

Factors influencing university brand image: A case study at a university in Vietnam

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the factors affecting the brand image of Nam Can Tho University and, on that basis, propose some policy implications to enhance the university's brand image. The study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative research aims to determine the research model and calibrate the scale. The research model consists of four independent variables: brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived quality, which impact the brand image of Nam Can Tho University. The analysis results from a survey of 240 students, conducted through steps such as reliability testing of the measurement scale using Cronbach's Alpha, exploratory factor analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis, show that the brand image is influenced by four factors: perceived quality, association, brand awareness, and brand loyalty. Based on the research findings, policy implications are proposed to enhance the brand image of Nam Can Tho University.

Keywords: Brand image, Nam Can Tho, Students.

1. Introduction

To address competitive challenges, universities have started developing branding strategies. Branding has been used as a differentiation strategy for higher education institutions [1]. As competition intensifies, educational institutions exhibit similar operational characteristics to businesses, implementing marketing activities and brand development [2, 3]. A university brand creates a strong impression on students while helping to identify and differentiate the university from others. Studying the factors affecting a university's brand image provides a basis for directing long-term brand development strategies, contributing to the university's sustainable development in the future [4]. Furthermore, Nguyen, et al. [5] pointed out that a brand reflects the university's ability to meet students' needs, building trust in its ability to provide essential services. Additionally, it helps prospective students decide which university to choose and attract and retain students [1].

In Vietnam, many universities strive to build and enhance their brand image to attract students, international collaborations, and employers [6, 7]. Nam Can Tho university is gradually asserting its position in the Mekong Delta region and across Vietnam. Nam Can Tho university plays a vital role in providing quality educational programs to serve the development of this region. However, the university needs to build a strong brand image to attract potential students and enhance its reputation. Studying the factors affecting the university's brand image will provide a basis for guiding long-term brand development strategies, contributing to the sustainable growth of the university in the future. Moreover, research has yet to be conducted to identify the factors influencing the brand image of Nam Can Tho university. Thus, such a study can provide helpful information for developing promotional strategies, enhancing service quality, and brand development, thereby increasing student loyalty.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Theoretical Framework

A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or a combination of these used to identify the goods or services of a seller and distinguish them from those of competitors [8]. According to Aaker [4] a brand is a set of values attached to the brand name or symbol, which are added to the product/service to enhance the value and usability of the product/service for the business and the customers. Beneke [9] defined a higher education brand as the perception or feeling maintained by buyers or potential buyers, describing their experiences related to transactions with an academic institution and its products and services. According to Park, et al. [10] brand image is the consumer's understanding derived from all brand-related activities carried out by the organization. Meanwhile, Bulotaite [11] argued that when someone mentions the name of a university, it immediately evokes “associations, emotions, images, and faces”. Beneke [9] stated that a university brand represents the unique characteristics that set it apart from other institutions. It reflects the university's ability to fulfill student needs, build trust in its capacity to provide quality higher education and assist prospective students in making enrollment decisions.

Many authors assert that brand image combines cognitive and emotional attributes [12, 13]. According to O’Cass and Grace [14] cognitive brand attributes are viewed as functional attributes associated with tangible factors, such as the quality of services provided by the university (relating to human factors, staff, and customers), facilities, and interaction processes that are visible, touchable, and linked to components of the service environment and service space. According to Lassar, et al. [15] brand image can be approached from two main perspectives: the customer perspective and the financial perspective. From the customer perspective, it includes two components, namely “brand awareness” and “brand image” [16]. From a financial perspective, brand image is measured based on the cash flow crystallized in the product, enhancing product value and distinguishing branded products from similar unbranded products [17]. The theory of semantic memory by Yoo, et al. [18] and Collins and Loftus [8] is proposed as the basis for different approaches to brand image, following the sequence of the processes of encoding, storing, and linking product elements into an information network in the customer's memory. According to Keller [12] the role of customer recall in brand decision-making is affirmed. In this study, the author argues that brand image is the representation and asset of higher education institutions, used to differentiate among universities, thereby contributing to sustainable development and creating value.

