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From Social Media Engagement to Enrollment Decision in Private Universities: An Integrated E-Branding, Brand Experience, Brand Equity, and Brand Loyalty Model

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ABSTRACT

Private universities increasingly compete for prospective students within a digital marketplace in which social media functions as a primary touchpoint between institutions and applicants. Despite this shift, higher education marketing scholarship has tended to examine social media engagement, e-branding, brand experience, brand equity, and brand loyalty as separate streams rather than as a connected sequence culminating in a student's enrollment decision. This conceptual paper addresses that fragmentation by proposing an integrated model tracing the pathway from social media engagement, alongside deliberate e-branding strategy, through brand experience and brand equity, to brand loyalty and, ultimately, enrollment decision. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in secondary data, the study thematically synthesizes peer-reviewed literature identified through a systematic search of major academic databases, interpreted through the Stimulus Organism Response paradigm and Keller's customer-based brand equity framework. The synthesis yields a six-construct integrated model and six accompanying research propositions describing how digital brand stimuli are processed into brand equity and behavioral loyalty that shape enrollment outcomes. The paper contributes a parsimonious, theory-grounded framework for private higher education marketing scholarships and offers university marketers a sequenced logic for digital brand investment. Limitations, boundary conditions, and an agenda for future empirical validation are discussed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Private higher education has expanded rapidly across much of the developing and developed world over the past three decades, driven by rising demand for tertiary credentials that public systems have struggled to absorb (Mourad et al., 2011). Private universities operate, in the language of the brand-marketing literature, as service brands competing in a saturated marketplace for a finite and increasingly discerning pool of applicants (Pinar et al., 2014). Demographic contraction in several markets, the proliferation of transnational and online alternatives, and rising student price sensitivity have intensified this competition (Mourad et al., 2020), pushing private institutions to treat branding not as a peripheral communications function but as a strategic determinant of enrollment and financial sustainability.

Social media has become the dominant arena in which this competition for attention now plays out. Prospective students, most of whom belong to a generation that has never known an offline-only information environment, research, compare, and form impressions of universities largely through Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube long before any formal point of institutional contact (Rutter et al., 2016). For many applicants, a university's social media presence now functions as a more immediate and more emotionally resonant source of institutional information than the official prospectus, particularly when that presence carries peer-generated, rather than purely institutional, content (Le et al., 2019). Universities have responded by investing heavily in social media presence, content strategy, and broader e-branding activity intended to project a coherent digital brand identity (Pringle & Fritz, 2019).

Yet the scholarly literature that might guide this investment remains fragmented along disciplinary and construct lines. One stream, rooted in the brand-equity tradition, examines how universities build awareness, associations, and perceived quality among students (Mourad et al., 2011; Pinar et al., 2014). A second, smaller stream applies experiential -marketing theory to ask how interactions with a university's brand touchpoints generate sensory, affective, and cognitive responses (Brakus et al., 2009; Farhat et al., 2021). A third examines social media engagement specifically as a driver of brand outcomes such as loyalty or recruitment performance (Rutter et al., 2016; Salgado & Vela, 2019).

A fourth, older stream addresses the mechanics of e-branding and online brand equity largely outside the education sector (Christodoulides et al., 2006; Ibeh et al., 2005). Few studies connect these constructs into a single explanatory sequence, and fewer still extend that sequence to the outcome that matters most to a university: the prospective student's enrollment decision. Where integration has been attempted, it has typically been partial, linking only two or three constructs, for instance, social media marketing activity to brand equity (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022), rather than tracing the full pathway from digital stimulus to enrollment behavior. This conceptual paper addresses that gap. Adopting a qualitative research design built on secondary data, it synthesizes the extant literature on social media engagement, e-branding, brand experience, brand equity, and brand loyalty in higher education and proposes an integrated model connecting these constructs sequentially to enrollment decision, the outcome of greatest practical consequence for private university administrators. The paper draws on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and Keller's (1993, 2001) customer-based brand equity framework as its theoretical scaffolding, using thematic synthesis of secondary sources to derive the model's constructs and propositions.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it consolidates a literature that has developed largely in disciplinary silos into a single, theoretically grounded conceptual model. Second, it extends existing brand-equity and engagement models in higher education by including e-branding as a distinct, manageable strategic input and by tracing the chain explicitly through to enrollment decision rather than stopping attitudinal loyalty or recruitment performance as a proxy. Third, it offers private university marketers a sequenced logic for digital brand investment, clarifying where in the student journey particular interventions, content strategy, community management, virtual experience design, are likely to exert influence. The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature construct by construct, outlines the theoretical foundations and qualitative secondary-data methodology, presents the integrated model and associated propositions, and closes with a discussion of implications, limitations, and directions for future empirical research.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media Engagement in Higher Education Marketing

