

Unlocking Students' Enrolment: A Mixed Methods Study on How Brand Reputation and Perceived Benefits Shape Higher Education Choices in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

As competition for student enrolment intensifies, higher education institutions must understand the factors influencing students' choices to ensure their sustainability and growth. The study investigated how brand reputation and perceived benefits affect higher education enrolment intention. The study employed a concurrent mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from surveys with qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to comprehensively understand the research problem through triangulation. The first objective involved conducting qualitative exploration through seven purposively selected focus group discussions (FGDs), applying thematic analysis to identify factors influencing enrolment choices. The second objective involved utilizing structured questionnaires to collect quantitative data from a representative sample of 119 randomly selected respondents. Multiple linear regression analysis was employed to analyze quantitative data and examine how brand reputation and perceived benefits influence enrolment intentions. The qualitative findings indicate that brand reputation, alumni success, campus facilities, faculty expertise, financial aid, and academic programs are pivotal in shaping students' choices. Conversely, the quantitative analysis reveals that while brand names and compelling slogans positively affect enrolment intentions, brand logos do not yield a significant impact. These findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to prioritize brand reputation, alum engagement, investment in campus facilities and faculty expertise, and financial support to enhance student attraction. This research extends brand equity theory to the higher education context, elucidating the significance of branding in enrolment decisions and enhancing academic discourse through its dual-method approach. The findings conclude that effective branding is a critical determinant of student enrolment choices, thereby substantially contributing to developing higher education marketing strategies.



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1. Introduction

Higher education marketing is a rapidly evolving field of practice driven by the gradual marketization that has affected higher education globally (Japutra et al., 2016). As competition for student enrollment intensifies, higher education institutions must understand the factors influencing students' choices to ensure their sustainability and growth. Thus, to survive in this era of mushrooming of HEIs and stiff competition, the management and board of directors of each higher education institution (HEI) are obliged to develop and execute effective marketing programs, strategies, and tactics that can build a solid and reputable institutional brand (Erisher et al., 2014a). Thus, to gain a superior competitive advantage, each HEI has to adapt, develop, and deploy reputable brand strategies and benefits to capture a sizeable segment of students in the market.

Branding emerges as a powerful and indispensable tool that enables HEIs to carve their unique identities and gain a competitive advantage (Aaker, 2012; Girard & Pinar, 2021). By harnessing the potential of branding, HEIs can captivate students' attention, build trust and credibility, and establish a strong foothold in the fiercely competitive marketplace. Existing literature highlights the importance of branding in establishing an emotional connection with the audience and convincing them to invest in uncertain outcomes (Iqbal et al., 2012; Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022). A strong brand image differentiates one HEI from others, building customer trust and credibility. In the dynamic environment of higher education, branding elements wield immense power in shaping the success and reputation of HEIs. Scholars such as Iqbal, Rasli, and Hassan (2012) and Sadeghvaziri et al. (2022) have emphasized the pivotal role of brand names, logos, and slogans in the branding strategies of HEIs. The elements above act as vibrant threads that weave a compelling narrative, differentiating one institution from the rest and captivating the hearts and minds of students and stakeholders alike. With the ability to evoke trust, convey value, and establish a unique identity, these branding elements are catalysts for enhancing institutional competitiveness and attracting discerning learners in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

Effective branding strategies in HEIs not only differentiate them from competitors but also simplify the decision-making process for customers, reduce perceived risks, protect the institution's rights, attract a more extensive customer base, foster trustful relationships, and drive growth and survival (Kotler et al., 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2016). Successful brand-building activities lead to substantial brand equity, facilitating easy recognition and recall and generating positive consumer responses (Girard & Pinar, 2021; Kotler et al., 2014). The need for further examination of the influence of students' perception of brand benefits on higher education enrolment intention is supported by several reasons. Enrolment intention refers to a prospective student's expressed interest or plans to enroll in an educational institution or program, analogous to the likelihood of a consumer purchasing a product (Sam & Tahir, 2009). It encompasses the factors that stimulate and drive student enrolments, such as the academic programs offered and the influences and motivations that affect consumer purchase decisions (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Although branding has been extensively utilized in various business sectors such as automotive, beverages, fashion, hospitality, and entertainment (Aaker, 2012; Brunetti et al., 2019; Sheth & Koschmann, 2019), its application within higher education institutions (HEIs) remains limited. While branding efforts in academia, such as vision statements, visual designs, and core values, are easily observable, there is a scarcity of studies explicitly focusing on branding in HEIs (Erisher et al., 2014; Sankaran & Chakraborty, 2023; Soliman, 2023). Therefore, HEI management and boards must strategically brand their institutions, establish a positive corporate image, and position their services to cultivate commitment and loyalty among students while capitalizing on available opportunities. The rationale behind this research lies in the global competitive landscape of higher education, where HEIs face stiff competition from prospective students. HEIs need effective branding strategies that create strong, reputable institutional brands to stand out. Branding is crucial as

it helps institutions differentiate themselves, build trust, and attract students and stakeholders. Furthermore, literature on branding in HEIs needs to be expanded, often overlooking vital brand elements.

