Measuring Brand Equity for Higher Education: a Case Study of CFVG in Vietnam

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Abstract—Higher education is a unique industry that considers branding as important function to create competitive advantage for universities and business schools. Measuring brand equity provides educational institution necessary strategic analysis before critical branding decisions. This study applies the CBBE brand equity model by (Keller, 2001) to measure the higher education brand with a case study of CFVG School of Management in Vietnam. With a mix approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the CBBE brand equity model is adapted for use in higher education context, with prospective and retrospective higher education students as the research subjects. Findings provide rich understandings about the concept of brand equity in higher education settings. This research contributes to current literature through testing the CBBE brand equity model in Vietnam as an emerging higher education market. Practical implications were highlighted for higher education practitioners in their efforts to establish strong brand equity.

Keywords--- Higher Education, Branding, Brand Equity, Higher Education Branding, Brand Management.

I. Introduction

Higher education is an unique industry that considers branding as important function to create competitive advantage for universities and business schools. The universities are striving to improve their social image by adopting brand management strategy. Better brand position definitely have impact on their recruitment performanceand brand plays important role in connecting a higher educational institution with its prospective students, students and graduates. In order for higher education institution to achieve branding success, measuring brand equity is critical for a thorough understanding of brand health and its situation for an impactful branding strategy. The higher education brand carries with its promise a wire range of intangible values that can be integrated in a pesonal identity. Bulotaite (2003) argued that the university name is highly connected to the emotions, images and appearances of the learners, and building a university brand should focus on those associations.

Though higher education is a special industry, universities and business school are increasingly open to marketing orientation, by which the students are increasingly considered "consumers" (Sweeney, Mazzarol, & Soutar, 2008). The application of customer-based brand equity in measuring brand equity for higher education is relevant and meaningful.

Literature indicated that brand equity measure the brand values and the degree of desirability that brand attributes are conveyed to customers. Brand equity serves as the basis for building an emotional bond with customers (Teas & Grapentine, 1996). The customer-based brand equity is conceptualized as "the overall utility that the consumer associates with the use and consumption of the brand; including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities" (Vázquez, Río, & Iglesias, 2002). Farquhar (1989) confirmed that brand equity represents the added value of the brand to the customers.

Despite the extensive research of brand equity in the context of physical products, less attention has been paid to this concept in the context of higher education. Ennew, Mourad, & Kortam (2011)made the first attempt to adapt Keller (2001)model in higher education sector. They argued that the concept of "higher education brand" has different characteristics as compared to other brand concepts, and university's brand equity essentially consists of two fundamental factors: "brand awareness" and "brand image". Their study proved that the brand image plays a more important role in creating brand equity.

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In practice, traditional approaches to branding that put emphasis on mass media techniques seem questionable in such a special context of higher education. In these settings, potential customers (prospective students) make their brand selection based on brand trust and prestige that should be endorsed by experience-based perception. A different brand equity building perspective is needed to provide effective branding guidelines in the current rapidly changing communication context.

Taking the case of a school of management in Vietnam, this paper aims to use brand equity model of Keller (2001)in the specific context of an higher education brand in Vietnam, an emerging market. With a study on prospective and retrospective students of CFVG, the results help to identify the key elements that make CFVG a successful brand in higher education market. The findings are expected to provide educational institutions a new perspective for building / enhancing their brand-equity.

In Vietnam, the higher education marketing is emerging with competitive pressures from home and abroad brands. In 2018 there are 79 programs from 29 institutions which deliver higher education programs in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Centre Franco-Vietnamien de Formation à la Gestion (CFVG), also called CFVG School of Management in Vietnam, is in the realm. CFVG has 25 years of operation in Vietanm with five mainprograms: an MBA, 3 Specialized Masters and a PhD program. It also offers the executive training programs to enterprises.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Brand Equity and Brand Equity Models

Brand equity is very important to building a strong brand and help the brand get more advantages than competitors. In the branding literature, the concept of brand equity has been well defined as "a multi-dimensional concept" (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Aaker (1991a, p.4) defined brand equity as [...a set of assets such as name awareness, loyal customers, perceived quality, and associations that are linked to the brand and add value to the product or service being offered].