Social media engagement refers to a consumer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in interactions with a brand on social platforms, extending beyond passive exposure to active participation through liking, commenting, sharing, and content creation (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Brodie et al. (2011) situate engagement within a broader relational paradigm, arguing that it represents a psychological state arising through interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal object, in this case, a university's social media presence, that varies in intensity according to context-specific drivers. Unlike traditional reach-based metrics, engagement captures the intensity and quality of the student-institution relationship rather than mere exposure. Within higher education specifically, social media engagement

has been examined primarily as an antecedent of recruitment-relevant outcomes. Rutter et al. (2016) found that the volume and nature of interaction on a university's social media channels correlated positively with perceptions of brand value and, ultimately, with recruitment performance, framing platforms such as Twitter as a viable proxy for brand strength in a competitive higher education marketplace. Salgado and Vela (2019) showed, in a mixed-method study of public and private university students, that positive experiences on a university's Brand Fan Page increased platform-use intensity, which in turn strengthened student loyalty toward the institution. More recently, Ruangkanjanases et al. (2022) demonstrated, in a study of prospective Indonesian secondary students, that social media marketing activities increased behavioral engagement both directly and indirectly through brand equity, underscoring engagement's dual role as both an outcome of marketing activity and an antecedent of downstream brand outcomes.

Engagement in the higher education context is also shaped by content type and source. Le et al. (2019) found that prospective students placed particular weight on peer-generated, electronic word of mouth content encountered on social media during the search phase of the choice process, while institution-generated content carried comparatively less

influence unless it was perceived as authentic. This finding aligns with Brech et al. (2017), who showed that fan interaction on the Facebook pages of higher education institutions was driven less by promotional volume than by the perceived responsiveness and community orientation of the page. Together, this body of work positions social media engagement as a digital stimulus that initiates, rather than merely accompanies, the brand-building process examined throughout the remainder of this review.

2.2 E-Branding and Digital Brand Strategy in Higher Education

E-branding refers to the deliberate strategic process of building, communicating, and managing a brand's identity through internet-based channels, encompassing website design, content strategy, search visibility, and coordinated online communication (Ibeh et al., 2005). Early conceptualizations distinguished e-branding from mere online presence, emphasizing that successful e-brand building required consistency between a brand's offline values and its online enactment (Christodoulides et al., 2006). Christodoulides et al. (2006) identified emotional connection, online experience, responsiveness, trust, and fulfilment as core dimensions through which equity accrues to brands in digital environments, a framework that, although developed for e-tail brands, transfers readily to service brands such as universities that must build trust at a distance with applicants who cannot physically sample the institution before enrolling.

In the higher education context, e-branding manifests through institutional websites, search-engine visibility, virtual campus tours, email nurture sequences, and increasingly through coordinated social media content strategy (Pringle & Fritz, 2019). Pringle and Fritz (2019) used data analytics to examine the authenticity of universities' social media brand presentation, finding that institutions whose digital content aligned closely with their stated brand promise generated stronger engagement than those whose online communication diverged from lived student experience. This finding underscores a defining tension in higher education e-branding: because the institutional "product" is intangible and co-produced with the student, digital brand communication that overstates institutional reality risks eroding rather than building equity once

prospective students encounter contradictory peer accounts (Mourad et al., 2020).

Contemporary higher education e-branding strategy increasingly integrates search-engine optimization, mobile-first content design, and algorithmically mediated discovery alongside conventional social media activity, reflecting how prospective students now begin their institutional search in curated digital environments rather than through direct navigation to a university homepage. Within the framework developed in this paper, e-branding is treated as a deliberate, institution-controlled strategic input that operates in parallel with, and partly shapes the conditions for, the more bottom-up phenomenon of social media engagement; the two constructs are conceptually distinct but mutually reinforcing, since well-executed e-branding increases the likelihood and quality of student engagement, while engagement data, in turn, informs the iterative refinement of e-branding strategy.

2.3 Brand Experience in Higher Education

Brand experience is conceptualized as the sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli encountered through a brand's design, identity, communications, and environments (Brakus et al., 2009). Brakus et al. (2009) decomposed the construct into four dimensions, namely sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral responses, and demonstrated empirically that brand experience is conceptually distinct from related constructs such as brand attachment, brand personality, and customer delight, while still exerting a direct and indirect influence on consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Because brand experience is stimulus-driven, digital touchpoints, including a university's website, social media content, and virtual interactions, qualify as legitimate sources of experience even in the absence of physical campus contact, a point reinforced by qualitative research on corporate brand experience design in online settings (Hamzah et al., 2014).

