Brand Salience and Affective Factors on Brand Resonance of a Postgraduate Business School

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Abstract: In the fast-evolving landscape of higher education, strengthening brand resonance has become a crucial strategy for ensuring institutional sustainability, particularly in the post-pandemic era. This study investigates how postgraduate students at a public university business school in Malaysia perceive the School's brand in this context of educational transformation. The research explores the role of brand salience and two affective components—brand imagery and brand feeling—in shaping brand resonance. Data were collected through an online survey distributed to full-time and part-time students, eliciting 171 responses, which were then analysed using SmartPLS Version 4. The findings reveal that brand salience significantly influences both brand imagery and feeling, with brand feeling being the strongest affective factor driving brand resonance. These insights offer valuable guidance for the school in developing sustainable brand strategies that attract prospective students and retaining current ones. From a management perspective, the study signifies the importance of a resilient brand presence, as strong brand salience promotes brand feeling and imagery, contributing to long-term institutional sustainability in a post-pandemic educational environment.

Keywords: Brand resonance, Brand salience, Brand feeling, Brand imagery, Post-pandemic education sustainability

1. Introduction

The higher education sector has been increasingly marketised due to greater liberalisation in the service sector. As a result, many educational institutions have adopted innovative and sustainable marketing strategies to differentiate themselves from competitors, especially in Malaysia where universities face a challenging post-pandemic environment. These strategies are crucial given the new educational norms, to ensure long-term institutional sustainability and address the evolving needs of students in a rapidly evolving landscape. Branding has become a critical measure for universities to achieve greater enrolment, considering the increased number of higher learning services or universities. Malaysia has 20 public universities, 404 private higher institutions, 36 polytechnics, and 105 community colleges (Ministry of Higher Education, 2024). A tremendous increase in private higher institutions has made the competition stiffer. Thus, for public and private higher institutions, leveraging its branding, specifically on the university's brand image and performance, can be a critical marketing tool to help capture, involve, and retain students.

To establish a competitive edge over other universities, creating an effective brand could help carve the needful image in students' minds. However, creating an impactful institutional brand followed by effective communication can be challenging, particularly in educational services where the nature of the service is intangible. Hence, it is essential to study this from the perspective of consumers. One of the most applicable theories in branding literature is the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model, developed by Kevin Lane Keller in 2001. CBBE is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on customers' response to the marketing of that brand. A brand has positive CBBE when customers react more favourably to a product and how it is marketed when the brand is identified than when it is not. The CBBE pyramid comprises six building blocks: brand salience, brand performance, brand judgment, brand feeling, brand imagery, and brand resonance. The top of the pyramid is brand resonance; creating brand resonance should be the aim of achieving brand equity.

According to Keller, the brand resonance concept refers to the relationship between customers and a brand and how well they identify with it. Strong brand salience, performance, judgment, feeling, and imagery enhance brand resonance. The brand resonance model is a roadmap for brand-building, which is a helpful tool for brands to evaluate their marketing research initiatives. In higher education services, the CBBE Model is often used to measure a university's brand value from the student's perspective. For instance, Stukalina and Pavlyuk (2021) used the CBBE Model to evaluate the Transport and Telecommunication Institute in Latvia among local and international students. However, there is limited research on how higher education institutions develop and manage customer or student–brand relationships (Hashim et al., 2020). Students can benefit from both tangible and intangible aspects of postgraduate business school education.

The present study examines the impact of brand salience, brand imagery, and brand feeling on brand resonance in the context of higher education services in Malaysia. Brand imagery and brand feeling represent the affective predictors of brand resonance. By identifying the strongest predictor of brand resonance, the School can develop effective and sustainable brand positioning strategies that align with the new norms in post-pandemic education. This approach can support long-term institutional sustainability while attracting local and international students.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Brand Resonance

The Brand Resonance Pyramid comprises cognitive and affective components. The cognitive component comprises brand performance and judgment, representing consumers' rational views and evaluation of a particular brand. The affective component consists of brand imagery and brand feeling, symbolising the consumer's emotional psyche. Consumers must react cognitively and emotionally toward a particular product or service to achieve brand resonance. Brand resonance describes the relationship and level of identification that the customer has with the brand (MacInnis et al., 2009).

