pattern is consistent with Keller's (1993) proposition that brand associations create value when they are strong, favorable, and unique, and with more recent higher education research showing that university choice is shaped by multiple dimensions of brand equity rather than awareness alone.

Media and Quality Signals

Table 3 shows the media through which the respondents learned about the Institution and the factors that influenced the perception of the quality. Among the awareness media, digital marketing was ranked first (mean rank = 2.23), followed by out-of-home advertisements (2.70) and paid partnerships with media outlets (2.98). Fourth was career talks, school campaigns and school visits (3.46) and fifth was exhibits, competitions and conferences (3.63). The results indicate that digital channels played a crucial role in boosting students' awareness of the Institution. This pattern is supported by evidence from university students in Cebu City. Jayma et al. (2025) found a significant positive relationship between TikTok exposure and consumer buying behavior ($\rho = .480$, $p < .001$), with user-generated content showing the strongest relationship ($\rho = .517$, $p < .001$). Although the study examined consumer purchasing rather than educational choice, the findings demonstrate the capacity of digital content and exposure to shape behavioral responses among university students. This finding is in line with some recent research that indicates social media has become an important channel for higher education institutions to promote their brand, engage potential students, and enhance brand performance (Dwivedi, 2024; Perera et al., 2023).

The most salient elements that influence the perception of students on quality were autonomous status and accreditation (mean rank= 2.30), followed by licensure performance (2.44) and student and graduate employability (2.67). Industry linkages and international affiliations were ranked fourth (3.19) while price was ranked last with a considerable margin (4.41). The results suggest that students evaluated institutional quality primarily on the basis of academic credentials and outcomes, rather than on cost. Accreditation, licensure performance and employability provide students with tangible proof of what an institution has accomplished and what they can expect from studying there. This is consistent with earlier observations that academic standing measures can enhance credibility and uniqueness of a university brand, particularly when they reflect academic success (Kethüda, 2022). Students can also benefit from the university's reputation, which can be a useful guide when choosing an institution, particularly when they have not yet experienced its educational services (Ma, 2022).

Differences Across Colleges

The results of the one-way ANOVA on the level of agreement for each of the five colleges' brand equity dimensions are shown in Table 4. Perceived quality, $F(4, 629) = 5.21$, $p < .001$ and brand loyalty, $F(4, 629) = 4.01$, $p = .003$ were significant differences. There were no significant differences for brand awareness, $F(4, 629) = 1.25$, $p = .288$, brand associations, $F(4, 629) = 2.02$, $p = .090$, or proprietary brand assets, $F(4, 629) = 2.33$, $p = .055$. Therefore, H01 was rejected for perceived quality and brand loyalty but not for other three dimensions.

The colleges showed a consistent pattern in their mean scores. CMBA and CNAHS recorded the two highest means across all five brand equity dimensions, while CASE recorded the lowest means, with CCS and CEA generally falling

between these groups. The significant difference in perceived quality suggests that students' perceptions of institutional quality may vary according to their college context. Such differences may partly reflect variations in students' institutional experiences, as recent evidence indicates that university support and student experience are associated with the formation of university brand image (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA of the Level of Agreement on Brand Equity Dimensions Across Colleges (n = 634)

Dimension	**CASE**	**CCS**	**CEA**	**CMBA**	**CNAHS**	***F***	***p***	**Result**
Brand Awareness	3.346	3.389	3.360	3.514	3.667	1.25	.288	Not significant
Perceived Quality	3.233	3.453	3.293	3.541	3.747	5.21	< .001	Significant
Brand Associations	2.992	3.176	3.055	3.335	3.333	2.02	.090	Not significant
Brand Loyalty	2.892	3.156	3.096	3.400	3.333	4.01	.003	Significant
Proprietary Brand Assets	3.405	3.505	3.431	3.746	3.533	2.33	.055	Not significant

Note. Values under each college are means. df = degrees of freedom; F-critical = critical F value; α = significance level. df = 4, 629; F-critical = 2.39; α = .05. CASE n = 78; CCS n = 197; CEA n = 307; CMBA n = 37; CNAHS n = 15.

