

# The Impact of University Branding on High School Students' College Choice

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Phan Thi Yen , <sup>2</sup>Dr. Dang Vinh

<sup>1</sup>University of Foreign Languages Studies, The University of Danang, Viet Nam

<sup>2</sup>Vietnam - Korea University of Information and Communication Technology, The University of Danang, Viet Nam.

---

**ABSTRACT:** This study aims to explore the role of university brand factors in influencing high school students' decisions to choose a university in the context of a transitioning economy. Grounded in theories of service marketing, brand equity, and consumer behavior in education, the proposed research model includes seven key components: brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, reputation and rankings, brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining focus group discussions and a quantitative survey of 527 twelfth-grade students in Da Nang and neighboring provinces. Analytical techniques include Pearson correlation analysis, simple linear regression, and multiple linear regression. The findings indicate that brand-related factors significantly influence students' university choices, with reputation and rankings having the strongest impact. These results offer both theoretical foundations and practical implications for universities in developing effective branding strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** college branding, college choice, high school students, brand image, brand equity.

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasing competition in higher education, university branding is not only a communication tool but also a strategic factor that shapes learners' perceptions and decisions. High school students today not only consider the quality of training but also care about the image, reputation, symbolic value and emotional attachment to the school. However, in Vietnam, comprehensive quantitative research on the relationship between brand factors and students' decisions to choose a school is still limited. Therefore, this study was conducted to analyze the impact of university branding factors on high school students' choice behavior and propose strategic recommendations to help schools improve their competitiveness in enrollment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

**2.1. University brand image in the era of social media:** In the digital age, a university's brand image is shaped not only through traditional channels but also significantly influenced by social media. In particular, the TikTok platform has emerged as a powerful tool in shaping high school students' perceptions of universities. According to an article in the New York Post, many members of Generation Z choose universities based on their "aesthetic appeal" and the potential to share their academic experiences on TikTok. The hashtag #collegelife has garnered over 30 billion views, highlighting the profound impact of user-generated content in shaping university brand images.

**2.2. Regional shifts in university selection trends :** A notable trend in recent years is the increasing number of students from Northern U.S. states opting to attend public universities in the South. This shift is driven not only by lower tuition fees and warmer climates but also by the perception of Southern universities as more dynamic, friendly, and less politically charged. According to analysis by the Wall Street Journal, the number of Northern students enrolled in Southern public universities has risen by 84% over the past two decades, with a 30% increase recorded between 2018 and 2022.

**2.3. Student experience and perceived value in university choice:** Student experience and perceived value play critical roles in building a university's brand. According to Chen (2022), the academic journey, emotional engagement, and perceived educational value contribute significantly to the strength of a university's brand and students' subsequent enrollment decisions. Nguyen et al. (2022), in a study of Vietnamese higher education institutions, further supported this perspective by showing that institutional support and positive learning experiences enhance brand image and influence students' program choices.

**2.4. External factors influencing university choice:** Beyond internal brand-related factors, external contextual variables such as city image and socio-cultural characteristics also affect students' university choices. Ma (2022) found that international students' major selection is influenced not only by academic reputation but also by the perceived image and attractiveness of the host city. In Vietnam, Le, Duong, and Le (2022) found that program-specific features, career opportunities, and universities' communication efforts significantly shape student preferences, underscoring the importance of integrated branding strategies.

### III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining focus group discussions and a structured questionnaire administered to 12th-grade students in Da Nang (N = 527). A continuous 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (lowest influence) to 5 (highest influence), was used to measure the perceived impact of various university brand factors on students' decision-making. Data were analyzed using SPSS software. The analytical procedures included Pearson correlation analysis to examine relationships among variables, simple linear regression to assess the individual impact of each brand factor, and multiple linear regression to evaluate the combined influence of all factors on students' university choice.

