

“How Branding Process Activities impact brand quality within Higher Education Institutions in Chhattisgarh”

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This research paper provides an overview of the problem statement and briefly discusses the literature background in which it is embedded. Further, it enumerates the research objectives, design, methodology and scope of the study.

1.1. Introduction

Brands are pivotal sources for generating and sustaining a competitive advantage, which is a source of strong and favourable differentiators (Aaker, 1996). The world of Indian education is in an enriching churn and the last 20 years have seen a phenomenal growth of education in India. The universities have introduced several contemporary courses to meet the industry demand (Kumar & Dash, 2011). Building an educational brand has become an important agenda for universities, particularly due challenges from newer institutions, shrinking global boundaries, and fragmentation of consumers. More stringent competition and increased expectations on brand performance have increased the importance of assessing brand equity for private universities. However, there has been very limited academic research to understand the role played by private university brand equity, especially in the Indian context.

Education branding worldwide is still largely at the stage of differentiation, which is based on self-defined sets of attributes and benefits. Universities in India are still striving to establish their own differentiated value proposition. Currently they are focusing more on functional attributes – which are ‘parity points’ rather than ‘differentiators’, but they need to uncover the intangible attributes on which they can position themselves. In a global market where functionally similar products and services are available from a wide range of suppliers, the ‘brand name’ has become an important differentiating tool, as it offers promise of value and quality to consumers (Kartono & Rao, 2008). Strong brands help consumers cut through the proliferation of choices available in product and service categories.

The goal of brand building in educational institutions is to create awareness in the minds of target audiences and focus on the intersection of the institution's core values and the expectations of target audience. Branding is about finding the sweet spot between what the institution is and what their audience wants (Sevier & Sickler, 2004). Parameswaran and Glowacka (1995) in their study of university image conclude that higher education institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create an advantage in an increasingly competitive market. It is this image that will impact students' willingness to apply to that institution for enrolment or for other research and developmental activities. The image portrayed by the institution of higher education plays a critical role in the attitudes of the institution's publics toward that institution (Yavas & Shemwell, 1996).

In today's complex and highly competitive marketplace, universities are turning to branding as a solution in dealing with global challenges. Topor (2005) suggests that universities need to build reputation, which can be done by enhancing brand equity and goodwill. Brand equity measures the value of the brand. However, the concept has been less explored in the service sector, especially in higher education (Mourad, Ennew, & Kortam, 2010).

With this background, this present study proposes a framework of familiarity–perception–preference–choice for measuring customer-based brand equity of universities. The framework includes determinants of brand awareness (i.e. brand familiarity), brand image dimensions (the perceived quality–product and service attributes; overall brand image – symbolic attribute; and perceived value for money (VFM)), willingness to pay a price premium, and customer choice (behavioural indicators/outcomes of brand equity) (Keller, 1993).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Method of Literature Review

For the identification of workable research gaps in the area of branding in higher education, a review of literature published in the reputed academic research journals between 2000 and 2016 was done in which the academic literature was subjected to content analysis for the purpose of classification. Content analysis as technique for compressing texts using explicit rules of coding has been recognized as a systematic and replicable technique for literature review (Weber, 1990).

According to Holsti (1969), content analysis is a technique for drawing inferences by systematic and objective classification of data. In content analysis, the researchers use five key criteria as suggested by Kassirjian and Robertson (1991) as well as Kolbe and Burnett (1991). These five key criteria include: sampling, objectivity, reliability, systemization and quantification. For this literature review, the communications population was specified as private university and educational branding literature restricted to the five well-known online databases: (1) Science Direct, (2) Emerald Fulltext, (3) Sage, (4) SpringerLink, and (5) Taylor & Francis. In this literature review, the researchers have taken only academic literature published in academic journals published in these databases, however, there could be many sources apart from these five databases, e.g. practitioner publications and reports, conference papers, master's and doctoral dissertations, textbooks and unpublished working papers. Since both academicians and practitioners use journals as a source of new findings in their respective domains (Ngai, 2005). Therefore, the decision to use journals as the primary source of literature could be one of the rationales.

