

THE IMPACT OF BRAND EQUITY ON CUSTOMER CHOICES IN THE HIGHER AND TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS. EVIDENCE FROM UNIVERSITIES IN HARARE, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This research aims at investigating the impact of brand equity on customer choices of a university to be enrolled at. The target population of the research was approximately 500 registered university students in Zimbabwe. The research focuses on universities with main campuses in Harare. The study employs a quantitative research methodology. Stratified and simple random samplings were adopted to choose students to participate in the study out of 500 population sample size. The response rate was 356. Factor analysis results indicated that brand awareness and brand loyalty were the most dominant elements. Explanatory statistics showed that there were statistically significant differences in the opinions of customers basing on level of education and institutions. The research recommends that brand equity should be employed to play a primary role in service-related strategies aimed at establishing a marketing strategy for university education services.

Keywords: brand association, perceived quality, customer preference, brand awareness, brand loyalty

INTRODUCTION

Institutions such as Harvard University, Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) consistently rank among the highest across multiple rankings, including the Times Higher Education (THE), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) (Ahir and Joshi, 2025). The marketisation of higher

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education has contributed to this growth, attracting a diverse international student body (Tannock, 2018). The U.S. has seen a notable rise in foreign student enrolment, especially in science and engineering fields, where doctorate students have increased dramatically (Ahir and Joshi, 2025). The percentage of foreign students in Asian universities has shown notable trends over the past five years, reflecting shifts in international student mobility patterns (Huang and Zelin, 2023). While South African universities dominate, other African nations are also emerging as educational hubs. While South Africa leads in attracting international students, other African nations face significant barriers, such as limited funding and fewer partnerships with global institutions. This disparity highlights the need for a more equitable approach to internationalisation across the continent, ensuring that all African universities can benefit from global academic exchanges (Souza and Souza, 2024). Many African universities are establishing dedicated offices for internationalisation, focusing on partnerships and research collaborations to improve their global standing (Andoh and Salmi, 2019).

The Government of Zimbabwe has achieved remarkable increases in secondary school enrolment since 1980, promoting the belief in the importance of academic qualifications. However, inclusive education has remained an illusion at a time when the inclusive framework is expected to have fully developed and to be bearing fruit (“The State of Inclusive Education in Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe Decades After Independence and the Salamanga Declaration,” 2023). Rural students encounter unique challenges, including geographic isolation and financial constraints which hinder their transition to tertiary education (Chidakwa, 2025). While there is a growing demand for higher education, challenges such as inadequate facilities and resource constraints hinder full accommodation of applicants. Many universities face significant infrastructural deficits that limit their ability to expand student intake (Noutchie, 2024).

The number of students in need of the tertiary education has risen sharply since 1970. This expansion is bound to be felt by universities (MOESC, 1970-2005). It is unfortunate that despite a sharp increase in the demand for higher education services, local universities are failing to attract the best of these students. Approximately one million Zimbabweans have migrated since 2000, with many seeking education in countries like South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Botswana (Chikanda, 2025). The Southern African

Development Community (SADC) region has seen a notable influx of Zimbabwean students, driven by the desire for higher-quality education and better employment prospects (Chauke and Chinyakata, 2023)

In recent years, the discussion of brand and its relevant issues is considered by many companies and research institutes such as the public and private sectors and determining brand value as an argument is seriously considered. Zimbabwean universities incorporate the Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC) to align education with national cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). This curriculum reform is seen as a tool for rebranding the education system and fostering national pride (Dube and Tshuma, 2025).

The focus on cultural identity is intended to differentiate Zimbabwean universities from others in the SADC region that may prioritise global competitiveness and international rankings (*ibid.*). Universities are encouraged to engage in digital branding and stakeholder-centered strategies to align with global trends and foster stronger connections with international partners (Liu and Ghasemy, 2025). In order to attract top students in high school, universities should know the indicators that are important for students as they select a university to enrol in.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Higher and tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe face growing pressure to attract and retain students amid a proliferation of public and private universities offering similar academic programmes (Chikanda, 2025). This has resulted in increased competition. Despite this competition, limited research has examined how brand equity influences students' decisions when selecting universities in Zimbabwe. Factors such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty may significantly shape students' choices, yet their specific impact within the local context remains underexplored. The study, therefore, seeks to investigate the extent to which brand equity affects customer (student) choices among universities in Zimbabwe, particularly in Harare. The study seeks to provide insights that can guide institutional branding strategies and enhance competitive positioning in the higher education market.