In Tanzania, as in many countries globally, higher education institutions (HEIs) encounter fierce competition for prospective students, with numerous institutions offering similar or substitute study programs (El Sheikh et al., 2024). This competitive environment and constrained academic funding compel HEIs to adopt innovative strategies to distinguish themselves. Branding emerges as a crucial factor influencing students' enrollment intentions; however, a notable disjunction exists between the perceived advantages of educational brands and the actual enrollment decisions made by prospective students (Shahnaz & Qadir, 2020). Previous studies by El Sheikh et al. (2024), Erisher et al. (2014), and Girard and Pinar (2021) indicate that many institutions need to more consistently communicate their brand value, resulting in reduced attractiveness for potential enrollees. This study investigates the influence of students' perceptions of brand benefits on higher education enrolment intentions in Tanzania, thereby addressing a significant research gap in the branding of higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly within the Sub-Saharan African context. The paucity of targeted research examining the impact of specific brand attributes on enrolment decisions in Sub-Saharan Africa underscores the critical importance of this research endeavor. Although prior studies have established a theoretical foundation regarding the influence of branding, they frequently need to account for the distinct socio-cultural and economic factors that shape students' perceptions in this region.

Besides, to the authors' knowledge, only three studies addressing branding in higher learning institutions (HLs) have been conducted, each within differing contexts. For instance, the research by Sadeghvaziri et al. (2022), conducted in Tehran, Iran, exclusively examined brand logos while neglecting other essential elements of the brand ecosystem, such as brand names and slogans. Similarly, the study by Iqbal et al. (2012) in Malaysia overlooked the importance of considering the broader context of developing countries. Furthermore, the investigation by Girard and Pinar (2021) focused on the dynamic relationships among core brand equity components and supporting elements in HEIs in Pennsylvania, USA. Thus, despite extensive literature on branding within various business sectors and higher education in developed countries (Erisher et al., 2014; Klabi, 2020; Van Grinsven & Das, 2016), there exists a notable dearth of research that examines brand elements beyond logos in HEIs, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This gap accentuates the urgent need for a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between branding and enrolment choices within the Tanzanian context.

This study is structured around two distinct research objectives. Objective one explores the factors influencing students' higher education enrollment decisions. Objective two examines the relationship between students' perceptions of brand benefits and their intentions to pursue higher education in Tanzania. Through these objectives, the study seeks to elucidate the relationship between brand perception and enrollment intention, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of effective branding strategies in Tanzania. The research is poised to make significant contributions in several key areas. It is anticipated to represent the pioneering investigation in Sub-Saharan countries that establishes a link between brand benefits and higher education enrollment intention among students, thereby filling a notable research gap in the existing literature. Unlike the study by Sadeghvaziri et al. (2022), which focuses exclusively on brand logos, this research comprehensively examines the impact of three crucial brand ecosystem elements—brand name, brand logo, and slogans—on higher education enrollment intention in Tanzania. This comprehensive approach underscores the significance of multiple brand components and provides a holistic understanding of their influence within the context of higher education. Furthermore, this research extends brand equity theory into the higher education sector, offering insights into specific factors that shape

enrollment decisions. The concurrent mixed-methods approach employed in this study enhances understanding by integrating qualitative and quantitative analyses, yielding robust evidence for effective marketing strategies tailored to educational institutions.

1.1. Theoretical Foundation

This study focuses on applying brand equity theory in higher education institutions (HEIs). Brand equity theory includes elements such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty, all of which relate to a brand's market value and strength (Aaker, 1991; Sankaran & Chakraborty, 2023). Brand equity is crucial for the success of goods and services organizations and gaining a competitive edge (Berry, 2000; Brunetti et al., 2019). While brand equity models have been widely used in various sectors, their application in HEIs is limited. The study focuses on academic branding efforts and the scarcity of research explicitly addressing branding in HEIs (Erisher et al., 2014b; Soliman, 2023). Consequently, it becomes imperative for each college or university to establish its branding in higher education. In the realm of branding, various elements such as brand name, brand logo, brand mark, trade name, trade characters, trademark, packaging, labeling, and slogans play vital roles in creating brand benefits (Iqbal et al., 2012; Kotler et al., 2014).