Resonance represents the depth of customers' psychological bond with the brand. The repeated purchase rate indicates behavioural loyalty, while attitudinal attachment describes favourable cognitive and affective processes in evaluating and deciding on a brand. In higher education services, willingness to recommend the institution to others and intention to pursue a higher degree at the same institution are included as brand loyalty. A sense of community explains the customers' affiliation with other people associated with the brand. Active engagement is considered the most robust affirmation of brand loyalty, i.e., when customers are engaged or willing to invest their time, energy, money, and other resources in the brand beyond their purchase or consumption.

Brand resonance is vital in providing a yardstick to describe customers' responses to the brand. However, before developing cognitive or affective responses toward a brand, consumers must know its presence. Therefore, brand salience serves as the foundation of the Brand Resonance Model.

2.2 Brand Salience, Brand Imagery and Brand Feeling

According to Keller and Swaminathan (2020), brand salience measures different aspects of brand awareness, including customers' ability to recall and recognise the brand under various conditions. It

also measures the customers' ability to link brand elements, like brand names, logos, and symbols, to specific associations in memory. The first step to building brand awareness is to make customers remember and choose the brand (Saputra et al., 2021). The breadth and depth of awareness determine how likely customers are to remember the brand elements, including its identity, the product or service category to which the brand belongs, and what brand comes to their mind when purchasing that product category.

In higher education, it was found that the institution's brand identity significantly influenced the respondents' intention to study at the institution (Mohamad Saleh et al., 2022). The findings of Mohamad Saleh et al.'s work (2022) on Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) showed that the respondents were aware of the vision and mission of the School towards sustainability, and such mission was reflected through the School's slogan. The respondents agreed that the university's brand reflects who they were and the feeling of being connected to the university, and they used USM sustainability practices to communicate who they are to other students.

Strong brand salience leads to the creation of solid brand meaning. Brand meaning can be created by establishing a brand image and associating the brand with related performance and imagery (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Brand performance describes how the product or service meets a customer's functional needs. In contrast, brand imagery refers to more intangible aspects, representing the affective aspects of brand resonance. It is formed by subjecting the product or services to extrinsic properties, which include how the brand aims to fulfil the customer's psychological or social needs. Customers' experience, advertising, or other sources can form the imagery association. For instance, Royo-Vela and Hunermund's work (2016) indicated that the brand image resulting from the university's brand communications influences potential students' choice of university. Mohamed et al. (2023) found that institutional image significantly influences student loyalty in a study involving 370 respondents who were students of the diploma program at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Terengganu, Malaysia. The institutional image also strengthens the relationship between students' satisfaction and loyalty (Mohamed et al., 2023).

Brand salience can predict brand responses, such as what customers think or feel about the brand. Brand feeling refers to customers' emotional responses and reactions to brands. According to Keller and Swaminathan (2020), emotional customer value is the value that customers feel emotionally, which is created from how the benefits of a product match the customers' emotional satisfaction. Emotional customer value can boost brand resonance since the latter reflects consumers' senses of a psychological relationship with a brand. Saputra et al. (2021) found that customers' emotional value positively and significantly impacts brand resonance.

Khanna et al.'s (2019) study investigated the roles of brand emotional value as determinants of brand resonance among the alumni of business schools across India. The study focused on alumni who argued that the perceived quality of education services is an essential determinant of brand equity. The study documented that feelings of gratitude positively impact brand resonance, created through behavioural loyalty and a sense of brand community. Consequently, the alumni have a strong connection with the institution, and most agreed that positive referrals and word of mouth contributed to the institution.

Based on the above discussion, the research hypotheses were developed, and the research framework is presented in Figure 2.