Within higher education, brand experience has been examined as both an antecedent of engagement and a determinant of loyalty. Farhat et al. (2021) found, in a study of higher education institutions, that brand experience and brand affect jointly predicted brand engagement, suggesting that the affective and sensory quality of a prospective student's encounters

with a university, whether through an open day, a campus tour, or a well-produced social media video, generates the engagement that subsequently feeds into broader brand outcomes. Salgado and Vela (2019) similarly showed that the quality of experience generated on a university's Brand Fan Page was a direct antecedent of engagement intensity, which in turn predicted brand loyalty among the student sample studied.

Brand experience in the higher education sector carries distinctive features relative to commercial goods and services. Because higher education is a high-involvement, identity-relevant, and largely intangible purchase, prospective students' experiential responses are shaped not only by an institution's direct communications but also by the testimony and visible experience of current students and alumni circulating on social platforms (Le et al., 2019). This peer-mediated quality of brand experience means that a university's e-branding strategy can stage curated brand encounters but cannot fully control the experiential narrative that ultimately reaches prospective students, a tension that helps explain why authenticity, rather than polish alone, has emerged as a recurring success factor in the social media branding literature reviewed above (Pringle & Fritz, 2019). For the purposes of the model developed here, brand experience is positioned as the organismic, internally processed response that translates external digital stimuli, both engagement-driven and e-branding-driven, into the cognitive and affective brand associations that constitute brand equity.

2.4 Brand Equity in Higher Education

Brand equity is most influentially defined, in its customer-based form, as the differential effect that brand knowledge exerts on a consumer's response to the marketing of that brand, such that a branded offering elicits more favorable responses than an otherwise identical unbranded offering (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) decomposed brand knowledge into brand awareness and brand image, the latter comprising the associations, judgments, and feelings consumers hold in memory, and later extended this into the brand resonance pyramid, which sequences brand building from salience through performance and imagery to judgments and feelings, culminating in resonance, the deepest form of psychological

brand-customer bond (Keller, 2001). Aaker's (1991) parallel and equally influential framework conceptualizes brand equity as comprising brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty, treating loyalty itself as a dimension rather than purely a downstream consequence of equity, a conceptual choice that the present paper revisits in Section 2.5. Measurement approaches developed for brand equity more broadly, including Yoo and Donthu's (2001) multidimensional consumer-based brand equity scale, have informed several of the education-specific instruments discussed below, reflecting brand equity's status as one of the most extensively operationalized constructs in the marketing literature. Higher education researchers have adapted these general consumer-brand frameworks to capture the sector's distinctive service characteristics. Mourad et al. (2011), working in the Egyptian higher education market, found that brand awareness and brand image jointly determined university brand equity and that equity functioned as a risk-reduction mechanism for prospective students facing a high-stakes, largely credence-based purchase decision; a subsequent comparative study extended this model across markets and confirmed its broad applicability while noting cross-national variation in the relative weight of awareness versus image (Mourad et al., 2020). Pinar et al. (2014) developed and validated a dedicated University Brand Equity scale comprising core dimensions, namely faculty-student interaction quality, university reputation, awareness, loyalty, and emotional environment, alongside supporting dimensions related to facilities and student services, explicitly rooting their framework in Aaker's (1991) conceptualization while adapting it to the educational service context. Vukasovic (2015) similarly applied a consumer-based brand equity lens to higher education, concluding that awareness- and association-building activities exert measurable influence on prospective students' institutional preference even before direct service experience occurs. Other education-specific brand constructs, including the University Brand Personality Scale (Rauschnabel et al., 2016) and analyses of academic staff as brand-relevant assets (Shafaei et al., 2019), further demonstrate how general consumer brand frameworks have been adapted to capture dimensions, such as institutional prestige and faculty reputation, that are particularly salient to prospective students evaluating universities as quasi-relational, identity-relevant brands.

Social media has emerged as a particularly potent channel for brand equity formation in this sector precisely because it generates large volumes of both institution-controlled and peer-generated brand associations. Godey et al. (2016), studying luxury brands, demonstrated that social media marketing activities, including entertainment value, interaction, and word-of-mouth, significantly predicted brand equity and subsequent consumer behavior, a finding that Ruangkanjanases et al. (2022) extended directly into the higher education context by showing that social media marketing activities raised prospective students' behavioral engagement both directly and through the mediating mechanism of brand equity. For the integrated model developed in this paper, brand equity functions as the cognitive-affective brand-knowledge structure that brand experience builds and that subsequently determines the strength of brand loyalty.