Brand equity is conceptualized with various theoretical models. Aaker (1991a)introduced five dimensions (brand name awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary assets); Keller (1993)'s customer-based brand equity model focused on 02 constituents of brand knowledge: brand awareness (familiarity) and brand image (brand associations and their degree of favorability, strength and uniqueness). The "multidimensional consumer's based brand equity scale (MBE)" by Yoo & Donthu (2001)focused particularly on brand awareness, perceived quality, associations and loyalty.

Measuring brand equity is considered important because it reflects the brand health (brand image, brand loyalty...) and business profitability (business outcomes, sales and market share...). From different perspectives of conceptualizing brand equity, literature of brand equity identified 3 approaches to measure brand equity, which are: financial-based brand equity(Simon & Sullivan, 1993, Kim, Gon Kim, & An, 2003), customer-based brand equity(Vázquez et al., 2002) and employee-based brand equity (Supornpraditchai, Miller, Lings, & Jonmundsson, 2007). Among those three perspectives, the customer-based brand equity model is important for tracking the brand situation as well as the effectiveness of brand communication efforts toward customers. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding consumer brand knowledge structures that should be cultivated for implementing brand strategy.

2.2. Customer-based Brand Equity Pyramid

According to the customer-based brand equity model, brand equity is fundamentally determined by the brand knowledge created in consumers' mind through branding and communication efforts. Measurement of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) informs about unique effects that brand knowledge creates on consumer's response toward brand's marketing activities(Hoeffler & Keller, 2003; Keller, Apéria, & Georgson, 2008). From this perspective, brand knowledge is not only about the brand information, but it covers all the brand related associations held by customers, including thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences.

Basically, customer-based brand equity(CBBE) model indicates that power of a brand lies in the minds of customers (Janiszewski & Van Osselaer, 2000), and the powerful brands can create strong and meaningful image(Keller, 1993). A strong brand image eventually enhances differentiation and has a positive influence on buying behavior(McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999).

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Keller (2001) developed the customer-based brand equity pyramid that enacts four brand buildings steps:

- 1. Brand salience: ensuring identification of the brand with customers by aligning brand strategy with a specific purchase or consumption situations; in this first step, the goal is to create a brand identity that will make the customer recognize it and be aware of it through the name, logo or symbol of the brand.
- Brand performance: establishing the totality of brand meaning through satisfying customers' functional, psychological or social needs; then strategically linking tangible and intangible brand associations in the minds of customers through communication.
- Brand response: eliciting the proper customer responses in terms of brand-related judgments (customers' own personal opinions and evaluations) and feelings (customers' emotional responses and reactions with respect to the brand).
- 4. Brand resonance: converting brand response to create an intense, active loyalty relationship between customers and the brand. At the top of the pyramid, brand resonance is achieved when customers feel a deep relation with your brand.

The CBBE model emphasizes that a strong brand can be built rationally or emotionally connections with its customer(Keller, 2001). The brand resonance pyramid is critically important to track the contribution of marketing and communication performance to brand equity through creating intense, active loyalty relationships.

At a higher level, brand resonance has four dimensions that are closely linked to different aspects of brand loyalty such as (1) Behavioral loyalty (repeat purchases, increased amount or share of category volume...); (2) Attitudinal attachment (customer's perception, attitude, trust...); (3) Sense of community (customer's intentions to affiliate or attache with brand); (4) Active engagement (customer's willingness to invest personal resources on the brand).

2.3. Branding Context for Higher Education

Higher education represents a context in which brand image potentially plays a major role in decision making of brand choice. Brand image in the mind of students and graduates serve as a risk reliever that simplifies the decision process(Erdem & Swait, 1998). The evaluation of the educational quality depends on various factors including faculty, staffs, facilities, class size, learning experience, feelings during brand experience... Hence, having positive worth of mouth and recommendation from current students and alumni is important. Experience-based perceptions play important role in giving cues to the prospective students during the decision-making process.