In HEIs, the most commonly recognized antecedents of brand benefits are the brand name, logo, and slogans (Iqbal et al., 2012; Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022). The study, therefore, explores how branding elements, such as names, logos, and slogans, influence students' perception of brand benefits and their intention to pursue higher education (Altonji & Pierret, 1996; Erisher et al., 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2016; Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022; Soliman, 2023). The topic aligns with the core principles of brand equity theory, which emphasizes the importance of solid brand elements and positive brand associations in differentiating an institution from competitors, building trust and credibility, and driving growth (Aaker, 2012; Erisher et al., 2014; Soliman, 2023). The study acknowledges branding as a powerful tool for HEIs to establish a unique identity, attract students, and gain a competitive advantage. Consistently enhancing corporate brands is essential for cultivating trust among stakeholders, leading to positive word-of-mouth within the community and society, reduced promotion costs, increased enrolment rates, and enhanced profitability (Aaker, 1991; Sankaran & Chakraborty, 2023; Soliman, 2023). Additionally, the study highlights the need to explore branding in the context of developing nations like Tanzania, considering the influence of external factors and market conditions on brand perception and purchase intention (Aaker, 1991; Sankaran & Chakraborty, 2023).

1.2. Empirical literature review

1.2.1. Brand Name Benefits

The decision of consumers to choose HEIs is greatly influenced by the institution's brand equity, encompassing factors such as brand awareness, image, attitude, knowledge, experience, and quality attributes (Keller, 1993; Mourad et al., 2011). Brand equity refers to the value and significance attributed to a brand (Mourad et al., 2011). Aaker (1991) identifies five dimensions of brand equity, including brand name awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and other valuable assets like patents, channel relationships, and trademarks. According to Kotler and Keller (2014), a brand name is a verbal representation of a product consisting of a word, group of words, letters, or numbers. It is generally preferred for a brand name to be concise, easily pronounced, distinctive, memorable, recognizable, and carry positive connotations. Therefore, brand name benefits encompass various advantages of higher education institutions, such as brand awareness, image, attitude, knowledge, experience, and quality attributes. Nevertheless, despite consumers' importance

on a company's brand, there needs to be more research that delves explicitly into the advantages of brand names within the realm of HEIs.

1.2.2. Brand logo benefits

HEIs employ brand logos as a strategic marketing tool to attract prospective students, as a well-designed brand logo can significantly influence brand attitude and recognition (Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022; Van Grinsven & Das, 2016). To have a lasting impact on repeat purchases, a brand logo should possess certain qualities, such as simplicity, relevance, memorability, versatility, and an appealing color scheme and design (Labrecque & Milne, 2012). The benefits associated with brand logos encompass a range of aspects, including self-expression, attractiveness, aesthetics, and functionality, all of which viewers perceive as integral components of a brand logo (Japutra et al., 2016). Therefore, brand logo benefits refer to the perceived benefits derived from the brand logo, including brand attitude, recognition, self-expression, attractiveness, aesthetics, and functionality. Although the expected significance of brand logo benefits, such as cultivating consumer affection, commitment, and loyalty towards a product, has been recognized, there needs to be more comprehensive research specifically investigating this subject within the context of HEIs (Sadeghvaziri et al., 2022).

1.2.3. Brand slogans benefits

Brand slogans, in essence, are concise phrases designed to convey persuasive and compelling information about a product or brand (Altonji & Pierret, 1996; Supphellen & Nygaardsvik, 2002). These slogans serve as vital marketing strategies and advertising tools that effectively communicate a brand's message to consumers (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999) while simultaneously establishing the brand's image, identity, and position in order to emphasize its utility and enhance memorability among individuals (O'Guinn et al., 2009). A well-crafted slogan possesses certain qualities, including conciseness, uniqueness, catchiness, timelessness, attractiveness, persuasiveness, and a targeted approach towards the intended audience (Inpakdee & Worathumrong, 2022). HEIs showcase a variety of slogans that exemplify their unique identities and values (El Sheikh, 2024; Shahnaz & Qadir, 2020). For instance, Stanford University adopts the slogan "the wind of freedom blows," while the University of Oregon captures its essence with "minds move mountains." (Kovalenko, 2019; Supphellen & Nygaardsvik, 2002). These slogans serve as powerful expressions of each respective HEI's unique characteristics and values. While the significance of slogans to companies and their consumers has been acknowledged in various studies, there needs to be more research explicitly focusing on the benefits of brand slogans in HEIs.

1.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study in Fig. 1 in the appendices presents the relationship between two variables: students' perception of brand benefits and their higher education enrolment intention in Tanzania. The independent variables in this study are brand name benefits, brand logo benefits, and brand students' perception of brand benefits (Iqbal et al., 2012; Kotler et al., 2014). The dependent variable is HE enrolment intention, measured through enrolment applications, campus visits, open house attendance, admission deposits, and retention rate.