Table 5. One-Way ANOVA of the Level of Influence of Brand Equity Dimensions Across Colleges (n = 634)

Dimension	CASE	CCS	CEA	CMBA	CNAHS	*F*	*p*	Result
Brand Awareness	2.968	3.003	3.058	3.345	3.383	2.23	.065	Not significant
Perceived Quality	3.010	3.195	3.139	3.400	3.507	2.60	.035	Significant
Brand Associations	3.167	3.396	3.228	3.703	3.467	4.85	< .001	Significant
Brand Loyalty	3.090	3.218	3.111	3.622	3.400	3.76	.005	Significant
Proprietary Brand Assets	3.013	3.071	3.013	3.432	3.400	2.19	.069	Not significant

Note. Values under each college are means. df = 4, 629; F-critical = 2.39; α = .05.

Differences in perceived quality and brand loyalty may be at least partially a function of variation in program identity across colleges. Programs associated with board exams and well-defined professions such as nursing and accountancy may offer students more visible markers of quality through their licensure performance, professional associations, and recognizable career paths. These visible professional pathways may also strengthen students' commitment to the institution earlier in the enrollment process because the connection between the program, professional qualification, and future career is more readily apparent. This reading is in line with the respondents' ranking of accreditation, licensure performance and employability as the top indicators of institutional quality. CASE, however, is a broad umbrella that encompasses programs in many fields, which may lead to a less unified college-level brand reputation. Those dimensions that did not vary substantially across colleges—brand awareness, brand associations, and proprietary brand assets—may be more institution-wide aspects students experience regardless of the college they attend.

The results of the perceived influence of the brand equity dimensions on enrollment are shown in Table 5. Significant differences were found among colleges for perceived quality $F(4, 629) = 2.60$, $p = .035$, brand associations $F(4, 629) = 4.85$, $p < .001$, and brand loyalty $F(4, 629) = 3.76$, $p = .005$. There were no significant differences for brand awareness, $F(4, 629) = 2.23$, $p = .065$, or proprietary brand assets, $F(4, 629) = 2.19$, $p = .069$. Thus, H01 was rejected for the proposed influence of perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty but not

for brand awareness and proprietary brand assets.

The influence of brand associations presents the sharpest contrast. Although students across colleges did not differ significantly in their level of brand associations, the perceived influence of those associations on enrollment ranged from M = 3.167 in CASE to M = 3.703 in CMBA. One possible explanation is that students may attach different importance to institutional associations depending on the particular program or profession they intend to pursue. College choice has long been understood as being shaped partly by program characteristics and the influence of significant persons (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, because the present study did not collect data on first-choice programs or family background, this explanation remains tentative and warrants further investigation.

Table 6. Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Between the Level of Agreement on and the Level of Influence of Brand Equity (n = 634)

Brand Equity Dimension	ρ	*p*	Interpretation
Brand Awareness	.589	< .001	Moderate, positive, significant
Perceived Quality	.639	< .001	Strong, positive, significant
Brand Associations	.533	< .001	Moderate, positive, significant
Brand Loyalty	.635	< .001	Strong, positive, significant
Proprietary Brand Assets	.481	< .001	Moderate, positive, significant
Overall Brand Equity	.781	< .001	Strong, positive, significant

Note. Correlations were computed between each dimension's agreement and influence composite scores. .40–.59 = moderate; .60–.79 = strong; .80 and above = very strong.

Part of the observed variation may also reflect differences in subgroup size. The relatively small numbers of respondents from CNAHS and CMBA mean that their college-level estimates should be interpreted with greater caution than those of the larger colleges. Nevertheless, the general direction of the differences was consistent across the brand equity dimensions and across both the agreement and influence scales.

Relationship Between Brand Equity and Its Influence on Enrollment

Table 6 presents the results of Spearman's rank-order correlation between the level of agreement on each brand equity dimension and its perceived influence on enrollment. Overall brand equity showed a strong positive relationship with its overall perceived influence on enrollment ($\rho = .781$, $p < .001$). At the dimension level, all five relationships were positive and statistically significant at $p < .001$. The relationships were strong for perceived quality ($\rho = .639$) and brand loyalty ($\rho = .635$), and moderate for brand awareness ($\rho = .589$), brand associations ($\rho = .533$), and proprietary brand assets ($\rho = .481$). Accordingly, H02 was rejected for all five dimensions.