OBJECTIVES

- Assess the influence of brand awareness on customer choice of a university.

- Determine the effect of brand loyalty on customer choice of a university.
- Establish the effect of perceived brand quality on customer choice of a university.
- Determine the effect of brand association on customer choice of university.
- Assess the influence of other proprietary brand assets on customer choice of a university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE BRAND EQUITY THEORY

Building on the consumer-based brand equity frameworks proposed by Aaker (2000) and Keller (2009), empirical evidence demonstrates that brand knowledge exerts a differential influence on consumers' choice behaviour. Keller (2009) affirms that there is need for marketers to form a brand in a sequence of four steps. First of all, markets should comprehend how every customer is capable of recognising the brand that satiates their necessities. Once a brand is identified, customers have a habit of developing a level of perception basing on the product performance (*ibid.*). Afterwards, they form a perception of the quality of the product. In real life, the first three steps do not frequently happen chronologically. These dimensions are likely to reinforce one another, particularly when consumers have limited prior experience with the brand category. Over time, this interaction progresses to the fourth stage—proprietary brand assets, which enables firms to protect the rights accumulated by the brand and thereby sustain a competitive advantage.

Brand equity is a multifaceted phenomenon. Keller (*ibid.*) divides it into two components; awareness and association. Aaker (2000) groups brand equity into five categories, namely perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association and other proprietary brand assets such as patents, trademarks and channel relationships. Among these five brand equity dimensions, the first four components characterise customers' appraisals and responses to the brand that can be clearly understood by the consumers (Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Many scholars have extensively adapted to measuring customer-based brand equity. Strong brand equity, in short, means customers have high brand name awareness, uphold a positive

brand image, notice that the brand is of high quality and are loyal to the brand. The study employs one of the commonly cited brand equity models in the marketing literature: the Aaker's (2000) model.

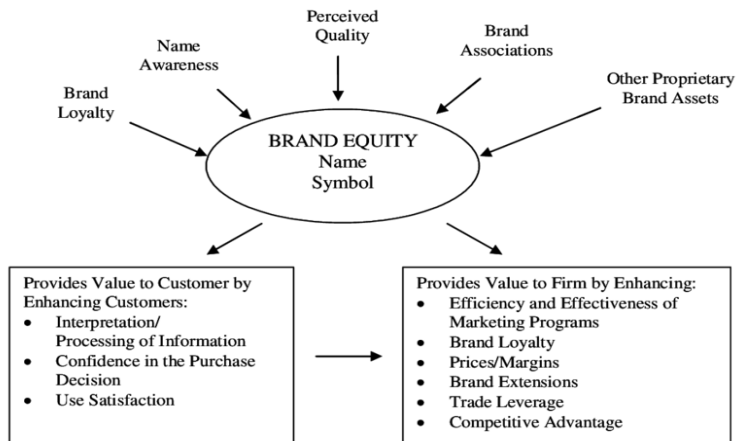


Figure 1: Brand Equity Model (Aaker, 2000)

BRAND EQUITY IN THE SERVICES INDUSTRY.

Higher education symbolises an environment in which brand image possibly plays a key role in reducing risk linked with such service mainly because assessment of quality is done after consumption (Chen and Tseng, 2017; Souza and Souza, 2024). Therefore, having strong brand is vital as a risk reliever that streamlines the decision-making process (Chen and Chang, 2008), meaning that brand represents a differentiation tool that gives signals to customers during the decision-making process (Chen and Chang, 2008; Hennig-Thurau and Houston, 2019; Chitadze, 2025). Also, there are several other factors that immediately influence the assessment of educational quality and, therefore, the opinion of the university brand (Kaur *et al.*, 2025). These aspects comprise quality of the staff, location, size, history and international agreements (Chen and Chang 2008; Vargas Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2023; Bedoui and Adouane, 2024). It is seen that many universities implement brand management strategies so as to improve their rank in higher education market (Hoang Thi Minh *et al.*, 2024). Lastly, the social image of the educational institution and its overall position in the on

market are vital in influencing the higher education brand and, hence, effect on the selection process (Guslenko, 2023).

LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAPS

Many studies based on the Aaker's (2000) model, yielded diverse results. For instance, Mahesh (2013) discovered that the brand association and the brand awareness were not meaningfully discriminant: these two theories were added to other factors called the perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets and brand awareness. Nevertheless, these results are challenged by other results that show a difference between brand awareness and brand association (Fathur Rohman and Wijayanti, 2023). Also, the measurement of individual constituents of the brand equity has been served differently in the experimental tests of Aaker's model. For instance, the brand awareness was measured by a single measure in López-Rodríguez *et al.* (2024), while it was regarded as multidimensional scale in other studies by Rana, Bhat and Rani (2018) and Anwer, 2024). Another drawback is related to the exclusive reliance on international researches to develop and validate brand equity scale in Zimbabwe. It is also obvious that there are relatively few studies that focus on the services sector, particularly in the higher and tertiary education industry (Harahap, 2025). The subsequent section integrates the findings of current study to develop brand equity framework which is later moment tested in the higher and tertiary education industry context.

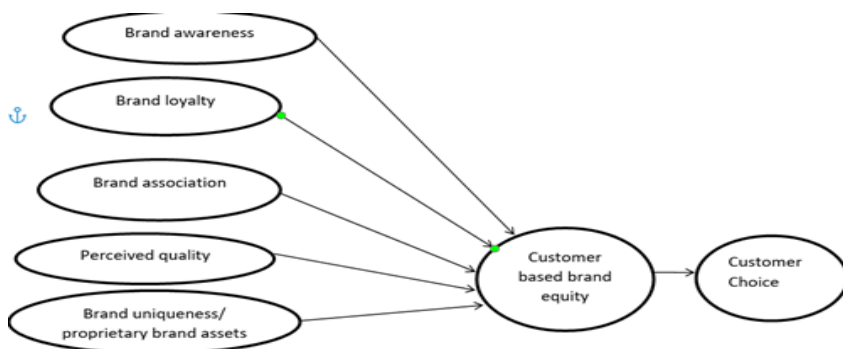


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

The research designs utilised in the study were descriptive and explanatory. The research deemed it fit to use the descriptive study because it is open to a better interpretation of the situation. Explanatory research was used to describe the features of the variables under study and at the same time to investigate the cause effect relationship between the variables. The survey strategy in this study was used because of its cost effectiveness and ability to generate data that can be generalised on the whole population of university students. The research is anchored on primary data because it allows the collection of firsthand context-specific information directly from students.

A questionnaire provided an efficient and systematic way to collect quantitative data from a large number of respondents across different universities in Harare. Also, the research instrument allowed for capture of diverse opinions and experiences in a standardised format, ensuring consistency and comparability of responses. The researcher used a questionnaire administered to the sampled customers (students). The questionnaire made use of a dichotomous, multiple choice and five-point Likert scale type statements and close-ended questions. The last part of the questionnaire asked the respondents to provide other factors that they thought played a role in making a decision about a university they intended to study at.

In this research, the population includes all university students enrolled in higher and tertiary institutions in Harare, regardless of their level of study or field of specialisation. The target population consists of undergraduate and postgraduate students currently enrolled at selected universities. The target population was 40 000 students enrolled at the University of Zimbabwe, the Catholic University in Zimbabwe, the Women's University in Africa, the Harare Institute of Technology and the Zimbabwe Open University. A sample of 500 students was used in the study because it provides a fair enough representation of the student population across various universities in Harare, ensuring that the findings are statistically reliable and generalisable. The study used the probability based stratified random sampling method where there were 2 strata (undergraduate and postgraduate), the simple random sampling technique, to gather data from each stratum.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

RESPONSE RATE

A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate and postgraduate students and 356 questionnaires were correctly filled and returned. This characterised a 71.2% response rate which exceeded the adequate of 50% as commended by Mendenhall (2008).