2.5 Brand Loyalty and Its Antecedents

Brand loyalty has been defined as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred brand consistently in the future, generating repetitive patronage behavior despite situational influences and marketing efforts that might otherwise induce switching (Oliver, 1999). Oliver's (1999) influential phased model distinguishes cognitive, affective, conative, and action loyalty, arguing that loyalty deepens through successive stages and that satisfaction alone is a necessary but insufficient condition for loyalty formation, since personal determinism and social bonding eventually sustain loyalty independent of ongoing satisfaction judgments. Dick and Basu (1994) offer a complementary framework, conceptualizing loyalty as a function of relative attitude strength combined with repeat patronage and arguing that loyalty is best understood as multidimensional rather than purely behavioral, a view consistent with the higher education context, where literal repeat enrollment is rare but attitudinal loyalty, manifest as advocacy, alumni support, and resistance to competitor persuasion, remains highly consequential. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) extended this reasoning by demonstrating that brand trust and brand affect jointly determine both purchase loyalty and attitudinal loyalty, with the latter associated with a brand's capacity to command a premium, an insight with direct relevance to private universities, which routinely compete on tuition premium relative to public alternatives.

Within higher education, brand loyalty has been operationalized variously as intention to recommend, willingness to provide alumni support, and resistance to competitor offers during the application process. Salgado and Vela (2019) found that engagement generated through a university's Brand Fan Page was a direct antecedent of student brand loyalty, while Shah et al. (2024) demonstrated that social media technologies, combined with relationship-management capabilities, jointly cultivated customer loyalty and institutional reputation among university stakeholders. Brandão and Ramos (2024) extended this line of inquiry by showing that emotional brand attachment mediates the relationship between brand equity and social media engagement, suggesting a partially reciprocal rather than strictly linear relationship between these constructs, an important boundary condition addressed later in this paper's discussion of model limitations.

Brand loyalty in the higher education context functions somewhat differently from loyalty in repeat-purchase consumer categories, since prospective students typically enroll once, and the loyalty construct prior to enrollment is better understood as a strong attitudinal preference and behavioral intention rather than repeated patronage. Nonetheless, the theoretical mechanisms identified by Oliver (1999) and Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), namely that trust and affect generated through accumulated positive brand encounters produce a resilient preference that withstands competing offers, transfer directly to the pre-enrollment context, positioning brand loyalty as the proximal psychological determinant of the enrollment decision examined in the next section.

2.6 Enrollment Decision-Making in Private Higher Education

The dominant explanatory framework for student enrollment behavior remains Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model, which conceptualizes college choice as unfolding through predisposition, the development of an aspiration to pursue higher education; search, the active gathering of information about specific institutions; and choice, the final selection and application decision.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) emphasized that institutions are simultaneously searching for students even as students search for institutions, a reciprocal dynamic that anticipates the interactive, platform-mediated relationship between universities and applicants that social media has since made commonplace. While developed before the social media era, the model's search phase maps closely onto the information-seeking behavior now documented in digital contexts, where prospective students consult institutional and peer-generated content across multiple platforms before narrowing their consideration set (Le et al., 2019).

More recent scholarships have continued to extend this choice framework into digital contexts, examining how institutional content strategy and authentic social media presentation shape awareness, consideration, and ultimately enrollment-related choice among prospective students (Pringle & Fritz, 2019). Within private university contexts specifically, social media marketing activity has been linked to prospective students' behavioral engagement and, through the mediating role of brand equity, to the kind of favorable institutional disposition that precedes a positive enrollment decision (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022).

For private universities specifically, the enrollment decision carries distinctive weight because, unlike many public counterparts, private institutions typically lack guaranteed catchment populations or government-mandated allocation mechanisms and must instead compete directly for both domestic, full-fee-paying, and increasingly international applicants on the basis of perceived brand value (Mourad et al., 2011). This dependence on perceived value, rather than geographic or administrative assignment, is precisely what makes the brand-equity and brand-loyalty mechanisms reviewed above so consequential for private institutions: in the absence of compulsion, the enrollment decision is, in a meaningful sense, a brand choice. The literature reviewed in this section, however, has rarely traced that brand choice back through the full sequence of digital stimuli, experience, and equity formation that precedes it, which is the integrative task this paper undertakes in Sections 4 and 5.