The identification of papers for the communication population started with an online search for literature based on the keyword descriptor, "social exchange relationship" and "employee creativity", using the above mentioned five databases and for the period ranging from year 2000 to 2016. The keyword descriptors were queried in the above mentioned databases in the title, abstract and the keyword list of the published articles. The initial search using the above discussed keywords and databases for the specified time period resulted in approx. 600 articles, which was a number too large for the critical review of literature. Therefore, the full text of each research paper was re-examined and further eliminations were done on the basis of present research themes, i.e. papers which did not fall in present research themes were rejected from the communication population. The review finally yielded 109 research papers related to employee creativity, and social exchange relationship sourced from 56 journals. This final set of 109 research papers was finally reviewed after classification. Although, a census approach was used for identifying key papers on the research theme but it has serious limitations with regard to source and time and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to the larger universe of literature. Content analysis typically uses smaller units of analysis such as paragraphs, sentences, words and so forth (Unerman, 2000). Nonetheless, entire articles can also be used as the unit of analysis in a content analysis (Stock, 1997). In the current study, the unit of analysis is the full text research paper. The full text of each of the selected research papers was carefully studied by the researcher to identify the appropriate categorization.

This process was repeated by another independent researcher. Based on mutual discussion, the two researchers decided to classify the entire literature on the above mentioned themes. Both the researchers felt that the entire literature can be very well classified through mutual discussion and negotiation, would help in achieving objectivity, which is a mandatory characteristic of research.

Chris Chapleo (2015) The purpose of the study was to examine and explore the factors necessary with in Non Profit Organization for successful branding and challenges in their implementation. The approach was qualitative one, conducted through depth interview. Researcher found some factors considered important to branding were identified, particularly leadership and clear vision. It was interesting that respondents generally agreed that limited marketing budget were not necessarily a major problem. I felt that such challenges in implementation that a specific conceptual framework for NPO branding could add real value.

Ashita Aggarwal Sharma, Vithala R. Rao & Sapna Popli (2013) The study aims to assess the brand equity of select Indian business schools using a familiarity-perception-preference-choice framework. This study highlights how consumer-based equity measures can be used to improve business school positioning and hence the brand image therefore it would help imitations apply brand equity measurements to their business schools and implement focused branding efforts to gain a higher student share and build quality education brands. CBBE framework measures related to different stages of hierarchy in business school decision making for calculation of brand equity in terms of familiarity, perception of quality, brand assessment and preference. As the findings suggest that brands have a significant role to play in business school selection. Thus, the prospective students as stakeholders infer the business school brand on overall brand image, which is build through ‘ word of mouth’. Therefore, the role of public relations and social media becomes critical.

Puja Khatri Yukti Ahuja Sharma (2011). Study was conducted to know the developing an ethical institutional brand in India and the objective was To know the ethical practices in HEI can be powerful tool for branding and attaining competitive advantage and Educational Brand can be built on the basis of just and fair practices at the institution.

Limitation was sample taken only in Delhi-NCR, not covered tier 2 and 3 cities. Output of the study was academic processes an ethically strong institution can be built and also perception of UG and PG level students on different variable of ethical practices leading to brand building are found to vary.

Musa Pinar Paul Trapp Tulay Girard Thomas E Boyt (2011) The purpose of the study to make the brand ecosystem frame work in order to develop branding strategies for colleges and universities. Framework include core value creation which cover student experiences of the university in term of branding strategies, academic services and supporting activities which cover developing student learning experience that co created with students and faculty. As he found both creating activities will help to student learning experience and ultimately a strong university brand. I found conceptual framework is not easy to apply in other area.

Chris Chapleo (2010). Title was what defines successful university brands ?, the purpose was the study to know the marketing variable associated with branding activities and explore and identified as having successful brand in UK. Limitations was hard to measure how successful university brands are when there is little empirical literature on the aims of branding in universities and also lack of knowledge underpinning the precise objectives of university branding. Researcher found that even among those brands considered successful, challenges such as lack of internal brand engagement and limited international resonance may be apparent and certain common positive success factors are also suggested.

Geoffrey Soutar Margaret McNeil (1996) The study was conducted to measure the service quality of education provide in Australia. Researcher apply performance indicators, SERVQUAL scale to understand the service quality, he found gap between expectation and perceptions and also the result was fail to measure the quality of education and as performance indicators – measures of activity rather than true measure of quality of student.

2.2. Indian Higher Education

The Indian higher education sector is heterogeneous with different types of institutions coexisting and facing challenges of sustaining and communicating their quality. Hence the branding of education institutions is expected to become more important and vital for their growth and survival (Harsha & Shah, 2011).