Reliability test

Table 1: Reliability testing

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.784	27

An acceptable range of Cronbach's Alpha should have a minimum value of 0.70 for the research instrument to be regarded as reliable and acceptable. Table 1 indicates a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.784, which falls within the acceptable range, making the research instrument reliable.

DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

The section centres on characteristics of the respondents represented in Section A of the questionnaire. Section A of the questionnaire requested the respondents to provide information on their sex, age, institution and level of education.

Table 2: Sex of Respondents.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	207	58.1	58.1	58.1
	Female	149	41.9	41.9	100
	Total	356	100	100	

Table 2 shows that data was partially distributed across sex. There were marginally more males than female respondents with a ratio of 58.1% male to 41.9% female. This is consistent with the fact that there are generally more male students than females at higher and tertiary institutions especially business and science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) programmes. However, a transition from male-dominated enrolment to a more balanced representation has been notable in higher education institutions (Kaur *et al.*, 2025)

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid less than 19 years	3	1.1	1.1	1.1
19-23 years	114	32.0	32.0	32.9
24-28 years	130	36.5	36.5	69.4
Above 28 years	108	30.3	30.3	100
Total	356	100	100	

Age distribution in Table 2 shows that students at the universities were predominately within the age group of 24-28 years (36.5%) and 19-23 years (32%). Lowest numbers of respondents were aged less than 19 years (1.1%), followed by the above-28 age group (30.3%). Those in the age brackets of 19-23 and 24-28 years dominated because the Zimbabwean curriculum requires that a child starts Grade One at the age of six years, making them 19 upon completion of high school education, hence making them eligible for university education.

Table 3: Institution Enrolled

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid University of Zimbabwe	80	22.5	22.5	22.5
Harare Institute of Technology	63	17.7	17.7	40.2

Women's University in Africa	74	20.8	20.8	61.0
Zimbabwe Open University	76	21.3	21.3	82.3
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	63	17.7	17.7	100
Total	356	100	100	

The results in Table 3 show that 22.5% of the respondents were from the University of Zimbabwe, 21.3% from the Zimbabwe Open University, 20.8% from the Women's University in Africa, 17.7% from the Harare Institute of Technology and 17.7% were from the Catholic University in Zimbabwe. The University of Zimbabwe could have had the highest response rate because its main campus is situated in Harare and has the highest admission rate compared to other universities.

Table 4: Level of Education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Undergraduate	292	82	82	82
Postgraduate	64	18	18	100
Total	356	100	100	

Table 4 indicates that 82.0% of respondents were undergraduate students and 18.0% were doing their postgraduate studies. After completing their undergraduate studies, many students require working experience before they are eligible for postgraduate studies. Due to the unavailability of jobs in Zimbabwe, many undergraduate students do make it to the postgraduate level because they lack experience. The other reason could be the high tuition fees charged for postgraduate studies, hence students opt to work for survival than to invest in postgraduate studies. Higher family income levels correlate with increased likelihood of enrolling in postgraduate studies, highlighting the impact of socio-economic status on educational attainment (Gama, 2018; Supriya, 2024)

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Table 5: Brand Equity Elements

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Brand Awareness	356	2	5	3.68	.552
Brand Association	356	2	5	3.68	.438
Brand Loyalty	356	2	5	3.38	.493
Perceived Quality	356	2	5	3.81	.454
Proprietary brand assets	356	2	5	3.95	.568
Valid N (listwise)	356				

Table 5 indicates the mean and standard deviation for brand awareness of 3.68 and 0.552, respectively. This implies that, on average, the respondents approved that they took the initiative to get the information on the university they desired to be enrolled at. Mean and standard deviation of brand association were 3.68 and 0.438, respectively. Given that the standard deviation is smaller than the mean, it implies that respondents observed that association was homogenous and that on average, the respondents were somehow indifferent as far as brand association was concerned. The mean and standard deviations of brand loyalty are 3.38 and 0.493, respectively. This means that the respondents agreed that brand loyalty plays a significant role in influencing customer choices.

Proprietary brand assets recorded a mean of 3.95 and standard deviation of 0.568, implying that the respondents agreed that the brand class, brand association and a visible trademark, influenced their choice of university. Perceived quality statistics of a mean of 3.81 and standard deviation of 0.454 indicate that on average, the respondents agreed that performance, service quality as well as service offered, influence students' choice. A mean above 2.5 for all the brand equity elements implies that, generally, the student choices were influenced by brand equity.