2.2. Literature Review

According to Yoo, et al. [18] there are four factors to measure brand image: awareness, association, perceived quality, and loyalty. Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19] and Tram and Hai [20] defined brand equity as the additional value brought by the brand, measured by four components: brand association, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Each component benefits customers and producers differently Trang, et al. [21]. Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19] and Van [22] stated that brand image is influenced by brand awareness, association, perceived quality, loyalty, and commitment. Pinar [1] argued that brand image is influenced by brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, learning environment, emotional environment, brand trust, brand loyalty, and university reputation. In Vietnam, studies have also used Aaker [23] and Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19] model, such as the research by Uyen and Oanh [24] which showed that there are four factors affecting the brand image of universities in Dong Nai province, including brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Vinh, et al. [25] identified the factors affecting brand image at Can Tho University as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty. Hang, et al. [26] stated that the brand image of Ho Chi Minh City university of Food Industry includes perceived quality, brand value, brand loyalty, promotional attitude, and brand awareness. Uyen

and Oanh [24] added personal emotions to the four factors of perceived quality, brand awareness, brand association, and brand loyalty. Farquhar [27] found that the brand image of Hong Bang International University is influenced by the willingness to experience, relevance, perceived quality, brand desire, and brand loyalty. In another aspect, Zeithaml [28] identified six factors: department history, trust in the department, program cost, program quality, teaching quality, and service quality. Shoemaker and Lewis [29] found a positive relationship between reputation, meeting needs, implementation, and the teaching staff, affecting the brand image of Sao Do University. In summary, many domestic and international authors have studied the brand image of universities; however, there still needs to be a consensus on the influencing factors.

2.3. Research Hypothesis

Brand awareness refers to a customer's ability to recognize or recall a brand and distinguish its characteristics among a set of brands available in the market [4]. Brand awareness affects students' decision-making when selecting a university for educational services. They often choose a brand they recognize due to trust and a sense of safety compared to unfamiliar brands [12]. The higher the brand awareness of a university, the greater its influence and the more easily students choose its brand [1]. Therefore, the study proposes hypothesis H1: Brand awareness impacts the brand image of Nam Can Tho university.

Brand association refers to anything that “positions” in the customer's memory about a brand [23]. These are direct or indirect memories stored in the customer's mind and linked to the brand or owner [30]. Brand association occurs when an element, brand, or event creates an impression or message that connects to another brand [1]. Therefore, the study proposes hypothesis H2: The brand association impacts the brand image of Nam Can Tho university.

Perceived quality is a fundamental factor of brand value [27] and refers to consumers' opinions about the ability of a product/service brand to meet their expectations [23]. It is the customer's perception of the overall quality of a product [28]. Perceived quality directly affects purchasing decisions and customer loyalty. In education, universities need to build and position themselves with a high level of perceived quality to maintain current students and attract potential learners, thereby enhancing the institution's brand value [19]. Therefore, the study proposes hypothesis H3: Perceived quality impacts the brand image of Nam Can Tho university.

Brand loyalty is the core of brand value [23]. When brand loyalty is high, customers are less likely to switch to other brands [29]. Additionally, among many choices, customers are willing to reuse branded products/services because they perceive them as good and reliable. A brand that fosters high loyalty generates greater profits for the organization, meaning the brand holds higher value [19]. Therefore, the study proposes hypothesis H4: Brand loyalty has an impact on the brand image of Nam Can Tho university.