H1: Brand salience positively and significantly influences the brand imagery of a postgraduate business school
H2: Brand salience positively and significantly influences brand feeling towards a postgraduate business school
H3: Brand imagery positively and significantly affects brand resonance of a postgraduate business school
H4: Brand feeling positively and significantly affects the brand resonance of a postgraduate business school

Figure 1

Research framework
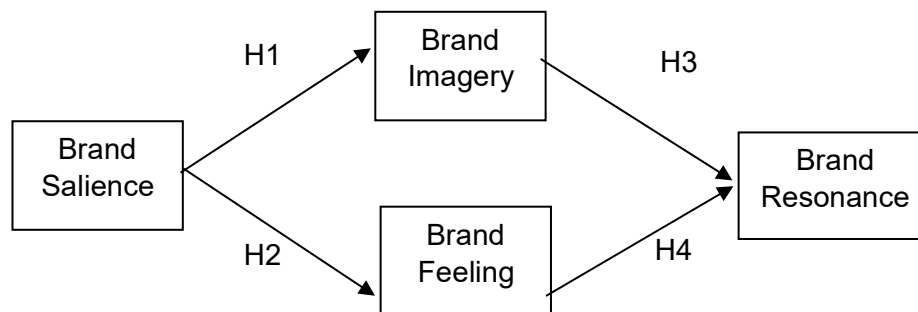
3. Research Methodology

This exploratory and descriptive research was conducted as a cross-sectional study. The target respondents were students enrolled in master's and doctoral degree programs, full-time and part-time, including local and international students at the main campus. A purposive sampling technique was used to select students registered in the program. G-power was used to determine the required sample size, which generated a minimum sample size of 143, given two predictors, an error level of 1%, and a power value of 95%. Data was collected using an online survey created on Google Forms. The survey link was posted to target respondents via the official "WhatsApp" group set up by the School's Academic Unit. The survey was open for two weeks, during which time 171 responses were obtained, all of which were usable and met the minimum sample size requirement. The questionnaire used in this study was divided into two sections. Section A collected information on the respondents' demographic variables, while Section B focused on the postgraduate business school's brand salience, brand imagery, brand feeling, and brand resonance. The indicators of the variables were adapted from Keller and Swaminathan's work (2020).

Brand salience, which measures the extent of consumer awareness of the brand, consists of eight items, including *"The School is knowledge-driven"* and *"The School is industry recognised"*. Respondents rated their agreement on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Brand imagery refers to how people abstractly think about a brand rather than about what the brand does (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). It is measured by four items that include, *"People I admire studied at the School"* and *"I feel more learned as I grew with the School"*. The items utilised a 10-scale measurement, with 1 as "Least Extent" and 10 as "Highest Extent." The brand feeling construct is measured by six items using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always). The brand feeling represents the emotional responses and reactions toward the brand, including *"The School gives me a feeling of welcoming"* ,*"The School gives me a feeling of excitement,"* and *"The School gives me a feeling of confidence"*.

Brand resonance reflects the most significant level of customer relationship with the brand. It describes how well customers relate to a specific brand and the intensity of the relationship (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). The construct is measured by 14 statements, including *"I consider myself loyal to the School"*, *"I love the School",* and *"The School is special to me"*. All 14 items used a five-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Profile of Respondents

Based on 171 responses (Table 1), 56% were female, and 44% were male. The vast majority of participants were from master's degree programs (74.6%). Most were in Semester 1 (31.6%) and

Semester 3 (29.2%) of their studies. The findings indicated that about one-third of the respondents were new students at the School. Most respondents (59.6%) obtained their bachelor's degree from the same university, while 40.4% earned their bachelor's degree qualifications from other universities.

Of the 171 respondents, 117 (68%) were part-time students, and 54 were full-time students (32%). Most respondents (42.7%) were between 20 and 29 years, while 39.8% were between 30 and 39 years. This age distribution represented the students' age range at the main campus. Regarding employment, 55% of the respondents (94) worked in the private sector, followed by 16.4% who worked in the public sector. The majority of the respondents earned between RM2,001 to RM5,000 (36.3%) and RM5,001 to RM8,000 (20.5%) per month.

