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Student perception on university brand equity during pandemics

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various fields, including higher education institutions. Changes in policies and norms cause universities to adjust to the brand equity-building strategies that have been carried out. The purpose of this study was to investigate student perceptions of the dimensions of university brand equity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research was conducted at a private university in Lampung. The samples taken were 400 people with the criteria that they had become students during the pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and post-pandemic. The research results found a significant relationship among the dimensions of university brand equity (brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, learning environment, emotional environment, brand trust, brand loyalty, and university reputation). Therefore, brand equity dimensions affect the student learning experience in creating a solid university brand equity.

Keywords: brand equity, university branding, higher education, marketing.

1 INTRODUCTION

Brand equity is getting more attention in the marketing of higher education institutions. In recent years, higher education institutions have realized the importance of branding to gain a competitive advantage. The development of brand equity in higher education institutions is driven by increasingly fierce competition, the need to attract consumers, the need for financial support, and the opening of international markets. The university's brand equity is different from that of the general product. There is a dimension closely related to the student learning experience, which is in accordance with the research conducted by Ng & Forbes (2009) and Palmer et al. (2016), stating that learning experience is a significant factor in branding a university.

This current pandemic provides various limitations on university academic operations by reducing income, reducing employee productivity, and limiting the ability of institutions to cover operational costs (Tamrat 2021). Activity restrictions have forced universities to do distance learning, and even accept all online enrollment. In addition, universities are not responsive to crises, for example distance learning facilities can certainly provide an unpleasant experience for students. Perception of experience helps strengthen the relationship between consumers and brands and influences brand equity (Iglesias et al. 2019; Khan & Fatma 2017). This condition is a challenge for both universities and students. Universities must be able to maintain excellence, while also adapting branding strategies according to the situation. This study aims at helping universities understand what constitutes consumer-based brand equity in dealing with crises such as pandemics.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Brand Equity University*

Brand equity is a set of unique attributes attached to a brand. Brand equity is also often considered brand strength (Feldwick 1996). A company or brand with strong brand equity will be superior

to its competitors. Currently brand equity is also considered an indicator of the success of a business (Tasci 2021). The branding strategy to build their excellence is adapted by higher education institutions.

University brand equity initially used the dimensions built by Aaker (1993), namely brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty. As academics pay attention to university brand equity, there is a difference between brand equity for products in general, e.g., university brand equity is built up due to the interaction between student consumers and campuses during their education. Previous research related to university brand equity took the basis of the BE concept developed by Aaker (1993) and (Keller 1993). The research results also include several other dimensions specific to university brand equity such as university reputation , learning environment , physical facilities, knowledge assessment, price, brand communication, and reputation of professor (Anwar et al. 2021; Khoshtaria et al. 2020; Moghaddam et al. 2013; Mourad et al. 2020; Pinar et al. 2020; Tran et al. 2020). The measurement of brand equity in this study will refer to several dimensions, namely brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand association, brand trust, learning environment, emotional environment, and university reputation.

3 METHODOLOGIES

This study employed a quantitative approach. The data collection used a questionnaire survey with a cluster sampling approach towards undergraduate student respondents at private universities in Lampung Province, Indonesia. The indicators in the questionnaire were adapted from Girard & Pinar (2021). The weighting of the questionnaire using a Likert scale of 1-5 points includes answering choices from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The study aims at investigating the relationship between indicators of university brand equity at the time of pandemics. The questionnaire included three main parts: introduction and purpose, demographic information, and measurement items. It took one month to collect the data (October to November 2021).

4 RESULTS

4.1 *Demographic information*

Table 1. The number of respondent.

Type	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	142	35.5%
	Female	258	64.5%
Year	Third	110	27.5%
	Second	136	34%
	First	154	38.5%

4.2 *Measurement model analysis*

Covariance Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) was implemented to test the proposed research model using AMOS 26 software. First, we assessed internal consistency reliability and the convergent validity of the constructs. In the validity and reliability tests carried out, all indicators in this study were valid and reliable. Then proceed with the normality test. Initial data from 400 respondents were declared abnormal. Hence, data reduction was carried out by removing outliers and indicators. The feasibility results were obtained based on several predetermined criteria. There are nine criteria used. Seven criteria have values above the threshold value and are declared good. Meanwhile, the probability value is still below the stipulation, and the chi-square value is above df.

Table 2. The number of respondent.

No	Model Fit Indices	Estimated Value	Obtained Value
1	Chi-square	Small	350.88
2	$\chi 2$ significance probability	≥ 0.05	0.000
3	Relative $\chi 2$ (CMIN/DF)	$\leq 2,00$	1.671
4	GFI (Goodness of Fit)	≥ 0.85	0.930
5	AGFI (Adjust Goodness of Fit Index)	≥ 0.85	0.908
6	TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index)	≥ 0.90	0.983
7	NFI (Normated Fit Index)	≥ 0.80	0.966
8	CFI (Comparative Fit Index)	≥ 0.90	0.986
9	RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.041

4.3 *Hypothesis testing*

The results of hypothesis testing using AMOS 26 show that all proposed hypotheses had significant results. Brand awareness, university reputation, brand association, learning environment, perceived quality, brand loyalty, emotional environment, and brand trust were interrelated both directly and indirectly.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has put universities in an almost similar situation, with different challenges. Private universities that are the research object also carry out temporary closures and restrictions on activities in response to the situation and government policies. Students must conduct distance learning with minimal facilities.

During the pandemic, it still showed that students' perceptions of brand equity were still good and quite high. Male students had a better average perception than female students. First-year students who entered during the pandemic had the highest level of perception, while the lowest were third-year students who entered before the pandemic. This result is different from research from (Aristovnik et al. 2020), which states that first-year students are more susceptible to the pandemic effect.

The results show there is a relationship between the dimensions of university brand equity. Brand awareness is an essential foundation for building university brand equity, which directly and indirectly affects other dimensions of brand equity. Research conducted during this pandemic did not succeed in proving there is a relationship between brand awareness and the learning environment, which could be due to the reduced interaction between students and the campus during the social distancing period. Meanwhile, in this study, a significant factor directly affecting brand loyalty is the university's reputation.

From this research, the learning environment has the most influence on other dimensions of brand equity. This dimension should be of greater concern to universities when building brand equity, along with university reputation, university reputation, brand association, and brand awareness.

6 IMPLICATIONS DAN LIMITATION

The university does branding to be superior to its competitors. Several factors that need to be considered during the pandemic include the readiness of the institution to face the crisis and the response and concern for students. These aspects have not been covered in this study and should be considered in formulating a branding strategy for a higher education institution in the future, especially when facing a crisis. This research was conducted at a private university. Future research

can be carried out with broad objects or involving government-owned universities. In addition, it is also necessary to pay attention to involving university consumers more broadly, not only students.

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