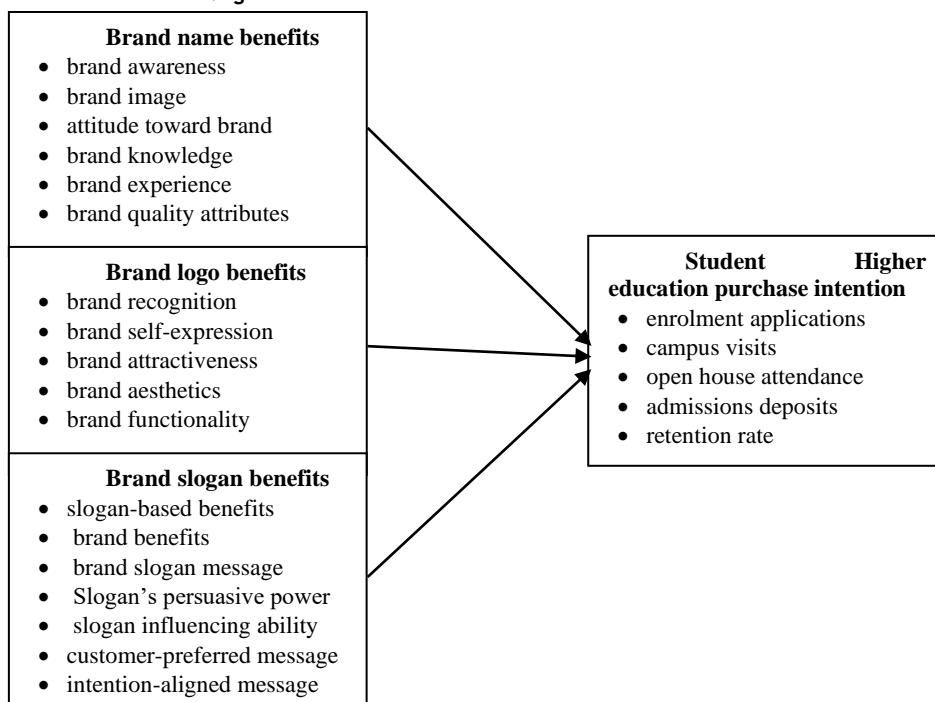


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework
Source: Literature review

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

This study adopted a correlational research design to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of brand benefits and their enrollment intentions in Tanzanian higher education institutions (John & Creswell, 2014; Venkatesh et al., 2013). A concurrent mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs), enhancing the depth and reliability of the findings through triangulation (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The study targeted bachelor's degree students in selected higher education institutions across five Tanzanian regions: Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, Arusha, Dodoma, and Mbeya. These regions were chosen due to their concentration of both public and private institutions, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. Bachelor's students were selected for their relevant experience in higher education decision-making, providing critical insights into the factors influencing enrollment. Data were collected through online questionnaires, allowing for broad participation across the selected regions.

2.2. Sampling techniques

For research objective one, students with relevant knowledge and experience were deliberately selected to provide insights into the influence of brand benefits and specific brand elements on higher education decision-making (Kothari, 2004). Data saturation was reached after conducting seven focus group discussions (FGDs) by focusing on these students in their natural settings. For research objective two, a simple random sampling technique was employed to ensure a representative sample from the target population of students in higher education (Creswell, 2014; Kothari, 2004). The study adopted Green's (1991) formula for calculating the sample size for quantitative data, represented by the equation $N > 50 + 8m$, where N = sample size and m = number of independent variables. Since the study had three independent variables, based on the formula, the required sample size should be greater than

84. Therefore, this study used a sample of 119, as indicated in Table 1 in the appendices, which is greater than 84 from five regions of notable student populations and educational prominence.

Table 1 Sample size of 119 respondents across the five regions

Region	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Dar es Salaam	32	26.9
Mwanza	28	23.5
Arusha	24	20.2
Dodoma	19	16.0
Mbeya	16	13.4
Total	119	100

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical considerations involved obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and adhering to established research guidelines throughout the data collection and various research procedures. This study exclusively relied on primary data to collect first-hand information relevant to the research objectives. Qualitative data for objective one was gathered through recording and note-taking during FGDs. A facilitator's guide led the discussions, and data saturation was reached after seven purposefully selected FGD sessions. These FGDs were chosen to delve deeper into participants' perspectives, experiences, and insights on the research topic (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009). Quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires designed on a five-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 "strongly agree" to 5 "strongly disagree"), aligning with the approach used by Buck et al. (2009). This facilitated standardized measurement and analysis of participants' responses, enabling quantitative assessment of the research variables.