*Table 1. Research sample statistics*

Name of high school		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Hoa Vang	105	19,9
	Le Quy Don for Gifted	85	16,1
	Nguyen Khuyen	118	22,4
	Phan Chau Trinh	102	19,4
	Thai Phien	117	22,2
	Total	527	100,0

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**4.1. Identifying brand factor groups that influence students' university choices :** The study incorporated expert consultation to identify seven groups of university brand factors that influence students' decision-making. These include: Brand Awareness (BA), Brand Image (BI), Perceived Quality (PQ), Reputation and Rankings (RR), Brand Trust (BT), Brand Attachment (BAT), and Brand Loyalty (BL). For each group, a set of items was developed to measure the extent to which these factors impact students' university choice.

**Table 2.** Identifying brand factor groups that influence students' university choices

University Brand Factors	Observation variable	Code
<b>Brand Awareness</b>	How well students know the school name	BA1
	Familiarity with logo, slogan, message	BA2
	How likely students are to remember the school when thinking about going to college	BA3
<b>Brand Image</b>	General impression of the school (quality, dynamic, modern...)	BI1
	Is the school associated with a prominent industry/field?	BI2
	How positive is the media about the school	BI3
<b>Perceived Quality</b>	Impressions of the training program, teaching staff	PQ1
	Academic reputation of the school	PQ2
	Facilities, student support services	PQ3
<b>Reputation &amp; Rankings</b>	The school's position in rankings	RE1
	Is the school widely recognised?	RE2
	Feedback from alumni, teachers and society	RE3
<b>Brand Trust</b>	Level of trust in the school's commitment	BT1
	Is the school transparent, fair, and supportive of students as advertised?	BT2
	Stability in policies, admissions, and training	BT3
<b>Brand Attachment</b>	Do students feel a sense of "belonging" to the school?	BAT1
	Do they want to experience studying there?	BAT2
	Is the school inspiring and aligned with their personal values?	BAT3

<b>Brand Loyalty</b>	Is the student likely to recommend the school to friends	BL1
	Intention to continue studying other programs at the school	BL2
	Long-term commitment if chosen	BL3

**4.2. Assessing the correlation between university brand elements :** Using SPSS to evaluate the correlation between university brand factors, the results show that there is a correlation between the dependent variable and the independent variables and a correlation between the independent variables with each other. Consider the correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variable, and the correlation between the dependent variables with each other. All significance values (Sig.) of the independent variables are equal to 0.000, which is less than the conventional threshold of 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant linear relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable. Details are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Correlation between university brand elements**

		<b>Correlations</b>							
		UDC	BA_avg	BI_avg	PQ_avg	RE_avg	BT_avg	BAT_avg	BL_avg
UDC	Pearson Correlation	1	,598**	,571**	,599**	,658**	,672**	,691**	,544**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
BA_avg	Pearson Correlation	,598**	1	,447**	,319**	,284**	,201**	,253**	,195**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
BI_avg	Pearson Correlation	,571**	,447**	1	,399**	,239**	,189**	,210**	,131**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000	,003
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
PQ_avg	Pearson Correlation	,599**	,319**	,399**	1	,216**	,275**	,300**	,199**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
RE_avg	Pearson Correlation	,658**	,284**	,239**	,216**	1	,374**	,395**	,255**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
BT_avg	Pearson Correlation	,672**	,201**	,189**	,275**	,374**	1	,484**	,305**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000		,000	,000
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
BAT_avg	Pearson Correlation	,691**	,253**	,210**	,300**	,395**	,484**	1	,278**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000		,000
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527
BL_avg	Pearson Correlation	,544**	,195**	,131**	,199**	,255**	,305**	,278**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,003	,000	,000	,000	,000	
	N	527	527	527	527	527	527	527	527

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

All brand elements have a positive and statistically significant correlation with the decision to choose a university. The strongest correlation is with: Brand Attachment ( $r = 0.691$ ), Brand Trust ( $r = 0.672$ ), Reputation & Rankings ( $r = 0.658$ ). This shows that: Students tend to choose a university not only based on recognition or image, but also based on trust, emotional attachment and reputation of the university. Pearson correlation results indicate that all dimensions of university branding are significantly and positively associated with students' decision to choose a university. The strongest relationships were found with brand attachment, brand trust, and reputation - suggesting that emotional and credibility - related factors are key drivers of student choice behavior. Based on the correlation between independent variables and dependent variables, linear regression analysis was performed to examine the impact of each brand factor on students' decision to choose a university.