Based on the brand equity model of Aaker [23]; Aaker [4] and Keller [12] and the empirical studies by Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19]; Pinar, et al. [1]; Uyen and Oanh [24]; Tram and Hai [20]; Trang, et al. [21] and Van [22] the proposed research model is as follows:

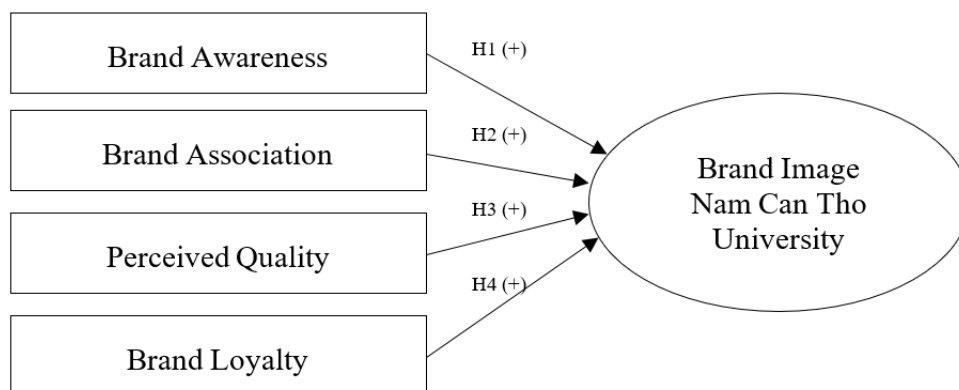


Figure 1.
Proposed research model.

3. Research Methodology

The study uses qualitative and quantitative methods, in which qualitative research is conducted to develop the model and the survey questionnaire. Quantitative research is conducted through the collection of primary data from a survey of students of the Faculty of Economics, Nam Can Tho university, using a questionnaire designed with a 5-point Likert scale. Hair, et al. [31] suggested that the sample size should be at least five observations per variable to determine the minimum sample size. This study has four scales with 18 observed variables, resulting in a minimum sample size of 90 observations. The survey subjects were selected by non-probability convenience sampling, using a combination of Google Form submissions and direct questionnaire distribution. The research sample includes diversity in characteristics such as gender, academic year, and significance. The survey was conducted in March 2024. The collected observations were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0. After collection, the data from the respondents were coded, cleaned, and analyzed through several steps, including reliability assessment of the scales using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis to test the model and research hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

After data collection, 240 valid survey responses were used for data analysis.

Regarding gender: The survey results of 240 students show that the proportion of males is lower than that of females, with 104 male students (accounting for 43.3%) and 136 female students (accounting for 56.7%).

Table 1.
Gender analysis results.

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	104	43.3
Female	136	56.7
Total	240	100.0

Regarding academic year: The survey results show that first-year students have the highest proportion at 34.2%, with 82 students; followed by fourth-year students at 30.0%, with 72 students; third-year students at 21.3%, with 51 students; and finally, second-year students have the lowest proportion at 14.6%, with 35 students.

Table 2.

Analysis results of the current year

Content	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Freshman	82	34.2	34.2	34.2
Second year	35	14.6	14.6	48.8
Third year	51	21.3	21.3	70.0
Fourth year	72	30.0	30.0	100.0
Total	240	100.0	100.0	

4.2. Reliability Testing of the Scale

Reliability testing of the scale: the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the overall scale is greater than 0.6; the item-total correlations of all observed variables are greater than 0.3. It can be concluded that the scale is reliable [31].