In-depth literature review revealed thatKeller (2001)'s brand-equity pyramid arguing that building brand-equity does not depends solely on brand awareness or brand knowledge but also on important parameters (like brand salience, brand performance, brand imagery, judgement and feelings, brand resonance). This most realistic and robust framework emphasizes leveraging long-term loyalty of the customers. Hence, the model is relevant for measuring the brand equity in the context of higher education, where the brand resonance should be considered as one of the important goals.

III. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Method

The current research mixed method uses both secondary and primary sources of data. In the first phase, face-to-face interviews were performed with 10 students and alumni of CFVG school of Management to obtain information about their brand image, experience, feelings, attitudes and relationships with CFVG brand. Interviews were conducted on the basis of face- to-face and followed a semi-constructed format during 45 minutes.

From this, a survey instrument was developed to gather information from students and alumni of CFVG about measuring brand equity of CFVG. A sample of 328 CFVG students (61.2 %) and alumni (38.8 %) are chosen randomly from the list of student and graduates. The survey questionnaire was designed online and sent to all the interviewees. 134 valid responses have been received. The survey consisted of a series of closed-questions, addressing each aspect of Keller's pyramid. The collected data have been organized in a SPSS data base, then treated and analyzed by using relevant SPSS functions.

3.2. CFVG Brand

CFVG is the first international cooperation project in postgraduate education in the field of management in Vietnam. As of October 2017 CFVG had 3.257 graduates, making an active contribution to the high-level labor market and to the Vietnamese economy. Every year, CFVG enrolls about 300 students in its various programs.

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Brand Identity of CFVG

Apply Aaker model about Brand Identity in CFVG case, it can be seen in Table I these elements which CFVG want to transfers to students, alumni as well as potential candidates.

Table 1: CFVG'S Brand Identity

Brand as Product	Brand as Organization	Brand as Person	Brand as Symbol
International program	French	Professio- nal	Blue
Accreditation	Pretigious	Serious	French
Rigor	Long history	Friendly	CFVG's logo
Specialize	International partner	Dynamic	
Academic	High ranked in Vietnam	Well educated	
Exchange program			

The vision of the CFVG is to position itself as a higher education institution in management offering internationally recognized programs in cooperation with prestigious academic partners, supported by a powerful alumni network and a high-level administrative and academic team. As part of its public relations and its marketing plan, the CFVG promotes three concepts that best describe the institution: "Innovation – Development – Internationalization".

IV. Findings

Based on Keller (2001)'s Brand-Equity Pyramid, the brand equity of CFVG brand was thorough examine, and here below are findings achieved from the study results.

Brand Salience

Keller (2001)emphasized the ways identity is built and maintained to form brand salience with customer. From the well-established brand identity and strong communication efforts, customers have detailed information about the brand and clear understanding on the brand offerings and philosophy.

Regarding brand association, in the survey with 134 students/alumni, the five most mentioned words are: "prestigious training program" counted for 88.8%, "French-Vietnamese" and "Over 25 years of operation in Vietnam" counted for almost the same percentage 85.8%, "International standard" counted for 76.7% and the last factor is "Study trip" with 76.1% (see Figure 3.4). Among five words, "prestigious training program", "international standard", "French-Vietnamese" and "Over 25 years of operation in Vietnam" are the most remarkable features of CFVG's brand identity.

The results of χ^2 -tests reported by SPSS show that all the dimensions of CFVG Brand Image, namely *Program Prestige*, *International Standard Quality*, *French-Vietnamese Identity*, *Professionalism*, *Difficult/Challenging Program*, *Network Expanding*, *Employment Opportunity*, *Strong Alumni Network* are well perceived equally (independently) whatever the respondent is current student or alumnus of CFVG.

About brand personality, the students and alumni describe CFVG as a *gentleman*, *well-educated*(68.7%), *experienced*(approximately 56%) and *friendly* (38.8%). Those human characters are well perceived as the personalities of CFVG brand.

According to the conceptualization of brand image, the 3 essential dimensions, namely brand association's favorability, brand association's uniqueness and brand association's strength can bring a key to successfullybuilding brand equity. These factors might create in the customers' memory an impression about the brand and as a result, they make customers feel a relation with the brand. If the results are strong for these dimensions, the customers are loyal toward the brand.