#### 4.3. Assessing the individual impact of each factor on university choice

**Table 4.** Regression results of brand awareness components influencing university choice decision  
Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,144	,085		25,235	,000
	BA1	,136	,024	,240	5,677	,000
	BA2	,113	,027	,202	4,129	,000
	BA3	,149	,027	,269	5,564	,000

a. Dependent Variable: UDC

The results of linear regression analysis show that all three factors in the independent variables group related to university brand (BA1, BA2 and BA3) have a positive and statistically significant influence on the university choice decision of high school students (UDC), with a significance level of Sig. = 0.000 for all variables. Specifically, factor BA3 has a standardized coefficient Beta = 0.269 and an unstandardized coefficient B = 0.149, indicating that this is the factor with the strongest impact in the model. Factor BA1 ranks second with Beta = 0.240 and B = 0.136, followed by BA2 with Beta = 0.202 and B = 0.113. This shows that the influence level of each factor is different, in which BA3 plays a key role in influencing students' decision to choose a university. In addition, the intercept coefficient (constant) has a value of B = 2.144 and is statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000), indicating that even when brand factors are not well perceived by students, there is still a certain level of willingness to choose a school. Overall, this result confirms that university brand awareness is an important factor in high school students' decision-making process, especially when factor BA3-which could be perceived as academic reputation, outstanding achievements, or widespread recognition-plays a more prominent role.

#### 4.4. The impact of brand image components on university choice decision

**Table 5.** Regression results of brand image components influencing university choice decision

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,138	,091		23,506	,000
	BI1	,169	,027	,286	6,194	,000
	BI2	,115	,028	,190	4,151	,000
	BI3	,121	,026	,210	4,736	,000

a. Dependent Variable: UDC

The results of the regression analysis showed that all three factors in the brand image group (BI1, BI2 and BI3) had a positive and statistically significant impact on students' decision to choose a university (Sig. < 0.001). Of which, BI1 was the factor with the strongest impact with a standardized coefficient Beta = 0.286, followed by BI3 (Beta = 0.210) and BI2 (Beta = 0.190). The unstandardized coefficients B of the variables ranged from 0.115 to 0.169, indicating that the actual level of influence of each factor was different. This result confirmed that the brand image of the university plays a significant role in students' decision to choose a university.

#### 4.5. Correlation analysis of the three key factors most strongly influencing the university choice decision

**Table 6.** Regression results of brand attachment components influencing university choice decision  
Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2,096	,068		30,738	,000
	BAT1	,135	,021	,261	6,526	,000
	BAT2	,105	,023	,204	4,516	,000
	BAT3	,178	,022	,347	8,120	,000

a. Dependent Variable: UDC

The results of regression analysis show that all three components of brand attachment (BAT1, BAT2, BAT3) have a positive and statistically significant influence on the decision to choose a university (Sig. < 0.001). In which, BAT3 is the factor with the strongest influence with a standardized coefficient Beta = 0.347, followed by BAT1 (Beta = 0.261) and BAT2 (Beta = 0.204). The coefficient B ranges from 0.105 to 0.178, indicating that the actual level of influence between the factors is different. These results confirm the important role of brand attachment in the process of students making decisions to choose a university.

**Table 7.** Regression results of brand trust components influencing university choice decision

		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	2,182	,069		31,550	,000
	BT1	,134	,022	,255	6,012	,000
	BT2	,078	,023	,156	3,450	,001
	BT3	,172	,022	,363	7,669	,000

a. Dependent Variable: UDC

The regression results show that all three components of brand trust (BT1, BT2, BT3) have a positive and statistically significant influence on university choice decisions (Sig. < 0.001). Of which, BT3 has the strongest impact with the highest standardized Beta coefficient (0.363), followed by BT1 (Beta = 0.255) and BT2 (Beta = 0.156). The B coefficient ranges from 0.078 to 0.172, indicating that the actual influence of each factor is different. This result indicates that university brand trust plays an important role in students' university choice decisions, especially factors related to trust and sense of security (BT3).