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data collected for objective one, specifically from the FGDs, to uncover recurring patterns and categories within the responses (Creswell, 2014). The process began with data familiarization, where the researcher repeatedly reviewed transcripts to immerse in the data. Following this, initial codes were generated to identify significant concepts related to brand benefits and their influence on higher education enrollment. These codes were then grouped through an iterative process to search for overarching themes. Once potential themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance to the research objectives. The researcher then defined and named the final themes, ensuring each captured an essential aspect of students' decision-making processes regarding brand perception. The main themes generated were presented in a comprehensive narrative, interpreting their implications within the broader context of the study. The multiple linear regression method was utilized for the quantitative data analysis, as this statistical technique is well-suited for determining the correlation between variables (Kothari, 2009). To estimate the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable, equation 1 was employed, and a confidence interval of 95% was used to judge the significance or insignificance of the findings.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \epsilon \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

The a priori expectation for the variables is that higher education students' enrolment intention (Y) will be influenced by brand name benefits (X₁), brand logo benefits (X₂), and brand slogan benefits (X₃). The coefficients or constants, denoted as β₀, β₁, β₂, and β₃, are expected to reveal the magnitude and direction of the impact of each respective brand-related factor on the student's enrolment intention.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Reliability and validity of data

To ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data, rigorous research methods and techniques were employed. Remarkably high Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.977, 0.982, and 0.987 were obtained for brand name, logo, and slogan benefits, respectively, as indicated in Table 2 in the appendices. These values confidently exceed the 7.0 threshold, unequivocally affirming the measured variables' utmost reliability.

Table 2 Reliability test results for objective two

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Brand name benefits	.977	6
Brand logo benefits	.982	5
Brand slogan benefits	.987	6

Source: Field data (2023)

Validity was ensured by employing established measurement scales that have been previously validated and conducting pilot testing of instruments to identify and address any potential issues or limitations that could affect data collection (John & Creswell, 2014; Venkatesh et al., 2013). Furthermore, factor Analysis was utilized to assess the underlying structure of the data, to identify latent factors responsible for explaining the variance observed in the variables. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was evaluated, yielding a high suitability value of 0.949, signifying strong interrelationships among the variables as indicated in Table 3 in the appendices. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was performed, revealing a highly significant result with an approximate Chi-Square value of 0.000, confirming the substantial interrelatedness of the variables.

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test for Objective Two

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.949
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4361.369
	Df	406
	Sig.	.000

Source: Field data (2023)

3.1.2 Thematic Analysis of Factors Influencing Students' Higher Education Enrolment Decisions

Figure 2 indicates qualitative findings on a hierarchy of factors significantly influencing students' decisions to enroll in higher education institutions. The most critical factors identified include reputation and rankings, alumni success and networks, campus facilities, faculty expertise, scholarships, financial aid, and the diversity of academic programs. These elements underscore students' preferences for institutional prestige, quality education, affordability, and enriching campus experiences. Understanding these influences is essential for institutions striving to attract and retain students in a competitive educational landscape.

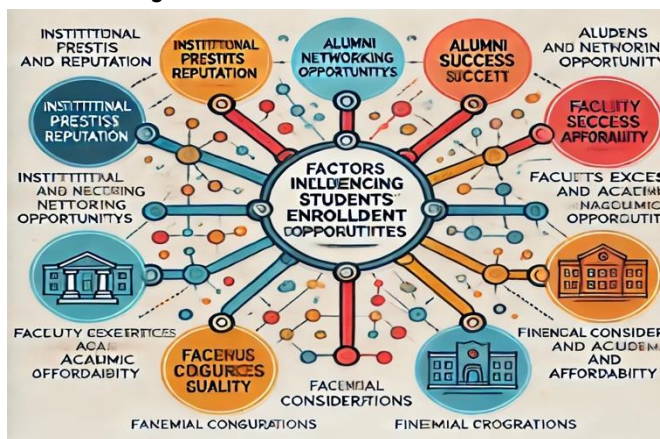


Figure 2 Thematic Analysis of Factors Influencing Students' Enrolment Decisions

3.1.3 Students' Perception of Brand Benefits and Their Intention to Pursue Higher Education

Model Summary

This section investigates students' perceptions of brand benefits and their intention to pursue higher education. In this study, a linear regression model was used to explore the relationship between the dependent variable, Higher Education Enrolment Intention, and three predictor variables: Brand Name Benefits (BNB), Brand Logo Benefits (BLB), and Brand Slogan Benefits (BSB). The model summary in Table 4 in the appendices revealed an Adjusted R Square value of 0.647, indicating that around 64.7% of the variance in Higher Education Enrolment Intention can be explained by BNB, BLB, and BSB. The multiple correlation coefficient (R) of 0.812 further supports a strong positive relationship between brand-related benefits and Higher Education Enrolment Intention. These findings highlight the meaningful impact of brand-related benefits (BNB, BLB, and BSB) on students' intention to enrolment higher education products or services, offering valuable information for understanding the factors influencing students' decision-making in this context.