3.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The integrated model developed in this paper draws on three complementary theoretical traditions to explain how digital brand stimuli are transformed into enrollment behavior. First, the Stimulus–Organism–Response paradigm, originally formulated within environmental psychology, proposes that features of an environment function as stimuli that alter an individual's internal affective and cognitive state, which in turn produces approach or avoidance behavioral responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Although developed to explain responses to physical environments, the S-O-R framework has been applied extensively to digital and online consumer behavior, where website characteristics, content, and online community interaction function as stimuli that shape internal states such as engagement and trust, which subsequently predict behavioral outcomes. Ul Islam and Rahman (2017) demonstrated specifically that characteristics of online brand communities function as stimuli that elevate customer engagement, supporting the use of S-O-R logic to model how social media and e-branding stimuli, occupying the present model's first stage, generate the internal organismic states of brand experience and brand equity that occupy its second stage, prior to producing the loyalty and enrollment responses of its third stage.

Second, Keller's (1993, 2001) customer-based brand equity framework supplies the substantive content of the model's organismic stage, explaining how awareness and associations accumulate into the judgments, feelings, and ultimately resonance that the present paper operationalizes as brand equity and brand loyalty. Keller's framework is particularly well suited to a higher education context because it is explicitly sequential and cumulative: equity cannot be built without first establishing salience and a coherent set of positive associations, which is precisely the function performed by the social media engagement and e-branding constructs at the model's stimulus stage.

Third, consumer engagement theory, as articulated by Brodie et al. (2011) and operationalized for social media contexts by Hollebeek et al. (2014), provides the conceptual vocabulary for the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of engagement that connect digital stimulus to brand experience. Engagement theory clarifies that engagement is not synonymous with exposure or reach; rather, it represents an interactive,

co-creative psychological state that varies in intensity and that is shaped by the relational context, including trust and commitment, in which it occurs.

Integrating these three traditions, the present paper treats social media engagement and e-branding as the stimulus inputs of an S-O-R sequence; brand experience and brand equity as the organismic, internally processed states through which Keller's (1993, 2001) brand-knowledge structures accumulate; and brand loyalty and enrollment decision as the behavioral response outputs that engagement theory and the loyalty literature (Oliver, 1999) characterize as the terminal expression of accumulated brand value. This tripartite theoretical integration, summarized in Figure 1, provides the conceptual scaffolding for the model and propositions developed later in this paper.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in secondary data, consistent with conceptual and theory-building scholarship in marketing and management. Rather than collecting primary data from students or university administrators, the study systematically identifies, analyzes, and thematically synthesizes secondary sources, namely peer-reviewed journal articles, to derive an integrated conceptual model and accompanying theoretical propositions. This approach is appropriate where substantial empirical and conceptual literature already exists on individual constructs but has not yet been synthesized into a unified explanatory sequence; the contribution sought is integrative and theory-building rather than descriptive or hypothesis-testing.

4.2 Secondary Data Sources and Search Strategy

The secondary data underpinning this study comprised peer-reviewed articles published in Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed marketing, branding, and higher-education management journals, supplemented by seminal books and

foundational theoretical works identified through citation tracing. Search terms combined the core constructs, namely social media engagement, e-branding or online branding, brand experience, brand equity, and brand loyalty, with enrollment decision or college choice, and with the context terms higher education, university, and private university. Searches were conducted across Google Scholar, Scopus, and major publisher databases. Source identification and selection broadly followed the spirit of the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) for transparent reporting of systematic literature identification, screening, and inclusion, adapted here for a conceptual rather than a meta-analytic synthesis.

Inclusion criteria favored peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2000 onward, with priority given to studies published since 2014, when social media's role in higher education marketing began to receive sustained scholarly attention, while seminal pre-2000 theoretical works were retained where they supplied foundational constructs still in active use. Sources were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed, did not address at least one of the six focal constructs, or addressed brand constructs in product categories with limited conceptual transferability to a high-involvement service context such as higher education. Articles addressing higher education branding and digital marketing specifically were prioritized, supplemented by foundational general-marketing sources where sector-specific empirical work remained sparse, most notably for e-branding, where the literature remains comparatively underdeveloped relative to brand equity and loyalty.