Table 6: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.624
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	784.419
	Df	153
	Sig.	.000

Table 6 shows the results of KMO and Bartlett's test. KMO = 0.624 which indicated that the sample was adequate to proceed with the factor analysis, taking into consideration a 95% level of significance, $\alpha = 0.05$. The p-value (Sig) of $0.000 < 0.05$, hence, the factor analysis is valid. The approximate of Chi square is 784.419 with 153 degrees of freedom that is significant at 0.05 level of significance. Hence, factor analysis was regarded as the appropriate technique to use for further analysis of the data.

Table 7: Eigen Values - Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.421	12.741	12.741	2.421	12.741	12.741	2.094	11.023	11.023
2	2.219	11.679	24.420	2.219	11.679	24.420	1.936	10.188	21.211
3	1.692	8.906	33.326	1.692	8.906	33.326	1.897	9.985	31.196
4	1.467	7.721	41.047	1.467	7.721	41.047	1.504	7.914	39.110
5	1.265	6.656	47.703	1.265	6.656	47.703	1.482	7.798	46.908
6	1.105	5.814	53.517	1.105	5.814	53.517	1.256	6.608	53.517
7	.981	5.215	58.732						
8	.931	4.903	63.634						
9	.899	4.733	68.367						
10	.806	4.243	72.610						
11	.776	4.082	76.692						
12	.712	3.747	80.439						
13	.685	3.604	84.043						
14	.610	3.208	87.251						
15	.572	3.012	90.264						
16	.538	2.830	93.094						
17	.486	2.559	95.653						
18	.436	2.296	97.948						
19	.390	2.052	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Six factors were extracted, each factor constituted all the variables that had factor loadings above 0.5. Nineteen (19) variables were grouped into 6 factors. The factors were drawn from 19 variables employed in the research. The 6 drawn factors explained 53.517% of the variability the brand equity elements to customer choice, as indicated in Table 7. This explained over half of the variability after rotation, Factor 1 explains 11.023% of the variance, Factor 2 explains 10.188%, Factor 3 explains 9.985%, Factor 4 explains 7.914%, Factor 5 explains 7.798% and Factor 6 explains 6.608 of the variance.

Table 8: Rotated Component Matrix

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
I believe that my university is affiliated adequately	.745					
My university offers best services to students	.704					
I can recommend others to enrol at my university	.558					
I believe that my university offers high quality education	.534		.512			
Advertisements done at my university help in brand recall		.737				
I had a university brand fixed on my mind since I was in high school		.675				
My university contributes greatly to my country and beyond borders		.656				
I am satisfied with the performance of my university brand in the market			.629			
I believe that there are competent lecturers at my university			.628			
I desire to enrol for another degree programme at my university after completing the one I am currently doing			.592			
I believe that university infrastructure is equivalent to that of other foreign universities				.731		
I believe that the qualification I am going to get at my university will help me secure a job anywhere in the world				.511		
I took a special initiative to research on the university I applied at						
I believe that the qualification I am going to get at my university is as good as that of other universities outside Zimbabwe					.743	
I believe professional bodies highly regard qualifications from my university					.655	
I believe that the programmes offered at my university compete with those offered by other foreign universities						
My University choice was influenced by the accreditations my university has						.651
I can easily differentiate my university from others						.590
I can generally relate my university to some other foreign universities						

Variables with less than a factor loading above 0.5 were suppressed. The 19 variables employed to measure brand equity were reduced to 17, fitted into 6 components and named in accordance to the themes created, as indicated in Table 8. Component 1 was named brand/service deals, Component 2 brand advertising, Component 3 brand quality and performance, Component 4 brand competency, Component 5 brand associations and Component 6 brand image. This is in line with the Yoo *et al.* (2002) brand equity comprehensive model.

Component 1: brand/service deals, comprises 4 variables selected by factor analysis. “I believe that my university is affiliated adequately” had a value of 0.745. “I believe that my university offers high quality education” had the lowest value of 0.534. Brand adequacy is the factor with highest Eigen value of 12.741 and, therefore, has the greatest impact.