Table 3.
Reliability of the scale

Symbol	Observation variable	Mean	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha
Aware1	I know Nam Can Tho university	3.78	0.774	0.871	0.899
Aware2	I can quickly recognize the logo of Nam Can Tho university	3.74	0.792	0.864	
Aware3	I can easily distinguish Nam Can Tho university from other universities	3.64	0.753	0.878	
Aware4	I can quickly visualize the characteristics of Nam Can Tho university	3.80	0.783	0.867	
Asso1	Nam Can Tho university has a quality training program	3.60	0.784	0.918	0.929
Asso2	Nam Can Tho university has a team of lecturers with expertise and good teaching	3.52	0.787	0.917	
Asso3	Nam Can Tho university staff quickly handle students' questions	3.60	0.770	0.920	
Asso4	Nam Can Tho university has modern facilities, satisfying the needs of students.	3.51	0.838	0.907	
Asso5	Extracurricular activities of Nam Can Tho university are very useful	3.44	0.888	0.897	
Quality1	When mentioning Nam Can Tho city, I immediately think of Nam Can Tho university	3.61	0.650	0.869	0.879
Quality2	When mentioning Nam Can Tho university, I think of a good educational environment	3.42	0.639	0.870	
Quality3	When mentioning Nam Can Tho university, I think of a multidisciplinary university	3.57	0.839	0.824	
Quality4	When mentioning Nam Can Tho university, I think of lecturers with a lot of teaching experience	3.67	0.673	0.863	
Quality5	When mentioning Nam Can Tho university, I think of a university with many outstanding achievements	3.52	0.773	0.839	
Loyalty1	I chose Nam Can Tho university because of the school's brand	3.71	0.783	0.889	0.910
Loyalty2	I think of Nam Can Tho university when I have other needs about the major	3.60	0.811	0.878	
Loyalty3	I am willing to introduce Nam Can Tho university to everyone	3.78	0.827	0.873	
Loyalty4	I feel satisfied when studying and developing myself at Nam Can Tho university	3.68	0.770	0.895	
Image1	Nam Can Tho university brand is recognized nationwide	3.55	0.679	0.770	0.827
Image2	Nam Can Tho university brand represents high quality teaching	3.60	0.697	0.750	
Image3	The brand of Nam Can Tho university represents the high quality of scientific research	3.53	0.681	0.765	

4.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for independent variables: The analysis results of four factors with 18 observed variables show that the value ($KMO = 0.853$) satisfies the appropriateness of factor analysis if $0.5 \leq KMO \leq 1$; the value ($Sig.$) = 0.000 < 0.005 is statistically significant; the cumulative

variance of the four extracted factors is greater than 50%. All four factors meet the condition with an Eigenvalue > 1 , indicating meaningful statistical factors; all 18 observed variables have factor loadings > 0.5 , meeting the requirements [31].

Table 4.
Rotated Component Matrix^a.

	Component			Component	
	1	2		3	4
Quality5	0.899		Loyalty3	0.904	
Quality4	0.865		Loyalty2	0.897	
Quality2	0.835		Loyalty1	0.864	
Quality1	0.835		Loyalty4	0.860	
Quality3	0.821		Awar2		0.854
Asso3		0.902	Awar4		0.848
Asso5		0.887	Awar1		0.839
Asso4		0.790	Awar3		0.820
Asso1		0.702			
Asso2		0.688			

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) for Dependent Variables: The analysis results of 3 observed variables show that the value ($KMO = 0.723$) satisfies the appropriateness of factor analysis if $0.5 \leq KMO \leq 1$; the value ($Sig.$) = 0.000 < 0.005 is statistically significant; the cumulative variance of the one extracted factor is more significant than 50%. The single factor meets the condition with an Eigenvalue > 1 , indicating a statistically significant factor; all three observed variables have factor loadings > 0.5 , meeting the requirements [31].

4.4. Correlation Analysis Results

The correlation analysis results show that all independent variables (Awar, Quality, Asso, Loyalty) are correlated with Image.

Table 5.
Correlations.

		Awar	Quality	Asso	Loyalty	Image
Awar	Pearson Correlation	1				
Quality	Pearson Correlation	0.416**	1			
Asso	Pearson Correlation	0.373**	0.355**	1		
Loyalty	Pearson Correlation	0.132*	0.184**	0.169**	1	
Image	Pearson Correlation	0.530**	0.671**	0.587**	.352**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	240	240	240	240	240

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

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

4.5. Regression Analysis Results

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis show that the model has an adjusted R^2 of 0.651. This indicates that the factors (Loyalty, Awar, Asso, Quality) explain 65.1% of the variation in the “Image” variable, while the remaining 34.9% is due to factors outside the model and random errors.

Table 6.
Model Summary^b.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	0.811 ^a	0.657	0.651	0.33835	1.813

Note: a. Predictors: (Constant), Loyalty, Awar, Asso, Quality

b. Dependent Variable: Image

Table 7.
ANOVAa.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	51.574	4	12.893	112.624	0.000 ^b
	Residual	26.903	235	0.114		
	Total	78.477	239			

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Image

b. Predictors: (Constant), Loyalty, Awar, Asso, Quality.