Table 4 Summary of results

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.812 ^a	.660	.647	3.55316

a. Predictors: (Constant), BNB, BLB, BSB

Source: Field data analysis (2023)

Coefficient analysis

The coefficient analysis in Table 5 in the appendices provides crucial information on the standardized coefficients for the regression model involving the dependent variable, Higher Education Enrolment Intention (HEEI), and three predictor variables: Brand Name Benefits (BNB), Brand Logo Benefits (BLB), and Brand Slogan Benefits (BSB), represented by equation 2.

Table 5 Test of significance results

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.671	1.317		2.029	.046
	BNB	.387	.100	.700	3.873	.000
	BLB	-.141	.093	-.288	-1.523	.132
	BSB	.213	.053	.437	4.041	.000

a. Dependent Variable: HEEI

Source: Field data analysis (2023)

$$HEEI = \beta_0 + 0.7BNB - 0.288BLB + 0.437BSB + \epsilon \dots \dots \dots (2)$$

The coefficient analysis presented in Table 5 identifies the key determinants of Higher Education Enrolment Intention (HEEI) by evaluating three predictor variables: Brand Name Benefits (BNB), Brand Logo Benefits (BLB), and Brand Slogan Benefits (BSB). The results indicate that both BNB and BSB significantly positively influence HEEI, whereas BLB does not demonstrate a significant effect. Specifically, BNB shows a strong positive correlation with HEEI, as evidenced by a standardized coefficient of 0.700, a t-value of 3.873, and a p-value of 0.000. This finding implies that an increase in BNB corresponds with a substantial rise in HEEI, emphasizing the importance of institutional reputation and prestige in attracting prospective students. Similarly, BSB positively influences HEEI, reflected in a standardized coefficient of 0.437 and a t-value of 4.041, yielding a significant p-value of 0.000. This suggests that an increase in BSB is associated with an increase in HEEI, highlighting the significance of effective branding messages in shaping students' perceptions and enrolment decisions. Conversely, BLB reveals a negative coefficient of -0.288, accompanied by a p-value of 0.132, indicating no significant impact on enrolment intentions.

This result suggests that variations in BLB do not substantially influence HEEI. In conclusion, higher education institutions should prioritize enhancing the perceived benefits of their brand names and slogans to boost enrolment intentions effectively. Fostering a strong institutional reputation and delivering compelling branding messages will be essential in navigating the competitive landscape of higher education.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1 Thematic Analysis of Factors Influencing Students' Higher Education Enrolment Decisions (Figure 2)

Higher Education Institution Reputation and Ranking

Based on the FGDs, reputation, and rankings emerge as the most crucial factors, indicating the immense value students place on an institution's standing and prestige. Similarly, studies suggest that the reputation and ranking of a university play a pivotal role in shaping students' choices when deciding to enroll in higher education institutions (Baden-Fuller & Ang, 2001; Oy Lar Kiki et al., 2023). The participants argued that reputation and ranking are interwoven factors that influence individuals' decisions when selecting a university or higher education institution. A university's reputation, built through consistent academic excellence, notable research contributions, and positive student experiences, shapes perceptions held by the academic community, employers, and the public. This positive reputation often leads to a higher ranking, reflecting the institution's quality and impact. On the other hand, university rankings, which assess performance based on various criteria such

as academic reputation, faculty-to-student ratio, and research output, contribute to a university's reputation (Girard & Pinar, 2020). Higher-ranked universities are perceived as prestigious and are believed to offer superior academic opportunities, making them more appealing to prospective students.

Alumni Success and Networks

Following closely to brand reputation and ranking, Alumni success and networks play a vital role, highlighting the impact of a strong alumni network and the success of past graduates in attracting prospective students. Findings from FGDs with prospective students revealed that the strength of an institution's alumni network and networking opportunities significantly influenced their enrollment intention when selecting a university. Active and engaged alumni communities offering mentorship and career guidance were valued as a commitment to post-graduation support. Dedicated career services providing internships, job placement assistance, and networking opportunities enhanced the institution's brand reputation. Students also emphasized the importance of alumni engagement, networking events, and professional connections, which created a sense of belonging and support for future career prospects (Vo Minh et al., 2022). Additionally, the success and achievements of alumni inspired confidence in the institution's ability to provide quality education and valuable networking opportunities, reinforcing the belief that attending such a university would lead to a successful future with strong alumni connections. Comparably, research studies indicate that international research collaboration and improved international exposure and credentials exert a significant influence on students' decisions when considering enrolment in higher learning institutions (Baden-Fuller & Ang, 2001; Kiki, Lau, & Chan, 2023).