Component 2 comprises 3 variables. The component was named brand advertising. “Advertisements done at my university help in brand recall” had the highest factor loading of 0.737. “My university contributes greatly to my country and beyond borders” had a value of 0.656. The component had the second greatest impact; it recorded an Eigen value of 11.674.

Component 3: brand quality and performance comprise of 3 variables. “I am satisfied with the performance of my university brand in the market” had a value of 0.629. “I desire to enrol for another degree programme at my university after completing the one I am currently doing” had a value of 0.592. Component 3 had an Eigen value of 8.906. It is the third greatest impact on brand equity and customer choice.

Component 4 had 2 variables renamed brand competency. “I believe that university infrastructure is equivalent to that of other foreign universities” had the highest factor loading of 0.731. “I believe that the qualification I am going to get at my university will help me secure a job anywhere in the world” had the lowest factor loading of 0.511. Component 4 had an Eigen value of 7.721.

Component 5 had 3 variables, renamed brand associations. “I believe that the qualification I am going to get at my university is as good as that of other universities outside Zimbabwe” had the highest factor loading of 0.743. “I believe professional bodies highly regard qualifications from my university” had the lowest factor loading of 0.655. Component 5 had an Eigen value of 6.656 which is the second from the smallest.

The last component had 2 variables, renamed brand image. ‘My university choice was influenced by the accreditations my university has’ had a value of 0.651. “I can easily differentiate my university from others” had a value of 0.590. Component 6 had an Eigen value of 5.814, hence the has least impact on brand equity and customer choice.

FACTOR ANALYSIS WITH TRANSFORMED VARIABLES

Table 9: KMO and Bartlett's Test: Brand Equity Elements

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.636
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	114.799
	Df	10
	Sig.	.000

Table 9 shows that the KMO = 0.636, indicating that the sample is adequate and the factor analysis can proceed, taking into consideration a 95% level of significance, $\alpha = 0.05$, p-value (Sig) of $0.000 < 0.05$. The approximate of Chi square is 114.799 with 10 degrees of freedom that is significant at 0.05 level of significance, hence, factor analysis was regarded an appropriate technique for further analysis of the data.

Table 10: Eigen values: Brand equity elements.

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	1.713	34.264	34.264	1.713	34.264	34.264	1.629	32.575	32.575
2	1.041	20.830	55.094	1.041	20.830	55.094	1.126	22.518	55.094
3	.891	17.826	72.920						
4	.743	14.855	87.774						
5	.611	12.226	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Basing on transformed variables guided by the Aaker's model of brand equity, first 2 factors explain 55.094% of variance, as indicated in Table 10. Each factor constituted all the variables that had factor loadings above 0.5. Five variables were grouped into 2 factors. The factors were drawn from the 5 variables employed in the research. Factor 1 explains 34.264% of the variance. Factor 2 explains 20.830% of the variance.

Table 11: Rotated Component Matrix³: Brand Equity Elements.

	Component	
	1	2
BrandLoyalty	.748	
PerceivedQuality	.727	
Proprietarybrandassets	.559	
BrandAwareness		.850
BrandAssociation		.523

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Component 1 renamed brand loyalty had 3 variables, namely brand loyalty, perceived quality and proprietary brand assets, had highest loading of 0.748, as seen in Table 11. Component 1 had an Eigen value of 34.264 which is the highest. The component carried the variables of brand equity with the greatest impact on customer choice.

Component 2 was named brand awareness, had 2 variables, namely brand awareness and brand association, and had an Eigen value of 20.830. Mishra *et al.* (2017); Kaur *et al.* (2025) concluded that brand awareness and brand association fall in one dimension.

EXPLANATORY ANALYSIS

NORMALITY TEST

The Shapiro-Wilk test was suitable since the sample size in the study was less than 2 000. Table 12 indicates that the Shapiro-Wilk test significance values are all less than 0.05. This means that data distribution was skewed, hence, non-parametric tests were suitable in the study.