Table 1

Respondents' profiles

Descriptions	Total (n= 171)	Percentages
Age		
20-29 years old	73	42.7
30-39 years old	68	39.8
40-49 years old	21	12.3
50 years old and above	9	5.3
Gender		
Male	75	44
Female	96	56
Employment		
Public sector	28	16.4
Private sector	94	55
Full-time student	29	17
Self-employed	9	5.3
Other	11	6.4
Monthly Income		
RM2,000 and below	16	9.4
RM2,001 to RM5,000	62	36.3
RM5,001 to RM8,000	35	20.5
RM8,001 to RM11,000	14	8.2
RM11,0001 and above	11	6.4
Not applicable	33	19.3
Study Program		
Master Degree	132	76.6
Doctoral Degree	40	23.4
Study Mode		
Full time	55	32
Part-time	116	68
Semester		
First	54	31.6
Second	33	19.3
Third	50	29.2
Forth	18	10.5
Fifth and above	16	9.5

4.2   Hypothesis Testing and Results

A two-step approach was used to analyse the data. The measurement model was used to assess the validity and reliability of the instruments, followed by a structural model to test the hypotheses

developed in this study. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to examine whether a given set of variables has the predicted effect on the responses (Ringle et. al., 2015). The smartPLS4 software evaluated the model's path coefficients to explain the dependent constructs' variance (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2017). All the individual items in the model were analysed to determine their reliability.

As Chin (1998) suggested, standardised loadings should be greater than 0.707 for further analysis. The average variance extracted (AVE) was used to determine the construct's convergent validity. For all constructs, it must be greater than 0.50. A value of 0.50 or higher indicates that latent structures can explain at least 50% of item variance and that the measurement scale has sufficient convergent validity (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2017). Further, Henseler et al. (2015) proposed a method for evaluating the discriminant validity of variance-based SEMs by measuring the heterotrait-monotrait correlation ratio (HTMT). The HTMT is a factor correlation estimate and should be significantly less than one to establish discriminant validity. For $HTMT_{0.9}$, discriminant validity is considered present when the value is less than 0.90. The bootstrapping method was then used to determine the significance of the path-shaping coefficient.

4.2.1 Measurement model

Based on Table 2, all the item loadings exceeded the minimum cut-off value of 0.707 (Chin, 1998), indicating that internal consistency is achieved. Other than that, the average variance extracted (AVE) values range from 0.670 – 0.775, meeting the minimum criteria of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2014). The composite reliability (CR) values also conform to the cut-off point 0.7, ranging between 0.892 – 0.966.

Table 2

Result of measurement model

Construct	Items	Loading	AVE	CR	R^2
Brand Salience (BS)	The School is innovative (BS1)	0.860	0.713	0.952	
	The School is knowledge-driven (BS2)	0.836			
	The School is trustworthy (BS3)	0.836			
	The School is likable (BS4)	0.878			
	The School is student-centred (BS5)	0.862			
	The School is community-centered (BS6)	0.844			
	The School is admirable (BS7)	0.873			
	The School is an industry-recognised (BS8)	0.760			
Brand Feeling (BF)	The School gives me a feeling of welcome (BF1)	0.834	0.775	0.954	0.680
	The School gives me a feeling of fun (BF2)	0.902			
	The School gives me a feeling of excitement (BF3)	0.905			
	The School gives me a feeling of confidence (BF4)	0.877			
	The School gives me a feeling of social approval (BF5)	0.885			
	The School gives me a feeling of self-respect (BF6)	0.878			
Brand Imagery (BI)	People I admire studied at the School (BI1)	0.758	0.676	0.892	0.564
	People I respect studied at the School (BI2)	0.750			
	The School brings pleasant thoughts (BI3)	0.921			
	I feel more learned as I grew with the School (BI4)	0.847			
	I consider myself loyal to the School (BR1)	0.711			

Construct	Items	Loading	AVE	CR	R²
Brand Resonance (BR)	I will always choose the School (BR2)	0.879	0.670	0.966	0.607
	I would go out of my way to visit the School (BR3)	0.839			
	I love the School (BR4)	0.796			
	The School is unique to me (BR5)	0.713			
	The School is more than a postgraduate business school to me (BR6)	0.739			
	I identify with people who go to the School (BR7)	0.809			
	I feel a deep connection with the School as a postgraduate business school (BR8)	0.845			
	I like to talk about the School to others (BR9)	0.857			
	I am always interested in learning more about the School (BR10)	0.867			
	I would be interested in merchandise with the School's name on it (BR11)	0.866			
	I am proud to have others know that I study at the School (BR12)	0.783			
	I like to visit the School's Website (BR13)	0.883			
	I follow news about the School closely (BR14)	0.846			

Table 3

Result for HTMT$_{0.90}$

Constructs	BS	BF	BI	BR
Brand Salience (BS)		0.874	0.785	0.741
Brand Feeling (BF)			0.719	
Brand Imagery (BI)				
Brand Resonance (BR)		0.764	0.739	

For discriminant validity (Table 3), this study followed the suggestion by Henseler et al. (2015), using the HTMT method to assess the discriminant validity criterion for the study. The results for HTMT$_{0.90}$ criteria indicate there are no discriminant validity issues for inter-construct correlations. Thus, the measurement model was satisfactory and provided sufficient evidence of reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity.