Campus Facilities and Resources

Campus facilities and resources carry substantial weight, reflecting students' preference for institutions with well-equipped and modern facilities. The FGDs conducted with diverse students revealed the paramount influence of campus facilities and resources on their decision to enroll in a higher institution. Students passionately argued that a well-maintained and modern campus featuring state-of-the-art facilities, advanced laboratories, well-equipped libraries, and updated technology greatly influenced their perception of the institution's brand image, a sentiment further corroborated by empirical studies (Ligori et al., 2022; Sheth & Koschmann, 2019). They believed that such facilities demonstrated a genuine commitment from the university to provide a conducive and enriching learning environment, which strongly attracted them to consider that institution. Moreover, they emphasized that high-quality facilities and resources reflected the institution's dedication to supporting their academic and research pursuits, which are essential tools to enhance their educational experience. The presence of well-established research centers and recreational facilities also contributed to their positive impression of the university. Throughout the FGDs, the students argued that the availability of a supportive and conducive learning environment, shaped by modern infrastructure and well-equipped facilities, played a pivotal role in influencing their decision to choose the university, as it would offer the necessary resources and opportunities to thrive academically and personally.

Faculty Expertise

Faculty expertise is also essential, underscoring the influence of teaching staff quality on enrolment decisions. The expertise and qualifications of the faculty members at a higher education institution were identified as decisive factors significantly influencing students' enrolment intention. Throughout the FGDs, students emphasized that knowing the professors and instructors are highly regarded in their fields, coupled with relevant industry experience, was paramount in their decision-making process. This aspect of the institution's brand image

played a crucial role, as it instilled confidence that they would receive a top-notch education and mentorship from knowledgeable professionals. The presence of esteemed faculty members added a strong sense of credibility and assurance, positively influencing their perception of the university and reinforcing their intent to enroll. The influential role of faculty expertise in shaping enrolment intention underscored the significance of this brand element in guiding students toward their educational choices. In a similar vein, research findings suggest that factors such as lecturers' expertise, enhanced staff mobility, improved program delivery, international research collaboration, and increased global exposure significantly impact students' enrolment decisions in higher education institutions (Baden-Fuller & Ang, 2001; Ligori et al., 2022; Oy Lar Kiki et al., 2023).

Scholarship and Financial Aid

Scholarships and financial aid hold significant sway (9%), showcasing the effect of affordability on students' choices. The availability of scholarships, grants, and financial aid was crucial in students' higher education enrolment decisions. Many students emphasized their importance in making education more affordable and accessible. Prestigious scholarships were particularly attractive to high-achieving students due to their additional academic opportunities. Additionally, colleges and universities with reputations for providing generous personal and government financial support positively influenced students' perceptions of affordability and accessibility.

Moreover, paying tuition fees in several installments was encouraging, as it eased the financial burden and motivated students to join higher learning institutions. The participants highlighted students' gratitude for these opportunities, underscoring their significant impact on decision-making. Generally, scholarships, financial aid programs, and flexible payment options were pivotal in shaping students' choices regarding higher education enrolment. Also, research findings highlight that a decrease in political and financial risk significantly influences students' enrolment decisions in higher learning institutions (Baden-Fuller & Ang, 2001; Oy Lar Kiki et al., 2023).

Academic Programs

Academic programs and majors are valued (8%) for their diversity and relevance in attracting students. The information on how the availability of academic programs influences students' higher education enrolment decisions is derived from FGDs with college students. Throughout the FGDs, students emphasized the importance of considering factors beyond the brand name. They mentioned specific aspects such as the institution's reputation, the quality of education, accreditation, and the programs' suitability. Students expressed their focus on the substance of educational programs and prioritized factors like faculty qualifications and career development programs.

Additionally, the study revealed students' preferences for institutions with specialized programs that align with their interests and goals such as social and extracurricular activities, creativity programs, incubation opportunities, and self-practice programs for real-world learning experiences. They highlighted the impact of an institution's reputation for excellence in specific disciplines on its decision-making process. The information gathered from the FGDs underscores the significance of academic program availability in shaping college students' choices regarding higher education enrolment. Similarly, Studies indicate that curriculum innovation and added value to degree programs significantly influence students when making decisions about enrolling in higher learning institutions (Baden-Fuller & Ang, 2001; Oy Lar Kiki et al., 2023). Improved program delivery also plays a crucial role in shaping their enrolment choices.

3.2.2. Students' Perception of Brand Benefits and Their Intention to Pursue Higher Education

Brand Logo Benefits

The highest standardized coefficient of 0.700 for Brand Name Benefits (BNB) indicates its significant impact on HEEI. A more robust perception of value in a recognized brand leads to a greater intention to enrolment higher education products or services. The statistical significance of BNB's influence on HEEI is confirmed by the t-value of 3.873 ($p = 0.000$). These findings reinforce the robustness of the relationship, aligning with previous research on branding and consumer behavior in higher education (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Shrivastava & Jain, 2022). This alignment with prior research adds credibility to the importance of brand recognition in influencing consumers' decisions in higher education. Brand recognition and reputation significantly impact consumer decisions in higher education. A reputable brand instills trust and credibility, increasing the likelihood of choosing products or services associated with it. Well-known institutions are perceived to offer higher quality education and resources, making them attractive to potential students. Brand recognition simplifies decision-making, reduces risks, and creates an emotional connection, influencing consumer choices (Bapat & Thanigan, 2016; Ligorini et al., 2022). Additionally, a good brand name in higher education can enhance graduates' job prospects and career opportunities, as many employers value graduates from prestigious institutions. Trust in a brand's ability to provide quality education and career opportunities influences decision-making when selecting a higher education institution.