4.3 Data Analysis

Secondary sources were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach as familiarization with the corpus, generation of initial descriptive codes, search for candidate themes, review of themes against the coded extracts and full corpus, definition and naming of themes, and final synthesis into the narrative structure and integrated model presented in this paper. Coding proceeded construct by construct, with each source coded for

the constructs it addressed, the relationships it reported or proposed between constructs, and its underlying theoretical lens. Cross-construct themes, for example, the recurring finding that authenticity moderates the effectiveness of institution-generated digital content, were identified by examining where codes from different construct-specific subsets converged. This thematic, qualitative approach is distinct from, and complementary to, quantitative meta-analysis: rather than aggregating effect sizes, it surfaces the conceptual logic connecting constructs across studies rarely examined jointly.

5. PROPOSED INTEGRATED MODEL AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

5.1 Overview of the Integrated Model

Synthesizing the literature reviewed above through the theoretical lenses just established, this paper proposes a sequential, six-construct model linking

social media engagement and e-branding, as parallel digital stimulus inputs, through brand experience and brand equity, as organismic mediating states, to brand loyalty and enrollment decision, as behavioral responses. The model is deliberately parsimonious, retaining only the constructs and relationships for which converging secondary evidence was identified during thematic synthesis, while acknowledging several plausible feedback and moderating relationships that the core sequential model does not capture.

At the stimulus stage, social media engagement and e-branding are positioned as related but conceptually distinct inputs. E-branding represents the university's deliberate, controllable strategic investment, including website architecture, content calendars, search visibility, and platform selection, whereas social media engagement represents the resulting and partly co-created interactive behavior of prospective students and the wider online community, including peers, current students, and alumni. The model treats e-branding as a partial antecedent of social media engagement, consistent with the finding that strategically authentic digital brand communication generates

stronger engagement (Pringle & Fritz, 2019), while also allowing engagement to function independently as a stimulus, since peer-generated content circulating with limited institutional control demonstrably shapes prospective students' brand-relevant impressions (Le et al., 2019).

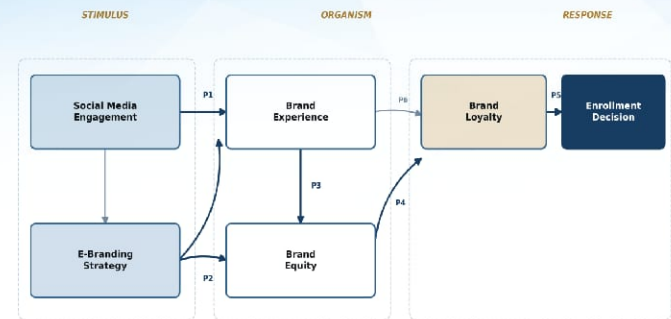
At the organismic stage, brand experience is modeled as the proximal, stimulus-driven response, capturing the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral reactions evoked by engagement and e-branding touchpoints. Brand experience, in turn, feeds into brand equity, operationalized as the accumulated structure of awareness, associations, judgments, and feelings that constitutes the university's brand knowledge in the prospective student's memory. This sequencing, experience preceding and feeding equity, reflects Brakus et al.'s (2009) original finding that brand experience exerts effects on downstream brand outcomes both directly and through its influence on brand-related associations, and is reinforced in the higher education context by research linking brand experience to engagement and, by extension, to the equity-relevant outcomes engagement is shown elsewhere to predict (Farhat et al., 2021; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022).

At the response stage, brand equity is modeled as the direct antecedent of brand loyalty, consistent with both Aaker's (1991) original inclusion of loyalty within the brand equity construct and higher-education-specific evidence linking engagement and equity perceptions to loyalty outcomes (Salgado & Vela, 2019; Shah et al., 2024). Brand loyalty, finally, is modeled as the direct antecedent of enrollment decision, the model's terminal outcome, reflecting Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) choice-phase logic and Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) demonstration that trust- and affect-based loyalty produces resilient preference capable of withstanding competing offers, precisely the resilience a private university requires of an applicant weighing multiple institutional options during the choice phase.

Solid navy arrows represent the model's primary hypothesized pathway (P1–P5). The arrow labeled P6 (light gray) denotes brand experience's direct partial effect on brand

Figure 1

Integrated Conceptual Model: From Social Media Engagement to Enrollment Decision



Theoretical anchors: Stimulus–Organism–Response paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974); Customer-Based Brand Equity (Keller, 1993, 2001)

loyalty, parallel to its indirect effect transmitted through brand equity (P3–P4). The light gray arrow from social media engagement to e-branding strategy represents the iterative feedback relationship discussed in Section 5.3, whereby engagement data inform the ongoing refinement of e-branding strategy.

5.2 Research Propositions

Based on the synthesized literature and theoretical integration described above, six propositions are advanced to guide future empirical validation of the model.