The data shows the following factors that make the CFVG's brand strong: education quality with 67.2%, prestigous degree counted for 64.9% and high ranking with 53.7%. CFVG brand's favorable associations includes alumni association, networking and exchange program, with agreement of 50.7%, 47.8% and 43.3% respectively.

Notably, CFVG brand's unique association is not clearly emphasized, meaning that in higher education, the uniqueness or differentiation of brand is not really important to students and graduates.

Brand Meaning

According to Keller (2001), brand meaning includes two main constituents: brand performance and brand imagery, which represent how customers are differently associated with the brand.

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Brand performance of CFVG is shown by the students's satisfaction with programwith regards to the factors they considerimportant when studying at CFVG.Regarding the student's satisfactionwith CFVG brand, teaching staff, international standard curriculum and student quality are the elements highly appreciated, with the percentages of 78.4%,68.7% and 67.9% respectively. The results of χ^2 -tests reported by SPSS allow to confirm that all the factors of Satisfaction, namely Faculty, Admin. Staff, Infrastructure, Leaders, International Standard Program, Quality at Entry, Qualification of Focus Hour Speakers, Appropriate Schedule, Sufficient and Clear Communication, Library Sources, Soft Skill Development, Specialization Options, Large Corporate Network, Partner School Network, Alumni Network are equally (independently) perceived whatever the respondent is current student or alumnus of CFVG (with many observed significances greater than 0.50, even 0.80 or 0.90).

Furthermore, it results from table Rotated Component Matrix that the important factors are categorized in three groups:

- The first component is linked mostly with Large Corporate Network, Partner School Network and Alumni Network (so we can name this component as Corporate –Partner School Alumni Network);
- The second component is linked mostly with Faculty, International Standard Program, Quality at Entry, Qualification of Focus Hour Speakers, and Soft Skill Development (so we can name this component as Academic Quality);
- The third component is linked mostly with Admin. Staff, Infrastructure, Leaders, and Sufficient and Clear Communication (so we can name this component as Management & Communication).

Brand Imagery refers to how well the brand statify the customers' needs on a social and psychological level(Keller, 2001). Imagery concerns mostly the intangible aspects of the brand, including user profile, purchase and use situation, personality and value, history, heritage, experience. In the context of higher education, abstract thinking about brand of students and graduats are typically connected to user profile, personality and value.

Study result show that students and graduates of CFVG share the same identity attributes thanks to their connection to the brand. Outstanding descriptors about graduates include: Various career background (80%), Strong expertise (72%), socialble & friendly (68%), experienced (67%), professional success(66%), while students of CFVG are described with characteristics such as various career background (84%), strong expertise(78%), cooperative spirit(78%), good attitude toward study (75%), experienced(62%. Besides, CFVG images are believed toenhance the personal image of students and graduates, such as: increasing personal prestige thanks to qualified degree (84%), offering opportunities for self-development (79%), increased professional expertise, good appreciation by colleagues (67%) and superiors thanks to CFVG brand(32%).

CFVG's Brand Response

CFVG's Brand Judgments

Regarding the recommendation intentions, 48.9% respondents usually introduce CFVG and 6% very usually, in total, more than 50% repondents willing to say something about CFVG.

Study result shows that "prestigous program" is again the first factor that receives high recommendation from respondent 85.8%, "Course and exam quality" and "long history" are the next 2 factors with 61.9% and 60.4% respectively. Another factor equally crucial is the experience of the CFVG's students. With a brand, an experience from customers is very important because if they have good experience they can come again and again and will become loyal customers in the future, willing to introduce to others. In higher education, a special product, the value of the brand becomes more and more prestigious when potential candidates receive the advice and referrals from the alumni.

CFVG's Brand Feelings

Statistics show that the number of respondents who give to the CFVG's brand7-8 points countes for 42.1%, 8-9 points: 35.1% and 9-10 points: 6.8%. CFVG's brand gets a lot of love from students.

Being askedto judge CFVG brand, almost all the respondents feel "credible in program" with approximately 82%. It is certainly because when choosing a program, the students have to spend time, money, effort... to get the degree. It confirms again the second factor from respondents is "expand knowledge and experience" that countes for 86.6% and the third factor "confident" with 79.9%. Moreover, with the factor "not proud" receives 75.4% "disagree" and "totally disagree" from respondents. It proves that the students always have positive thinking about their school brand.