Figure 2

Structural model output
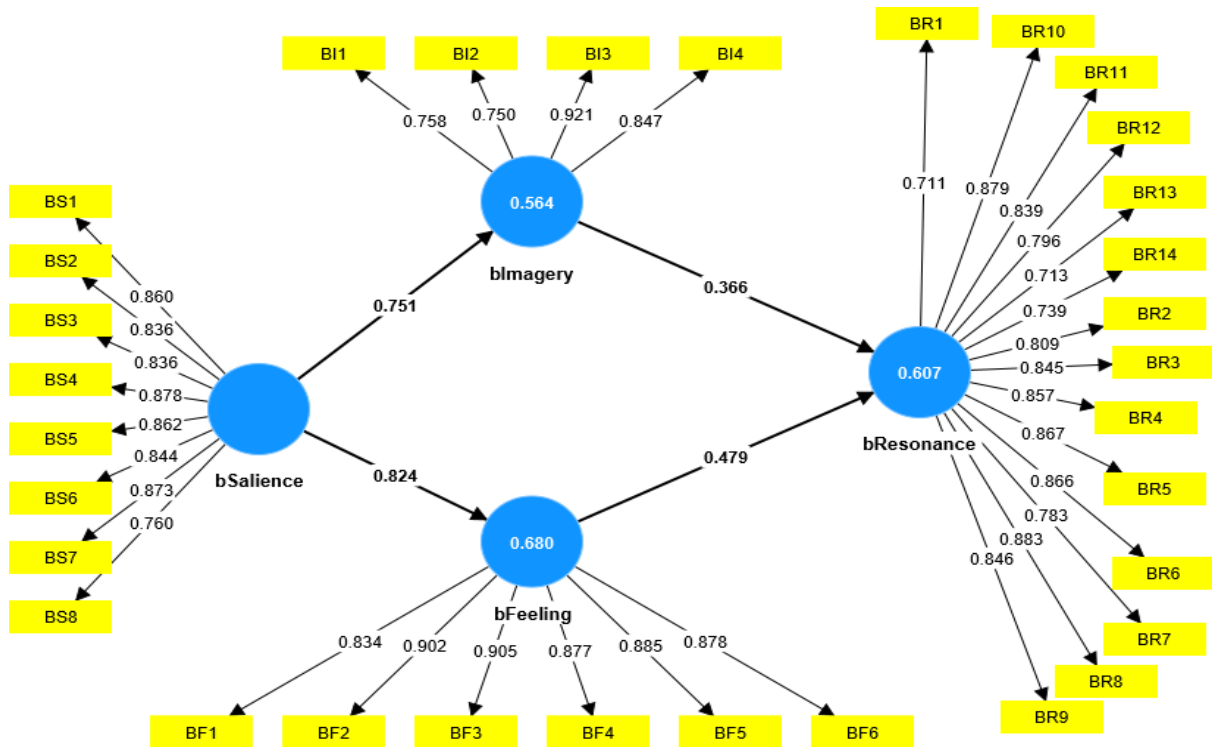
4.2.2 Structural model

To test the research hypotheses, a bootstrap with 5,000 resampling (Ramayah et al., 2018) was operated to generate the beta values, standard errors, t-values, and confidence intervals, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Result of structural model

Hypothesis	Beta	SD	t-value	p-value	BILL	BCIUL	f^2	VIF	Result
BS -> BI	0.751	0.031	24.003	0.000	0.701	0.803	1.292	1.000	Supported
BS -> BF	0.824	0.026	31.114	0.000	0.779	0.866	2.122	1.000	Supported
BI -> BR	0.366	0.075	4.850	0.000	0.241	0.488	0.176	1.936	Supported
BF -> BR	0.479	0.079	6.029	0.000	0.352	0.609	0.301	1.936	Supported

To assess the level of collinearity in PLS-SEM, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is referred to. The result indicates no potential issue with the collinearity problem (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006).