Students with more positive perceptions of the Institution's brand were also more likely to report that the brand equity dimensions influenced their decision to enroll. This finding supports the theoretical proposition, that positive responses to a brand are related to stronger brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). However, the study is correlation and the influence ratings are self-reported. These relationships are therefore suggestive of correlation, not causality. At the level of dimensions, the strongest associations were found for perceived quality and brand loyalty, and the weakest for proprietary brand assets. This pattern is consistent with recent evidence that service quality, satisfaction, trust and commitment are strongly linked to the development of university brand loyalty (Rew et al., 2024). These results, when viewed in conjunction with table 2, suggest that the quality of the Institution and the students' attachment to the Institution were more strongly correlated with the perceived impact of enrollment than with knowledge of the name and visible brand assets.

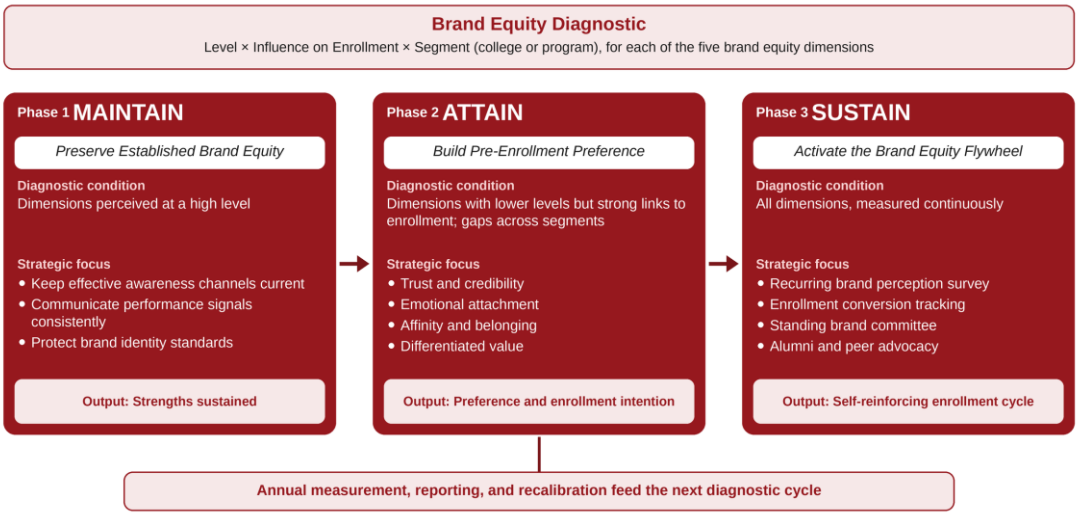
Summary of Findings

Overall, the Institution's brand equity among first-year students was rated as nearly always achieved and was driven by high brand awareness, positive perceptions of quality and strong recognition of its proprietary brand assets. Brand associations and brand loyalty were rated relatively low on agreement. Brand associations however recorded the highest perceived influence on enrollment, while brand awareness and proprietary brand assets despite recording the highest agreement ratings recorded the lowest perceived influence.

Digital marketing, out-of-home advertisements, and paid media partnerships emerged as the main sources through which students became aware of the Institution. In assessing institutional quality, students gave greater importance to accreditation, licensure performance, and graduate employability, while price ranked last among the factors considered. Students' perceptions also differed across colleges, particularly in perceived quality and brand loyalty, while differences in the perceived influence on enrollment were found for perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Overall, students who held more favorable views of the Institution's brand were also more likely to report that these perceptions influenced their decision to enroll. This relationship was significant across all five dimensions of brand equity, with perceived quality and brand loyalty showing the strongest relationships.

Implications of the Study

The results suggest that the institution's good name alone does not necessarily improve the level of preference for enrollment in private higher education institutions. Digital and out-of-home channels lead the pack as the top sources of awareness in this study but raising awareness is still an important part of the mix. However, the stronger relationships identified for perceived quality and brand loyalty indicate that institutions should improve students' perceptions of educational quality and attachment to the institutional brand beyond visibility.



Note. Adapted from Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993).

Figure 2. The Maintain-Attain-Sustain (MAS) Brand Equity Framework for Private Higher Education Institutions

Institutions may therefore consider combining efforts to increase their visibility with initiatives that strengthen students' perceptions of quality, meaningful brand associations, and attachment to the institutional brand. Communication with prospective students can highlight concrete evidence of quality, such as accreditation, licensure performance, and graduate employability, which respondents identified as the leading indicators of institutional quality. These strengths can be communicated consistently as students learn about

and consider the institution before enrollment. Since some dimensions of brand equity also differed across colleges, institution-wide efforts may be supported by communication that highlights the particular strengths and identity of each college.