Foreseeing the demand and importance of education, the Knowledge Commission of India has recommended the opening of IITs, IIMs, and Central Universities as well as allowing of private universities to operate in the country. Consequently, there has been a phenomenal growth in supply of private universities and institutions in India. India's seemingly unstoppable economic rise, an aspiring middle class desire to stand out in a competitive job market and a lucrative opportunity for investors fuelled a bubble in the higher education market space (Shah, 2012). Overall, the private universities in India are doing big business not just in India but across the world. The global market is estimated at approx. US\$22 billion and growing annually at 10–12% (Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003). The Indian higher education market is a cluttered space, with the presence of private autonomous universities, state and central universities, independent government supported institutions and those promoted by corporate institutions (Sinha, 2006). As the market is lucrative and the competition is increasing rapidly, it is particularly important for private universities to have a brand-driven growth.

2.3. Customer-based Brand equity

Private Universities need to highlight their differentiating characteristics to create high brand awareness and preference among the stakeholders (applicants, faculty, industry, government and possible partners); the efforts of which are reflected in their brand equity measures. Bisoux (2010) says that a university can spend years in establishing and reinforcing its brand. Along with a strong brand, a university needs a clear statement of purpose to lead its community in a single direction. As competition has increased for students, universities need to create and maintain a distinct image in the marketplace (Keever, 1998).

Due to commoditization of education, student feedback in terms of measuring university image has currently become an essential line of enquiry (Segev, Raveh, & Farjoun, 1999), and students increasingly regard themselves as customers. Hence, universities are under greater pressure to build and maintain a good reputation for customer service, and invest in creating a more customer friendly environment (Chapleo, 2007). For the customer, the value of a brand arises from its role as an indicator of desirable attributes and is the basis for building an emotional bond (Teas & Grapentine, 1996).

Kotler and Fox (1995) suggested that the public forms images of higher education institutions based on limited information, and these images affect the likelihood of people attending or recommending the institution. It is the university's perceived excellence and service quality that guides the attendance decision of its prospective students.

The concept of measuring the value of the brand began in the early 1980s with the coining of the term 'brand equity' by advertising professionals in the USA (Barwise, 1993). Keller (1993) identifies two motivating reasons for measuring brand equity. The first stems from the growing need to develop sound procedures for estimating the financial value of a brand for mergers and acquisitions. The second motivation for studying brand equity comes from the impetus for firms to improve the efficiency of their marketing program by better understanding of consumer's perceptions and their response to marketing actions. Brand equity has been defined in many different ways by academics and practitioners worldwide. The multi-faceted nature of brand equity and the absence of any single accepted framework have resulted in a number of different conceptualizations for the construct (Kartono & Rao, 2008). The literature on brand equity, although substantial, is largely fragmented and inconclusive. The lack of an agreed definition has in turn spawned various methodologies for measuring the construct (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2009).

Brand equity measurements have been developed along three theoretical streams: finance, psychology and economics. The financial and economic perspectives are also referred to as firm-based brand equity (FBBE) measures. Financial outcome measures of brand equity assess the value of the brand as a financial asset to the firm. Simon and Sullivan (1993) defined brand equity as an intangible asset whose value can be extracted from the market value of the firm. Dubin (1998) adds the income method for brand valuation wherein the brand earning multiplier is used to calculate the brand's expected future earnings based on historical data. This method is also used by Interbrand (a global brand valuation company). The economic orientation of measuring brand equity includes two inter-related theories: (i) the consumer utility theory to assess the brand equity from the consumer's perspective and (ii) economic theories of demand and supply to measure the value of the brand to the firm (Kartono & Rao, 2008). FBBE measures are therefore the outcome of the consumer's response to the brand and the brand is considered as a driving force for increased market share and brand profitability. In psychological orientation, researchers employ a cognitive psychology approach to study how consumers perceive and process information about the brand to develop relevant brand equity measures (Keller, 2001, 2002).

These measures are based on CBBE (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2009). This paper focuses on the psychology-based brand equity measures according to the frame-work of familiarity –perception–preference–choice as described earlier.

Aaker (1991) defines brand equity as the set of assets like name awareness, loyal customers, perceived quality and associations that are linked to the brand and add value to the products/services being offered. He presents a framework of brand equity that comprises four key measures of the consumer mindset – brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality and brand associations along with other proprietary brand assets that give brands a competitive advantage. Aaker's (1996) model of brand equity augments his 1991 framework by adding market-based assessment measures that correspond to the brand's market share, price and distribution coverage.