**Table 8.** Regression results of reputation and rankings components influencing university choice decision

		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	2,229	,067		33,143	,000
	RR1	,215	,023	,418	9,159	,000
	RR2	,070	,021	,141	3,282	,001
	RR3	,093	,019	,210	5,008	,000

a. Dependent Variable: UDC

The results of the regression analysis show that all three components of reputation and ranking factors (RR1, RR2, RR3) have a positive and statistically significant impact on the decision to choose a university (Sig. < 0.001). Of which, RR1 is the factor with the strongest influence, with a standardized coefficient Beta = 0.418 and coefficient B = 0.215, showing a significant impact on students' decisions. The remaining two factors, RR3 (Beta = 0.210) and RR2 (Beta = 0.141), also have a significant impact but at a lower level. This shows that the reputation of the brand and ranking of the university are among the key factors influencing high school students' choice of university. The results of linear regression analysis show that factors belonging to the university brand all have a positive and statistically significant influence on students' decision to choose a school. In particular, the factor groups including Brand Image, Brand Attachment, Brand Trust and Reputation & Rankings all play an important role, with standardized Beta coefficients ranging from 0.141 to 0.418 (Sig. < 0.001). Notably, the factor with the strongest influence is RR1 (Reputation & Rankings) with Beta = 0.418, followed by BAT3 (Brand Attachment) with Beta = 0.347 and BT3 (Brand Trust) with Beta = 0.363. This shows that students tend to choose universities with high reputation, strong brands and create emotional attachment and trust. These results contribute to affirming the essential role of branding in student attraction strategies and university recruitment communication planning.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The study has clarified the important role of university brands in high school students' decision to choose a school. Brands not only reflect the prestige and quality of training but also have a profound impact on candidates' awareness and trust when choosing a school that suits their learning and personal development goals. The research results show that factors such as reputation, learning environment, employment opportunities and

alumni networks are all important components that create the appeal of university brands. Therefore, universities need to invest in building and promoting their brands in a systematic and professional manner to increase their ability to attract candidates, while contributing to improving the quality of enrollment and sustainable development. The study also suggests new directions for education managers and policy makers to optimize communication strategies and build university brands, thereby creating more favorable conditions for students in choosing universities that suit their abilities and aspirations.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research is funded by University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Da Nang under project number T2024-05-02.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. Chen, S.-C. (2022). *University branding: Student experience, value perception, and consumption journey*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363283526>
2. Le, M. T., Duong, H. T., & Le, Q. A. (2022). Determinants of students' major choice in Vietnamese universities: The role of branding and communication. *Vietnam Journal of Education*, 6(3), 122–132.
3. Ma, C. (2022). Assessing the effects of university reputation and city image on international student destination choice: Evidence from a flagship university in Taipei. *Education and Urban Society*, 54(3), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245211013844>
4. Nguyen, H. N., Nguyen, T. T. P., & Phan, T. D. (2022). Addressing the interplay amongst university support, student experience, and university brand image at Vietnamese higher education institutions. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 20(2), 311–320. [https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.20\(2\).2022.26](https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.20(2).2022.26)
5. New York Post. (2024, November 1). *College-bound Gen Z is choosing a school based on how it will look on TikTok*. Retrieved from [https://nypost.com/2024/11/01/lifestyle/college-bound-gen-z-is-choosing-a-school-based-on-how-it-will-look-on-tiktok/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://nypost.com/2024/11/01/lifestyle/college-bound-gen-z-is-choosing-a-school-based-on-how-it-will-look-on-tiktok/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)
6. Wall Street Journal. (2024, March 21). *Sorry Harvard, everyone wants to go to college in the South now*. Retrieved from [https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/sorry-harvard-everyone-wants-to-go-to-college-in-the-south-now-235d7934?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/sorry-harvard-everyone-wants-to-go-to-college-in-the-south-now-235d7934?utm_source=chatgpt.com)