The regression analysis results in (Table 8) show that all four factors (Loyalty, Awar, Asso, Quality) of the proposed research model have an impact on “Image” with (Sig.) < 0.05 at a 95% confidence level. The impact levels of the independent factors on the dependent variable Image, in decreasing order of influence, are Quality ($\beta = 0.437$), Asso ($\beta = 0.324$), Awar ($\beta = 0.202$), and Loyalty ($\beta = 0.190$). In conclusion, all four research hypotheses are accepted.

Table 8.
Coefficientsa.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-0.425	0.198		-2.142	0.033		
	Awar	0.189	0.041	0.202	4.632	0.000	0.768	1.302
	Quality	0.410	0.041	0.437	10.029	0.000	0.770	1.299
	Asso	0.343	0.045	0.324	7.618	0.000	0.805	1.243
	Loyalty	0.165	0.034	0.190	4.864	0.000	0.953	1.050

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Image.

4.6. Discussion

Hypothesis H1, Brand Awareness: The Sig. value is 0.000, less than 0.01, indicating a significant positive impact with a 1% significance level and 99% confidence. This hypothesis is accepted, confirming that Brand Awareness positively influences the Brand Image of Nam Can Tho university. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19]; Pinar, et al. [1]; Tram and Hai [20]; Trang, et al. [21]; Van [22]; Uyen and Oanh [24] and Vinh, et al. [25]. This highlights the critical role of brand recognition in shaping the university's image in the eyes of students and stakeholders.

Hypothesis H2, Brand Association: The Sig. value is 0.000, less than 0.01, indicating a significant positive impact with a 1% significance level and 99% confidence. This hypothesis is accepted, confirming that the Brand Association positively influences the Brand Image of Nam Can Tho university. This result aligns with the findings of Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19]; Pinar, et al. [1]; Tram and Hai [20]; Trang, et al. [21] and Uyen and Oanh [24]. The association's students and stakeholders have with the university significantly contribute to its overall image of Nam Can Tho university.

Hypothesis H3, Perceived Quality: The Sig. The value is 0.000, less than 0.01, indicating a significant positive impact with a 1% significance level and 99% confidence. This hypothesis is accepted, confirming that Perceived Quality positively influences the Brand Image of Nam Can Tho University. The findings are consistent with previous studies by Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19]; Pinar, et al. [1]; Tram and Hai [20]; Trang, et al. [21]; Van [22]; Uyen and Oanh [24] and Vinh, et al. [25]. This highlights that the perceived quality of educational services is crucial in enhancing Nam Can Tho university's brand image.

Hypothesis H4, Brand Loyalty: The Sig. The value is 0.000, less than 0.01, indicating a significant positive impact with a 1% significance level and 99% confidence. This hypothesis is accepted, confirming that Brand Loyalty positively influences the Brand Image of Nam Can Tho university. These findings are consistent with those of Muhmurti and Selvanayagam [19]; Pinar, et al. [1]; Tram and Hai [20]; Trang, et al. [21]; Van [22]; Uyen and Oanh [24] and Vinh, et al. [25]. This underscores the

importance of fostering brand loyalty to enhance the university's reputation and maintain a competitive advantage.

In summary, all four hypotheses were supported, demonstrating that brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty significantly positively impact the Brand Image of Nam Can Tho university. These findings provide valuable insights for university management to develop strategies to effectively enhance the university's brand image.

5. Conclusions

The study aims to identify and measure the impact of factors on the brand image of Nam Can Tho university from the student's perspective. The research employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The research model consists of four independent variables: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand association, and brand loyalty, which affect the brand image of Nam Can Tho university. The multiple linear regression analysis results indicate that the brand image is influenced by four factors, in descending order of impact: perceived quality, brand association, brand awareness, and brand loyalty. Based on the research findings, policy implications are proposed to enhance the university's brand image.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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