Keller (1993) looks at brand equity from the consumer psychology perspective and introduces the concept of CBBE. He defines brand equity as the 'differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to marketing of the brand'. His framework includes two key dimensions of brand awareness (recall and recognition) and brand image (all possible associations for the brand) and classifies the method of measuring customer-based brand equity into direct and indirect approaches. The direct method measures the consumer's response to the marketing of branded product, relative to the unbranded offering. Such outcomes can be measured in terms of the consumers' behavior or preferences (stated/observed) after exposure to marketing activity and can be expressed in terms of their utility, purchase intent, past behavior, brand evaluations (or ratings) and willingness to pay a premium among other measures. His indirect approach to measure CBBE identifies the sources of brand equity in the minds of the consumers that drive consumer behavior and action outcomes. It involves measuring of constructs like awareness, associations, perceptions and brand evaluations, and much of academic research on CBBE uses this approach (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2009).

However, indirect measures of brand equity lack agreement on what dimensions constitute CBBE. Researchers believe that there is no such thing as a universal measure for brand equity and that the market sector and the life stage of the brand need to be accounted for when selecting an appropriate measure to assess brand equity (Baker, Nancarron, & Tinson, 2005; Mourad et al. 2010).

Ambler (2000) points out that many confuse the brand equity with brand valuation (worth of asset). For Ambler, value creation is a much more diffused process which should focus on the value that the brand creates for stakeholders. Business schools cater and create value for multiple stakeholders including students, faculty, alumni, industry, etc. Brand equity is hence both the ingredient and the outcome of this value creation process.

Higher education represents a context in which brand image potentially plays a major role in reducing the risk associated with the service largely because the assessment of quality takes place after consumption. Hence a strong brand is important to simplify the decision-making process (Byron, 1995; Chen, 2008). In addition, there are a number of factors that directly influence the evaluation of education quality and hence the perception of a university brand (Kurz, Scannell, & Veeder, 2008). These factors include staff, location, size, history, legacy and international presence (Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008; Mourad, 2010). Finally, the social image of the education institution and its overall position in the market are important in influencing the higher education brand equity (Paden & Stell, 2006). The aggregate brand equity of a university, which affects its performance and ranking, is the summated brand equity from all its stakeholders. To summarize, business schools across the world today need to focus on their brand and measure the equity as the latter directly impacts performance and rankings.

3. Research Gaps Identified in the Literature

Based on the literature review, it may be summarized that the indirect approach to measuring CBBE has several merits: (i) the CBBE measures allow the assessment of equity at the brand level; (ii) a lot of published research uses this kind of measure and (iii) several practicing managers are more familiar and comfortable with consumer-based measures. Thus, managers can use this approach as a diagnostic tool for decision-making. Literature suggests that in the absence of commonly agreed measures of brand equity, each sector and brand need to identify its best-suited variables (Baker et al., 2005). In order to integrate varied measures of brand equity, the framework based on the perception–preference–choice paradigm and the hierarchy of effects model has special merit (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961; McGuire, 1972). According to Agarwal and Rao (1996), this framework provides measures linked to stages through which a consumer passes in the ‘purchase’ process and hence can be useful diagnostic information for managers.

In a comprehensive study on the measures of CBBE, they found that most indirect measures (with the exception of unaided recall) have convergent validity and hence are appropriate measures for brand equity construct. Mackay (2001) replicates the work of Agarwal and Rao and shows that most of the measures are found to be convergent to estimate choice. This replication provides confidence in the selection of the range of brand equity measures that could be employed in this study.

The aim of literature review is to identify workable research gaps and subsequently leading to propositions or hypotheses, which could be tested through data analyses. The present literature review is a critical assessment of previous literature accomplished in the domain of brand equity theory. The details regarding the data collection and methodology for this review is mentioned in the previous section. Therefore, going straight to the outcomes the following research gaps were identified in the existing literature:

- (1) The present literature does not suggest how the various independent and dependent measures of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) relate to each other in university brand decisions?
- (2) Literature present literature does not communicate how well can the brand equity measures predict the actual ranking of universities as done by external agencies?

4. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to contribute toward brand equity literature adopting a descriptive approach to empirically measure the customer-based brand equity of private universities in Chhattisgarh. Specifically, the study is at identifying the key antecedents and consequences that could be hypothesized in the prediction of customer-based brand equity after controlling for mediators. Therefore, the present study aims at empirically examining three issues:

- 1) To measure the CBBE of private universities in Chhattisgarh,
- 2) To explore the moderation effect of gender, religion, and parental occupation on the CBBE of private universities in Chhattisgarh.

5. Hypotheses

Empirical evidence has highlighted that customer knowledge has a positive effect on the CCBE. Therefore, the researchers propose the following hypotheses in this regard:

Hypothesis 1a: *Perceived quality has a significant positive effect on brand perception, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 1b: *Brand awareness has a significant positive effect on brand perception, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 1c: *Overall brand equity has a significant positive effect on brand perception, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 1d: *Value for money has a significant positive effect on brand perception, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 2: *Brand preference has a significant positive effect on brand equity, when other factors are controlled for.*

Similarly, the literature also supports the relationship between brand equity antecedents and consequences is moderated by gender, religion and parental occupation. Therefore, we further propose that:

Hypothesis 3a: *Gender of customer moderates the relationship between antecedents and consequences of brand equity, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 3b: *Religion of customer moderates the relationship between antecedents and consequences of brand equity, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 3c: *Parental income of customer moderates the relationship between antecedents and consequences of brand equity, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 4a: *Brand preference has a significant positive effect on willingness to pay price premium, when other factors are controlled for.*

Hypothesis 4b: *Brand preference has a significant positive effect on purchase intention/choice, when other factors are controlled for.*