From these findings, the study developed the Maintain-Attain-Sustain (MAS) Brand Equity Framework as shown in Figure 2. The framework has a diagnostic step that assesses each brand equity dimension regarding its level, perceived contribution to enrollment, and difference across segments such as colleges. Already proven high-level dimensions are placed in the Maintain phase to preserve the established strengths. The Attain phase looks to reinforce pre-enrollment preference through trust and credibility, emotional attachment, affinity and belonging, and differentiated value in those dimensions that are weaker in relative terms, but show stronger association to perceived enrollment influence, or that are significantly different across segments. The Sustain phase involves continuous evaluation of the brand equity dimensions and their association with enrollment outcomes, providing the institution with an opportunity to readjust its brand-building strategies for subsequent enrollment cycles. For example, an institution may strengthen emotional attachment during the Attain phase through student and alumni engagement initiatives and then move this dimension into Sustain by regularly monitoring its relationship with enrollment preference. Similarly, initiatives intended to strengthen perceived quality may be tracked across successive recruitment and enrollment cycles to determine whether improvements are sustained.

Applied to the Institution, the diagnostic places brand awareness and proprietary brand assets under the Maintain phase because these dimensions received comparatively high agreement ratings. Perceived quality is likewise maintained as an existing strength while being further developed through the Attain priority of trust and credibility. Brand associations and brand loyalty become the principal targets of the Attain phase because they received comparatively lower agreement ratings while showing substantial perceived influence on enrollment. Proprietary brand assets may also contribute to differentiated value by giving recognizable institutional symbols greater meaning. Because the framework was derived from a single institutional case, these specific priorities should not be transferred directly to other institutions. Rather, the transferable element is the diagnostic-response logic of the framework, through which each institution identifies its own priorities based on its measurements.

For theory, the study provides evidence from a Philippine private higher education institution that brand equity dimensions differ not only in the level at which they are perceived but also in their perceived influence on enrollment, and that some of these dimensions vary across colleges within the same institution. The findings further suggest that brand awareness may function more as an entry condition that places an institution among the alternatives considered than as a decisive influence on enrollment. They also demonstrate the value of examining brand equity both at the institutional level and across internal segments such as colleges.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to first-year students of a private higher education institution in Cebu, Philippines and did not include prospective students who considered the Institution but enrolled elsewhere. The evaluation of the impact of enrollment was based on the respondents' retrospective descriptions of factors that influenced their decisions to enroll. Because these perceptions were reported after enrollment, they may also have been affected by recall bias or post-enrollment rationalization, whereby students' subsequent experiences with the Institution, influenced how they remembered the factors that shaped their original enrollment decision. In addition, the cross-sectional and correlational design allows for the identification of associations, but not causal relationships between brand equity and perceived enrollment influence. There was also variation in representation across colleges, with relatively fewer respondents from CMBA and CNAHS. Thus, the results should be primarily understood in terms of the Institution and the respondents involved in the research.

Future Research Directions

Future research could examine brand equity in other private and public institutions of higher learning to determine whether this study's findings are replicated in other settings. For instance, researchers might include potential students who considered an institution but then enrolled elsewhere. This gives a useful comparison group to those who decided to enroll. Future research could use a longitudinal design to track prospective students from the time they first consider universities through enrollment and after enrollment, providing a clearer picture of how their perceptions of an institution develop and change over time. Future qualitative studies with students and parents may further explore reasons for the importance of perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty in deciding to attend a university. Finally, additional research could apply the Maintain–Attain–Sustain (MAS) Brand Equity Framework to evaluate its relevance to institutional brand building and enrollment strategies.

Conclusion

The results suggest that brand equity can be an important component in decision making for tertiary enrollment. Strong relationships existed between students' perceptions of the Institution's brand and the impact of brand equity on their decision to enroll. Brand awareness and proprietary brand assets were among the highest rated dimensions, but perceived influence on enrollment was relatively lower than the higher rated influence of brand associations, brand loyalty and perceived quality. Perceived quality and brand loyalty also demonstrated the strongest relationships at the dimension level with perceived enrollment influence. Price was less important to students than observable quality indicators such as accreditation, licensure performance, and graduate employability. Some brand equity elements differed across colleges. Overall, the findings suggest that private higher education could benefit from being less familiar by improving perceived quality, meaningful brand associations and attachment to the institutional brand and accounting for differences across college contexts. These findings are correlations between self-reported perceptions at one institution and should not be interpreted as causal effects.

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