Brand Slogan Benefits

Brand Slogan Benefits (BSB) significantly and positively influence Higher Education Product Intention (HEEI), with a standardized coefficient of 0.437. Improvements in BSB correspond to increased intention among students to enroll in higher education products or services, albeit to a lesser extent than Brand Name Benefits (BNB). The statistical significance of this association is supported by a t-value of 4.041 ($p = 0.000$), confirming the persuasive power of brand slogans in driving consumers' intentions to engage with higher education offerings (Septianto et al., 2023; Supphellen & Nygaardsvik, 2002; Vo Minh et al., 2022). While some empirical reviews differ in their views on the positive influence of brand slogans on HEEI, Wolfsteiner, and Garaus (2023) reported contrasting findings. Brand slogans are more effective in attracting new applicants than retaining existing customers throughout their academic journey. The ability of a brand slogan to attract and retain students lies in its capacity to resonate with the target audience, convey a compelling message, evoke emotions, and communicate the institution's unique value proposition. Moreover, effective brand slogans can differentiate a higher education institution from its competitors, enabling it to stand out in a crowded market (Vo Minh et al., 2022). Additionally, brand slogans play a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty among existing students and alumni, creating a lasting bond between the institution and its students and leading to continued engagement and support even after graduation.

Brand Logo Benefits

Brand Logo Benefits (BLB) do not display a statistically significant relationship with Higher Education Product Intention (HEEI), as evidenced by its standardized coefficient of -0.288 and a t-value of -1.523 ($p = 0.132$). These findings suggest that changes in Brand Logo Benefits do not substantially influence students' enrolment intentions within the context of this research. The lack of significance calls for further investigation into potential reasons behind this absence of a significant relationship between brand logos and higher education enrolment intentions. Moreover, exploring cultural differences' role in shaping brand logos' influence on students' enrolment intentions could provide valuable insights and open

intriguing avenues for future research (Mirzaei et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2023; Soliman, 2023). Despite the lack of significant influence on HEEI in this study, it is essential to recognize that brand logos remain a vital visual element in higher education branding and marketing efforts. Serving as a visual representation of an institution's identity, values, and reputation, logos play a crucial role in building brand recognition and recall among prospective students (Sharma et al., 2023). While their immediate influence on enrolment intentions may be limited, strong and recognizable logos can create a cohesive brand image and foster brand loyalty among current students and alumni (Ligori et al., 2022).

This research significantly advances the existing literature by affirming the critical roles of brand name and slogan benefits while revealing the limited influence of brand logo benefits. Unlike prior studies that primarily centered on conventional branding elements, this study offers a refined perspective on how different facets of branding impact student decision-making. This differentiation enriches the ongoing discourse surrounding branding in higher education and opens new avenues for future inquiry. Moreover, subsequent research could explore the intricate interplay between logos and student decision-making processes to understand better how brand logos shape students' perceptions and preferences. By investigating this relationship, scholars can uncover more profound insights into the branding strategies that effectively resonate with prospective students, ultimately enhancing institutional appeal and fostering informed choices in higher education.

4. Conclusion

This study identified critical factors influencing students' decisions to enroll in higher education institutions. Focus group discussions revealed that brand reputation and rankings, alumni success and networks, campus facilities, faculty expertise, scholarships, financial aid, and academic programs significantly impact enrolment choices. Understanding these influences is essential for institutions striving to attract and retain students in a competitive educational landscape. Furthermore, the research examined the relationship between brand-related benefits and students' enrolment intentions. The findings indicated that brand name and slogan benefits significantly enhance enrolment intentions, highlighting the importance of brand recognition and effective messaging in shaping students' decisions.

Conversely, brand logo benefits were found to have no significant impact. The implications for higher education institutions are clear. Institutions should prioritize the development of a strong brand reputation and creating compelling slogans that effectively communicate their unique value propositions. These strategies can enhance students' willingness to engage with their offerings. This research contributes valuable insights into branding and consumer behavior in higher education. It underscores the pivotal roles of brand name and slogan benefits while indicating the need for further investigation into the factors influencing student choices. Future research should focus on cross-cultural studies, explore the interactions between brand-related benefits and other decision-making factors, and assess the long-term effects of branding on student satisfaction and academic performance.

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