P1. Social media engagement is positively associated with prospective students' brand experience of a private university.

P2. E-branding strategy is positively associated with prospective students' brand experience of a private university, and this relationship is partially mediated by social media engagement.

P3. Brand experience is positively associated with university brand equity as perceived by prospective students.

P4. University brand equity is positively associated with prospective students' brand loyalty toward the institution.

P5. Brand loyalty is positively associated with the likelihood of a favorable enrollment decision.

P6. Brand equity mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty, such that brand experience exerts both a direct effect on loyalty and an indirect effect transmitted through accumulated brand equity.

Collectively, these six propositions formalize the pathway depicted in Figure 1 and provide testable claims against which future primary research, ideally employing structural equation modeling with data collected from prospective and recently enrolled students, can evaluate the model's explanatory adequacy

5.3 Boundary Conditions and Feedback Relationships

While the model is presented as a directional sequence for parsimony, the underlying literature suggests at least two important qualifications. First, the relationship between brand equity and social media engagement may be partly reciprocal rather than strictly sequential: research has found that emotional brand attachment mediates a relationship running from brand equity toward continued social media engagement (Brandão & Ramos, 2024), suggesting that students with higher existing equity perceptions engage more, not only that engagement builds equity, a feedback loop the present model acknowledges but does not formally test. Second, the strength of the engagement-to-experience and experience-to-equity relationships is likely moderated by content authenticity and source credibility, given the consistent finding across the higher-education social media literature that institution-generated content is discounted relative to peer-generated content perceived as authentic (Le et al., 2019; Pringle & Fritz, 2019).

5.4 Distinctive Contribution

The model advanced here differs from prior higher education brand frameworks in two respects. First, where existing university brand equity scales and models (Pinar et al., 2014) treat brand equity as a relatively static, multidimensional outcome measured at a single point in the student journey, the present model treats equity as one stage in a temporally ordered process originating in specific, manageable digital stimuli, offering university marketers clearer guidance on where to intervene. Second, where social media studies in this sector have typically linked engagement to a single proximate outcome, whether recruitment performance (Rutter et al., 2016), brand loyalty (Salgado & Vela, 2019), or behavioral engagement (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022), the present model traces a longer causal chain through to enrollment decision itself, integrating e-branding as a distinct strategic lever rather than treating digital activity as an undifferentiated whole.

6.0 DISCUSSION

Sities: the enrollment decision. Three patterns emerging from the thematic synthesis merit further discussion. First, the synthesis suggests that digital brand stimuli are not monolithic. The literature consistently distinguishes between

Pringle & Fritz, 2019). This distinction has been somewhat underplayed in prior higher education brand-equity models, which tend to treat digital or social media marketing as a single undifferentiated input (Godey et al., 2016; Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). By separating e-branding from engagement while modeling their interrelationship, the present model offers a more granular account of where institutional control over the brand-building process begins and ends, with direct implications for how private universities allocate resources between owned content and community management.

Second, the synthesis reinforces brand experience's role as a conceptually distinct mediating construct rather than a synonym for engagement or satisfaction. Brakus et al.'s (2009) original distinction between brand experience and related constructs is corroborated in the higher education context by Farhat et al. (2021) and Salgado and Vela (2019), both of which find experiential quality to be a measurable, separable antecedent of subsequent engagement and loyalty outcomes. This matters because it suggests private universities cannot rely on brand equity or loyalty interventions alone; discrete brand encounters function as a necessary precursor that broader equity- or loyalty-building campaigns cannot substitute for.

institution-controlled e-branding activity and the more emergent, partly uncontrollable phenomenon of social media engagement, particularly peer-generated content (Le et al., 2019;

Third, the synthesis surfaces authenticity as a recurring moderating theme across multiple, otherwise independent literatures. Studies of social media content type (Le et al., 2019), brand authenticity analytics (Pringle & Fritz, 2019), and engagement intensity (Brech et al., 2017) converge on the finding that prospective students discount content perceived as overtly promotional relative to content perceived as authentic, peer-sourced, or community-oriented. This convergence, emerging independently across studies that did not set out to test a common authenticity hypothesis, lends the theme particular credibility and suggests that authenticity functions as a boundary condition on the entire model rather than a feature of any single construct.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that the integrated model's principal value lies less in any single novel relationship, since each individual link finds support in prior literature, than in the act of integration itself. Prior research has examined adjacent segments of this chain in isolation; connecting them within a single framework clarifies that private universities pursuing digital brand investment are, in effect, managing a single extended causal sequence rather than several independent marketing functions.