Table 12: Shapiro Wilk Test

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Brand Awareness	.108	353	.000	.973	353	.000
Brand Association	.162	353	.000	.937	353	.000
Brand Loyalty	.115	353	.000	.970	353	.000
Perceived Quality	.125	353	.000	.971	353	.000
Proprietary brand assets	.180	353	.000	.923	353	.000
Customer Choices	.168	353	.000	.933	353	.000

Table 13: Correlation Analysis

			Correlations					
			Brand Awareness	Brand Association	Brand Loyalty	Perceived Quality	Proprietary brand assets	Customer choices
Spearman's rho	Brand Awareness	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.130 [*]	.056	.040	-.019	.205 [*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.014	.290	.446	.725	.000
		N	356	356	356	356	356	353
	Brand Association	Correlation Coefficient	.130 [*]	1.000	.213 ^{**}	.240 ^{**}	.008	.100
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.014		.000	.000	.096	.061
		N	356	356	356	356	356	353
	Brand Loyalty	Correlation Coefficient	.056	.213 ^{**}	1.000	.359 ^{**}	.196 ^{**}	.110 [*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.290	.000		.000	.000	.039
		N	356	356	356	356	356	353
	Perceived Quality	Correlation Coefficient	.040	.240 ^{**}	.359 ^{**}	1.000	.135 [*]	.105 [*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.446	.000	.000		.011	.049
		N	356	356	356	356	356	353
	Proprietary brand assets	Correlation Coefficient	-.019	.088	.196 ^{**}	.135 [*]	1.000	.065
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.725	.096	.000	.011		.222
		N	356	356	356	356	356	353
	Customer choices	Correlation Coefficient	.205 [*]	.100	.110 [*]	.105 [*]	.065	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.061	.039	.049	.222	
		N	353	353	353	353	353	353

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a weak positive relationship, though statistically significant, between brand awareness and customer choice. Customers get to know more about brands, the pool from where they draw their choices are also increased. A weak positive and statistically insignificant relationship is shown between brand association and customer choice. An increase in the level of brand association leads to a very small increase in customer choice. A weak positive and statistically significant relationship between brand loyalty and customer choice is indicated in the table. This means that changes in brand loyalty affect customer choices of universities. A weak positive and statistically significant relationship between perceived quality and customer choices is noted, meaning that changes in the perceived quality of a university brand impact positively the choices customers make.

A weak positive and statistically insignificant relationship between proprietary brand assets is shown on the table. This indicates that as the university changes and improves accreditations and affiliation, customer

choices also improve. The pressure to meet accreditation standards can drive universities to innovate and improve their educational offerings, thereby increasing their appeal to potential students (Urrego Cedillo, 2025).

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Table 14: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.264 ^a	.070	.056	.31472

a. Predictors: (Constant), Proprietarybrandassets, BrandAwareness, PerceivedQuality, BrandAssociation, BrandLoyalty

Table 14 shows the correlation of variables (R value) at 0.264. This means there is a low degree of correlation. Table 14 shows that the percentage contribution of the elements under study is (R square) 7% which is too low, the remaining 93% is explained by other elements that were not in the study. The value of 0.056 adjusted R^2 indicates that the model is not a strong predictor of customer choice since only 5.6% of the variance in customer choice is explained by the predictors under study and the remaining 94.4% is accounted for by those out of the study.

Table 15: Model Fit

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.582	5	.516	5.213	.000 ^a
	Residual	34.369	347	.099		
	Total	36.950	352			

A positive F value indicates that the model is fit to explain how the independent variables have an effect on the dependent variable. Table 15 indicates that the regression model is statistically significant and positively and significantly predicts customer choice. In other words, the model is good fit for the data. The research used standardised beta because it takes in account bias and errors. VIF and Tolerance measure collinearity of elements under study to assess whether the independent variables are independent of each other. VIF value has to be less than 10 ($VIF < 10$) to confirm that there is

no problem of multi collinearity. Tolerance should be greater than 0.1 (T>0.1) to show that there is no a problem of multi-collinearity.