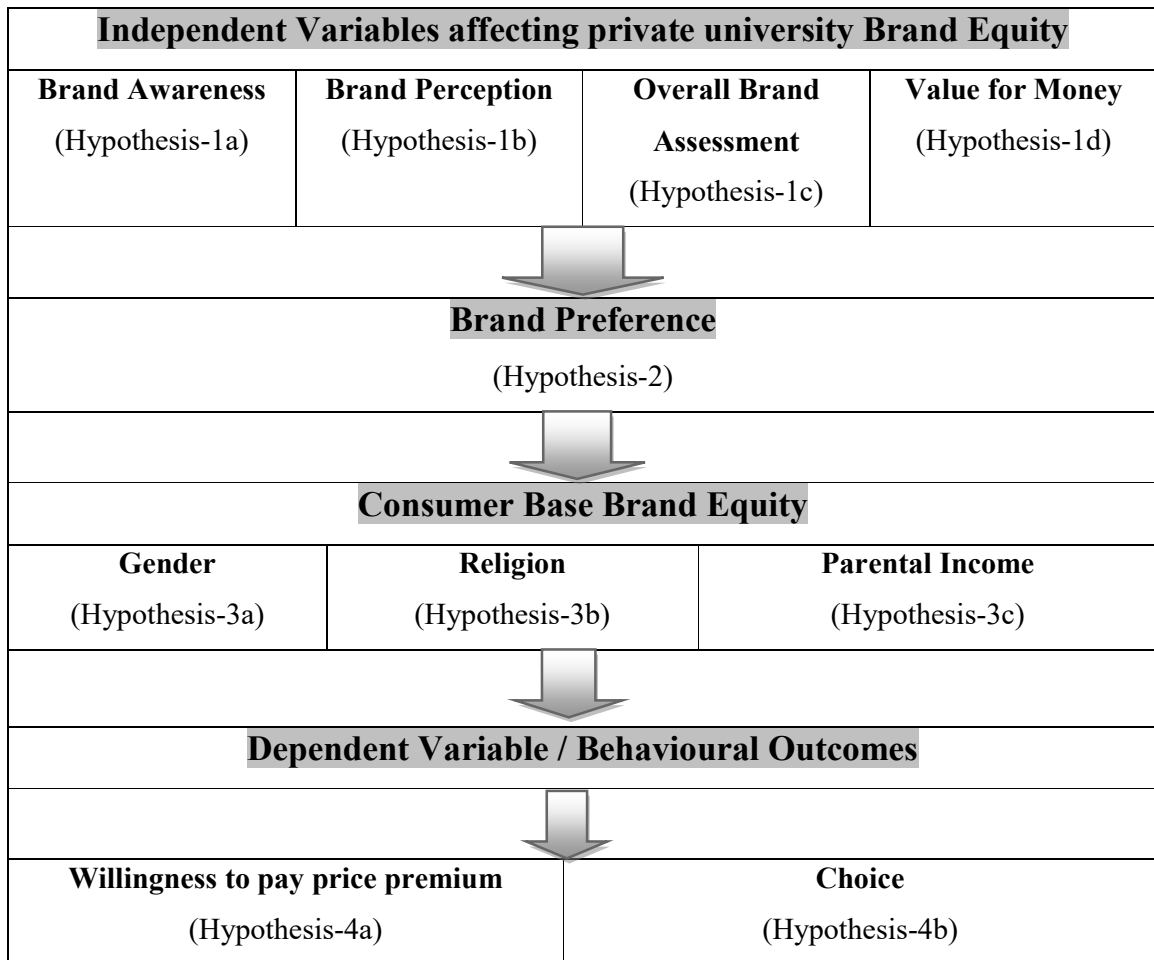


Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework hypothesized in this study.

6. Research Context/Setup

For the examination of phenomenon in question, private university as a research context is highly warranted. Although, there could be limitations with regard to the typology of institutions in this regard, yet private university seems to be a highly significant context considering the proliferation of such institution in the Indian education landscape, despite growth in govt. institutions in the last two decades. The Indian HEIs with 375 public and 40 private universities, and approximately 20,000 affiliated colleges established across the country is highly enormous and complex system (Agrawal 2009). The demand for higher education in India is always increasing and shows no sign of decline. Indian HEIs have evolved in all distinct and diverse streams, which are monitored by the apex body, The Ministry OF Human Recourse Development (MHRD).

The planning commission of India (now dissolved) has been the apex body behind educational planning, setting the national agenda for education and the parameter of funding higher education. Similarly, the University Grants Commission (UGC) as an apex regulatory body is responsible for distributing resources and promoting reforms, and living up to the expectations of national agenda for education. But still, the overall scenario of higher education in India does not match with the global quality standards as well as the needs and expectation of the employment sector.

HEIs are essential for national, social and economic development of the country. The need for value-based higher education is highly mandatory for inculcating employment skills and hence reducing poverty (Bhatia and Dash, 2011). India's higher education system is characterized by "islands of excellence in a sea of mediocrity" (Altbach, Philip G, 2014). The mainstream universities are recognized as lacking in quality. India's higher education system in the twenty-first century has become a profitable a business where quality is totally relegated and the owner only sees profit (Sinha, 2014). India needs to discover a framework that matches academic standards that are multi-dimensional as well as it is inexpensive to keep up its authority in the 21st century.

7. Research Design/Methodology

Research design is the blueprint or the skeleton which consists of methodologies regarding sampling, instrument development, data collection and data analysis. This research attempts to explore the relevance and importance of customer-based brand equity measures in the HEI context and its possible role in strengthening a university brand. Such study of consumer's perceptions will help universities in India to improve the efficiency of their marketing program and also provide guidelines for international expansion and portfolio enhancement.

7.1. Sampling Technique

Since, private universities within India and in abroad greatly vary in terms of infrastructure, funding, and academic and non-academic resources that are conducive to student welfare, it much likely that these factors will the brand image of the institution. Therefore, the study is focused on students aspiring to join private universities in India. The respondents of this survey will comprise of those prospective students who have applied to at least one of the private universities included in this study.

The study is conducted on prospective students as stakeholders and hence the brand equity of university calculated in this study will represent only that of prospective students as stakeholders. The sampling method used for the survey is stratified random sampling; 349 respondents will be selected for the study based on parameters including location, and other key variables.

7.2. Data Collection

Data will be collected using a self-administered survey method, with questions on attributes and variables mentioned above in the study framework. The instrument will be pretested to ensure clear understanding of the questions and response categories; and administered with both individual students and groups either at their homes or at participating institutions.

7.3. Analysis Technique

Given the multilevel nature of the data, it is advisable to use techniques like hierarchical linear regression, multiple regression analysis through structural equations modelling (SEM) technique with the software AMOS or SmartPLS to test the hypotheses (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004). In this study, the SEM technique will be used for the empirical examination of relationships hypothesized in the theoretical model (figure 1) and the moderation analysis based on social exchange differentiation.

8. Tentative Results / Out come

In order to keep pace with the changing business environment, competitive landscape, managerial philosophy and social considerations, academic organizations will have to capitalize on their state of art branding skills. The results of the present study will highlight on how organizations can leverage on brand equity to enhance their marketing performance, which is highly needed in the current times.

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