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The results of One-Way ANOVA tests prove that the appreciations of students/alumni they express in answering to Question 1: "How do you introduce about CFVG to others?" and Question 2: "How do you feel being a CFVG student /alumnus?" are very high.

CFVG's Brand Resonance

In Keller's CBBE model, this is the highest level and focuses on the relationship between the customer and the brand. Relationship quality is manifestested throught their willingness to engage in brand building efforts. All the factors mentioned receive positive feedbacks from the students. In particular, three factors: "willing to share program information" countes for 86.5%," Introduce potential candidates to CFVG" for 85.7% and even some respondents show their love with CFVG by "study well" (80.5%) which receives most agree than the others. The factors "willing to support CFVG's communication" countes for 70.7%; "join CFVG's activities" for 54.9%; "share and advertise CFVG's brand in social network" for 56.4%; "asserted position in work" for 77.4%.

As the final building block in the customer-based brand-equity pyramid by Keller (2001), brand resonance indicate the loyalty and commitment of students and graduates toward higher education brand. In general, each student hashis/her attitude about this situation, but they all agree that if they can, they are willing to help CFVG in their capacity. Analyses of data on the attitude of respondents toward good news about CFVG gives the following results: "feeling happy" for 73.7% and then "willing to share the news to the others" with nearly 64%."

In the context of brand crisis or difficulties, respondents choose "sad" to express their feeling (53.2%). Regarding their response, 2 factors are outstanding: "connect with CFVG and friends to find exactly information" (68%) and "willing to share information to help CFVG" (72.9%). Moreover, the factor "don't share in social network" receives 68.9%, that means the respondents tend to protect the brand by not sharing the disadvantage information about brand in social network like Facebook, LinkIn...At the highest level in CBBE model, positive feedbacks from respondents proves the strong relationship between CFVG and students, by which CFVG is importantly significant in students's mind and they are willing for helping CFVG to overcome difficulties.

V. Discussion

Higher education brand relies more on customer-based brand-equity (customers refer to students and graduates) to gain competitive advantage in brand positioning and communication. The research in higher education context indicates the same dimensions corresponding with attributes in Keller's frameworks, but the emphasis on some dimensions is different. Brand imagery and brand resonance are critically important components that decide the strength of brand equity in higher education.

For higher education brand, imagery features all the three types of value, which are functional value (knowledge, skill, and successful profession), emotional value (self-fulfillment, sense of pride, sense of belongingness...) and symbolic value (successful, mature, professional, and prestigious). The more attractive students perceive the brand imagery; the better will be their loyalty and commitment toward the brand, which results in stronger brand equity. As argued by previous authors, the important brand offerings in higher education is more intangible (Ennew et al., 2011), and perceived as a high-involvement decision (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In higher education context, the ultimate goal of building a brand is to establish a long-term relationship with the students, which are sustainable even when the students become graduates. For customers in higher education context, differentiation or uniqueness is not important, but favorability and congruity are more likely concerned. Students and graduates seek for the sense of similarity and belongingness that helps them to define their self. Theory of social identity(Ashforth & Mael, 1989) confirmed that individuals are keen on brand or group affiliation for self-presentation in specific social context

Brand resonance is importantly resulted from a strong brand identity and favorable brand associations. The establishments of brand identity involve the brand prestige with endorsement by students and graduates who have truly experienced the brand. Brand image is the perception of students and graduates regarding the brand's communication, values and experience. Breadth and depth of awareness are not as significant as the relevance and connection with the students and graduates.

Regarding brand response, judgments are both logical and emotional, but rational judgments are more important than emotional connection. Education brand is a life-long choice, which should be based on rational facts and clues rather than emotional touches. While in other context, judgments and feelings should appeal to both the head and the heart, it's not the case for higher education settings.