Table 16: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	3.193	.233		13.684	.000		
BrandAwareness	.115	.031	.195	3.719	.000	.973	1.027
BrandAssociation	.017	.042	.022	.391	.696	.886	1.129
BrandLoyalty	.084	.040	.122	2.125	.034	.811	1.233
PerceivedQuality	.025	.041	.035	.620	.535	.822	1.217
Proprietarybrandassets	.029	.036	.043	.823	.411	.960	1.042

a. Dependent Variable: Customerchoices

Table 16 indicates that Brand awareness had a positive impact and statistically significant predictor. Brand association had a positive impact, statistically insignificant effect. Brand loyalty indicated a positive impact, statistically significant predictor of customer choice. Perceived quality on customer choice shows a positive impact, statistically insignificant predictor. Proprietary brand assets show a positive impact, statistically insignificant predictor of customer choice. VIF values were below 10 and the Tolerance values greater than 0.1, hence there is no problem of multi-collinearity. Positive constant t-value shows that there are other elements that have an impact on customer choice which have not been taken into account this model. These elements are statistically significant in influencing customer choice as this is shown by the p-value. The unstandardised Beta constant suggests that these other elements not taken into account in the model will positively impact customer choice.

DISCUSSION

The general objective of the study was to investigate the impact of brand equity on customer choice of a university. The results show a significant effect of brand equity on customer choices of a university.

The results align with the findings of Haoucha (2024), who concluded that brand equity has a significant positive influence on customers' purchase decisions.

The results indicate that there is a positive and statistically significant impact of brand awareness on customer choices. The results differ from those of Olanipekun and Adelekan, (2022), who in their study found out that brand awareness was not a critical choice criterion. However, Xu and Chan, (2010), Abdelmoety and Gounaris (2014) and Snadrou and Haoucha (2024), found out that brand awareness was a critical element influencing customer choices.

Brand association results indicate a positive but insignificant impact on customer choices, hence supported the null hypothesis. The results are in line with Marilyn *et al.* (2017) who conclude that the respondents did not perceive brand association as a great factor in influencing consumer choice. Brand loyalty results show that it has a positive and significant influence on customer choices, the results being in line with Hannes, Kussum and Harald (2017) who studied the effect of brand loyalty in influencing customer's choice.

Perceived quality indicated a positive though insignificant impact on customer choice, hence, the null hypothesis was accepted. These results are somehow in tandem with what other authors have found. Cengic (2010), Saleem *et al.* (2015), and Roskosa and Stukalina (2022) found out that perceived quality indirectly affects customer choices, as a result of price premiums. The results show that there is a positive though insignificant effect of proprietary brand asset on consumer choice of a university. This is in agreement with Souza and Souza, (2024) who showed that consumers agree with the statement that they, to a lesser extent, choose their transport service provider from the same company as a result of influence from proprietary brand assets.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that brand equity influences the choice of students as they select a university to be enrolled at. The findings indicate that there is a strong influence of brand awareness on customer choice. The study shows that brand loyalty has an effect on customer choice of a university. This means that the attributes of perceived quality, like university staff and qualifications and competitiveness in the job market have an influence on customer purchasing decisions. However, the regression result proves otherwise. This left the study with mixed feelings of the impact of perceived quality on customer choice of a university. Basing on the analysis of the

findings from the primary sources, the study concludes that brands association has a positive impact on customer choice, though the impact is not significant. The study concludes that proprietary brand assets influence customer choice, although the influence is not significant. With regards to the research findings, it is recommended that universities focus on advertisement so as to increase awareness, particularly at the international level, so as to have potential students consider their university name as an option when making university selection. The research also establishes that top of mind awareness is a vital strategy to encourage customers in making their purchase choice based on an advertisement. Universities should also provide financial incentives to local as well as international students. This strategy will help a university in getting high quality international and local students who could not be admitted due to unaffordability.

In conclusion, the findings of the study show that customer-based brand equity has an important effect on customers' choice of university brand and lack of brand equity weakens customers' perception. Thus, there should be an incessant effort by university marketers to enrich customer-based brand equity. University policy makers should note that old familiar brands die as a result of poor management of brand, overextension and privation of investment in the development of brand equity and values.

Future research may extend the study to other provinces in Zimbabwe so as to compare how regional differences influence the relationship between brand equity and student choices. Secondly, future studies may include other stakeholders such as parents, alumni and university staff to gain a more holistic understanding of institutional branding. Lastly, a longitudinal study can be conducted to assess how brand equity evolves over time and its long-term impact on student retention and loyalty.

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