7.0 THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The model makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it extends established customer -based brand equity theory (Keller, 1993, 2001) into a digitally mediated, service-sector context by specifying the social media engagement and e-branding inputs that precede brand-knowledge formation, addressing a gap in several higher-education brand equity studies (Mourad et al., 2011, 2020; Pinar et al., 2014), which measure equity's dimensions without theorizing their digital antecedents. Second, it operationalizes the Stimulus–Organism Response paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) for a sector, higher education, in which the enrollment decision is unusually high-involvement, infrequent, and identity-relevant, demonstrating the paradigm's continued reach beyond the retail and e-commerce contexts in which it has most often been applied (Ul Islam & Rahman, 2017). Third, by extending the causal chain through to enrollment decision rather than stopping at attitudinal loyalty or recruitment performance, the model responds to calls for research connecting brand constructs more directly to enrollment-relevant outcomes (Le et al., 2019; Pringle & Fritz, 2019).

7.2 Practical Implications

For private university marketing and admissions leadership, the model implies that digital brand investment should be sequenced rather than treated as a single undifferentiated activity. Investment in e-branding fundamentals establishes the necessary conditions for engagement but does not by itself guarantee it; institutions should budget and measure community management separately, since authentic, peer-oriented engagement carries influence that institution-generated content alone does not replicate (Le et al., 2019; Pringle & Fritz, 2019).

The model further implies that brand experience deserves dedicated design attention as a distinct deliverable, rather than being treated as an automatic byproduct of engagement volume. Because brand equity is shown here to mediate between experience and loyalty, private universities should track equity-relevant perceptions as an intermediate key performance indicator distinct from both raw engagement metrics and final enrollment numbers, enabling earlier diagnosis of where a prospective student's brand journey is breaking down. Finally, because brand loyalty is modeled as the proximal determinant of enrollment decision, institutions should prioritize loyalty-building touchpoints during the search and choice phases of the enrollment journey (Hosler & Gallagher, 1987), when competing institutional offers are most likely to be under direct comparison.

8.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study's principal limitation follows directly from its chosen methodology as a qualitative synthesis of secondary data, the model and its propositions are conceptual rather than empirically tested, and the relationships proposed, while each grounded in prior empirical findings, have not been jointly estimated within a single sample or institutional context. Future research should therefore prioritize empirical validation, ideally through structural equation modeling using primary survey data collected from prospective and recently enrolled students at private universities, to test the proposed sequential and mediated relationships. Second, the secondary sources synthesized here, while spanning multiple national contexts, are unevenly distributed across regions; higher-education social media and branding research remains concentrated in North American, European, and selected Asian markets, and future work should extend empirical testing to underrepresented contexts, including South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where private higher education is expanding rapidly but the relevant digital marketing literature remains thin.

Third, the model's treatment of e-branding and social media engagement as distinguishable stimulus inputs, while supported by the literature reviewed, would benefit from primary research designed to disentangle their relative and interactive effects, since most existing studies measure only one construct or treat social media marketing activity as a

composite that does not separate institutional strategy from emergent engagement. Finally, the boundary conditions identified earlier, namely the possible reciprocal relationship between brand equity and engagement and the moderating role of content authenticity, warrant explicit empirical testing rather than the qualitative inference offered here. Longitudinal designs tracking individual prospective students from initial social media exposure through to final enrollment decision would be particularly valuable in establishing the temporal ordering the present model assumes but cannot, given its secondary-data design, directly demonstrate.

9.0 CONCLUSION

Private universities now compete for enrollment in an environment where social media functions as a primary point of contact between institution and prospective student, yet the scholarly literature explaining how that digital contact ultimately translates into an enrollment decision has remained fragmented across separate streams addressing engagement, branding, experience, equity, and loyalty in relative isolation. This paper has synthesized those streams, using a qualitative thematic analysis of secondary data grounded in the Stimulus–Organism

– Response paradigm and Keller’s customer-based brand equity framework, into a single integrated model that traces a coherent pathway from social media engagement and e-branding, through brand experience and brand equity, to brand loyalty and, finally, enrollment decision. The resulting six-proposition model offers higher education marketing scholars a parsimonious, theoretically grounded structure for future empirical testing, and offers private university administrators a sequenced logic for allocating digital brand investment across the distinct stages of the prospective student’s journey. As private higher education continues to expand under conditions of intensifying digital competition, integrating these previously disconnected literatures, and subjecting the resulting model to rigorous empirical validation, represents a necessary next step for both scholarship and practice in this field.

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