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Brand resonance take into consideration leveraging relationship between higher education brand and its students or graduates. Once the brand resonance is well-created, the students and graduates tend to commit to the welfare of the brand. This brand commitment is established based on a strong psychological bond. After Keller (2001), four dimensions of brand resonance include behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, active engagement. In the context of higher education, the leveraging brand resonances are essentially based on those.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this research contributes to the existing knowledge by providing further understanding on the customer-based brand equity applied for the higher education context in an emerging country like Vietnam. While the model of brand equity in higher education introduced by Ennew et al., (2011)emphasized two main dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness and brand image, this research suggests that brand imagery and brand resonance are two determinant factors of brand equity in higher education.

Brand imagery relates to the intangible associations from which a brand holder drives brand meaning. Higher education brand image has a very significant effect on learners' physiological and social need for a well-defined social status, an important value expected from the high educational brand. Literature of university identification confirmed that students tend to identify themselves with the university brand if they perceive that the university salient and characteristics are self-defining and enhance his or her self-identification (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Bhattacharya & Sen (2003)also confirmed the role of prestigious brand for the self-identification of individuals. Brand imagery is, therefore, specifically important to the brand equity of higher education.

This research highlight that relationship factors as potentially significant elements should be included in the customer-based brand equity model, especially for higher education brand. This suggestion is consistent with current research streams about brand relationship in the context of higher education, including brand identification, brand attachment, brand community. We also highlight that when the students find that the higher education brand associations are strongly connected to their desired personal image, they tend to build and maintain strong relationship with the brand, and they are more likely to perform supporting behaviors such as brand recommendation or brand protection. Brand resonance is critically important for building a trusted and strong brand, because when the students and graduates stay in the close relationship with brand, they are willing to participate in endorsing the brand with their own experience and perceptions. According to Beerli Palacio, Díaz Meneses, & Pérez Pérez (2002), the brand image of university includes students' associations about brand related experience, knowledge and feelings related. The relationship among brand and students/graduates is, therefore, critical for brand equity.

5.2. Managerial Implications

In addition to discussions regarding building strong brand equity for higher education, this research also provides useful insights to higher education administrators / managers to build a strong brand for higher education.

To create brand imagery, the education institution should strive for good understanding of the target groups regarding their motivation for education, especially the psychological needs for social representation. Learners' expectation and perception in terms of self-identification are countable for a good brand positioning strategy.

Creating brand resonance requires a foundation on which resonance can be built. To form the favorable brand salience, more efforts and attentions should be dedicated to creating brand attributes that ensure relevance and connection between brand and its students and graduate. On websites, marketers can communicate about brand information that is the utmost concerns of students and graduates. Websites should also convey rich accounts of history, heritage and experiences through the voice of students and graduates (testimonials, photo, and success story).

Interactive marketing communications can also help to facilitate the engagement of students and graduates by their personal tone and a wide range of creative content. Interactive marketing should not focus only on the breadth and depth of brand awareness by mass media, brand advocacy such as recommendation and word of mouth are especially important for higher education brand to raise sustainable reputation.

Building an active brand community to facilitate engagement of students and alumni is highly recommended. An interactive community platform allows students and graduates to learn from and educate others about a brand, as well as express their commitment to a brand or be inspired by the brand loyalty of others. Higher education brand should show the relationships that their students and graduates hold toward the brand as well as the bonding among the community members.

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Judgments and feelings are antecedent to brand resonance and creating impactful experiential is more important than enduring short-term feelings. The educational marketers should focus on building trust, triggering a sense of pride and clues for positive judgments. In most of the time, good attitude and brand commitment are already formulated. The brand should invest in creating the opportunities for the students and graduates to express their commitments and facilitating the brand engagement efforts.

Creating resonance requires daily or frequent encounters and feedback opportunities for consumers with a brand. Via bulletin boards, blogs and other means, interactive marketing communications also helps to build brand community among consumers and between the company and consumers. The role of faculty members and administrative staffs should be highlighted.

VI. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to examine the brand equity in the higher education context and the findings suggest that brand imagery and brand resonance are two critically important construct of brand equity. Besides the theoretical contributions, the study also reveals some recommendation to branding practice of higher education brand.

However, findings of this study must be considered in light of some limitations. This study is conducted with one case study in the context of an emerging country. Future research could extend the research to a larger scope in terms of number of cases or other countries with different cross-cultural and social settings. Empirical testing should also be performed to confirm brand imagery and brand resonance as the determinants of brand equity.

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