Based on the results in Table 4, all the hypotheses (H1, H2, H3 and H4) are supported. Brand salience was found to have a more substantial influence on brand feeling ($\beta = 0.824$, t-value = 31.114, p-value < 0.001), as opposed to brand imagery ($\beta = 0.751$, t-value = 24.003, p-value < 0.001). The results also indicate that brand feeling ($\beta = 0.479$, t-value = 6.029, p-value < 0.001) has a more substantial effect on brand resonance as compared to brand imagery ($\beta = 0.366$, t-value = 4.850, p-value < 0.001).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of brand salience (BS) on brand imagery (BI) and brand feeling (BF) and to determine to what extent BI and BF predict brand resonance (BR) among the respondents who were the students at a postgraduate business school. The survey results indicated that most respondents agreed that the School was trustworthy, knowledge-driven, innovative, and student-centred. Most respondents also agreed with statements such as "I consider myself loyal to the School" and "I am proud to have others know that I study at the School.", indicating a convincing brand resonance for the School. Based on the results, brand salience has a positive and significant influence on the brand imagery of a postgraduate business school. The respondents' awareness of what the School represents helps to create pleasant thoughts about the School. The study revealed that brand salience also positively and significantly affects brand feeling toward the School. The stronger the brand awareness, the more positive the respondents' feelings toward the School.

The acceptance of all proposed hypotheses showed the importance of brand salience, brand feeling, and brand imagery in building brand resonance, which allows the School to create a strong bond with the students. These findings align with the principles outlined in the Customer-Based Brand Equity Model (CBBE). The consumer journey begins with brand salience, where a strong knowledge of the brand is crucial for progressing to the next stage in the CBBE Model. In the context of this study, the results revealed that once students join the School, they tend to explore and create meaning for it. Emotional responses to the School's brand develop over time, and these brand feelings significantly influence respondents' loyalty to the School. In other words, the emotional value customers derive and the symbolic reputation of the brand can enhance brand resonance (Saputra et al., 2021). Hence, the roles of the affective elements of brand resonance should not be neglected to attract students and foster their connection to the institution. This emotional value of a brand is vital to support the rational value in sustaining the brand, as emphasized in the duality concept of branding (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

6. Recommendations

To achieve brand loyalty among its students, the School must strengthen the relationship between brand salience, brand feeling, and brand imagery. The study supports the findings of a previous study (Hashim et al., 2020) that a brand relationship strategy focused on students' psychological ties could help the School establish a stronger bond and favourable university brand relationship response. To enhance its brand salience, the School should focus on activities that align with its mission statement and brand mantra. The School could also leverage its past images of admired and respected students from its online website and other existing channels to enhance familiarity and increase engagement with the School. The School could leverage various elements, such as its reputation, accredited programs, up-to-date curriculum, and experienced faculty members, to strengthen the respondents' confidence and sense of belonging. Finally, the study suggests that the School's branding still lies with the people who have established strong relationships with the stakeholders. Thus, more subtle tactics for promoting the School's people through below-the-line programs like public relations and content marketing are strongly recommended.

It is important to note that the study has some limitations. As a non-probability technique was employed, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire population. However, as highlighted, the results provide compelling evidence of the significant role of brand salience in influencing brand imagery and brand feeling. The study's findings also underscore the importance of brand feeling and imagery as affective factors in establishing brand loyalty, which is critical for ensuring the sustainability of public higher education institutions in the post-pandemic landscape. Comparative studies between public and private higher education sectors are recommended. They would help better understand the similarities and differences between the two, enabling the identification of sustainable and innovative practices that can be adopted to enhance brand resonance in line with the new norms of post-pandemic education.

7. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author1, Author2, Author3 and Author4 designed the survey instrument and conducted the fieldwork. Author1, Author6 and Author7 prepared the literature review and overlooked the writeup of the whole article. Author1 and Author4 wrote the research methodology and did the data entry. Author4 and Author5 carried out the statistical analysis and interpretation of the results.

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