



Do Brand Development Touchpoints Influence Private Higher Education Institutions' Brand Equity?

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Abstract

Privately-managed higher education institutions that play a notable role in the Indonesian higher education sector, in today's increasingly competitive environment, need to develop brand equity to secure the existence and ensure the institutions' sustainability. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effect of brand development at the pre-admission touchpoint, during the course touchpoint, and the post-passing touchpoint on the brand equity of private higher education institutions. This study involved 100 third-year students from two private higher education institutions in Klaten Regency and used the purposive sampling method as the sampling technique. The collected data were then analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis. The results indicated that brand development at the pre-admissions touchpoint became the primary variable in determining the brand equity of the private higher education, followed by brand development at the course touchpoint and brand development at the post-passing touchpoint. In addition, brand development at the three touchpoints simultaneously had a positive and significant influence on the brand equity of private higher education institutions.

Abstrak

Institusi pendidikan tinggi swasta yang berperan penting dalam sektor pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia, dalam lingkungan yang semakin kompetitif seperti saat ini, perlu mengembangkan ekuitas merek untuk mengamankan keberadaan dan menjamin keberlanjutan institusi. Oleh karena itu, riset ini bertujuan untuk menguji pengaruh pengembangan merek pada titik sentuh pra-admisi, pada titik sentuh selama kuliah, dan pada titik sentuh setelah lulus terhadap ekuitas merek institusi pendidikan tinggi swasta. Sampel penelitian ini adalah 100 mahasiswa tahun ketiga yang dari dua institusi pendidikan tinggi swasta di Kabupaten Klaten. Teknik pengambilan sampel menggunakan metode purposive sampling. Data yang terkumpul kemudian dianalisis dengan menggunakan analisis regresi linier berganda. Hasil penelitian yang didapatkan menunjukkan pengembangan merek pada titik sentuh pra-admisi menjadi variabel utama yang menentukan ekuitas merek institusi pendidikan tinggi swasta, diikuti dengan pengembangan merek pada titik sentuh selama perkuliahan dan pengembangan merek pada titik sentuh setelah kelulusan. Selain itu pengembangan merek pada ketiga titik sentuh tersebut, secara simultan juga berpengaruh positif dan signifikan terhadap ekuitas merek institusi pendidikan tinggi swasta.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs), like other organizations, are facing an intense competition today (Lomer et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2018). Likewise, HEIs in Indonesia, both those managed by the government and those managed by private institutions (private HEIs), also face a similar situation. Fierce competition occurs not only at the local level, but also at the regional and international levels (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). One crucial area of the competition in higher education is related to the recruitment of new students (Bock et al., 2014; Joseph et al., 2012), in which HEIs will compete fiercely to get as many students as possible. This unfavorable circumstance puts pressure on private HEIs, especially those that rely on institutional income only from student tuition fees. Such intense competition will threaten the existence of the institution. Therefore, attracting and retaining students can be a crucial step in ensuring the sustainability of the institution. Hence, private HEIs need to develop a number of appropriate marketing-oriented strategies to overcome severe competition. Among several options, the development of institution brand equity can be a determining strategy (Pinar et al., 2014; Mourad et al., 2020).

The salient role of brand equity has raised attention among scholars. Many studies have been conducted to analyze various factors that affect the formation of brand equity. In the context of higher education, research by Mourad et al., (2011) identified several factors, namely brand awareness, brand image, and consumer attributes; as the antecedents of brand equity. Meanwhile, along with the massive development and use of social media, Carvalho et al., (2020) and Ebrahim, (2020) identified electronic word-of-mouth and social media marketing activities as the variables affecting the brand equity. Other studies also contributed to the understanding of the antecedents to brand equity ((Shafaei et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020). However, the majority of these studies paid less attention to the importance of the relationship between students and HEIs in the formation of institutional brand equity. In fact, this relationship plays a crucial role for the institution. For this reason, this study differs in its focus from previous studies by examining the determining factors of brand equity in private HEIs, focusing on the three crucial touchpoints, namely pre-admission touchpoints, during the course touchpoints, and post passing touchpoints.

The definition of brand equity varies greatly depending on the perspective used (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016). The economics perspective defines brand equity as replenishment in the utility a brand gives to a product. The financial perspective defines brand equity as a monetary measure of the market value of a company minus the physical assets' value. Furthermore, from the cognitive psychology perspective, brand equity is defined as a consumers' response to the product marketing mix. Meanwhile, from the employee-based perspective, brand equity is the derivative effect of employees' brand knowledge on their reaction to the firm. In addition, Keller (2013) conceptualized consumer-based brand equity, by defining brand equity as brand strength related to what consumers learn, feel, see and hear about the brands.

Studies on the determinants of brand equity often use the conceptualization of Aaker (1996) by placing the dimensions of brand equity, consisting of brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand association, and perceived quality, as the predictors of brand equity. In the context of higher education, the relationship between HEIs and their students is intensive and sustainable. In this relationship, there are touchpoints, namely pre-admission touchpoint, during the course touchpoint, and post-passing touchpoints, that play a crucial role in shaping student experience (Pinar et al., 2014; Khanna et al., 2014).

Considering that each of these touchpoint brands can play a strategic role by signaling trust regarding the quality of educational services provided (Mourad et al., 2011), brand development efforts must focus on those three crucial touchpoints (Khanna et al., 2014). Further, to have a preferred brand, brand development efforts should also be directed to create robust brand equity (Khoshtaria et al., 2020). Therefore, HEIs must understand that continuing higher education is a long-term personal investment that will determine one's professional career in the future (Carvalho et al., (2020). Prospective students will consider various factors in choosing higher education institutions, and brand equity in this regard can play a crucial role in minimizing the risk of error in the institution selection process (Mourad et al., 2011).

Understanding, managing, and developing a brand is an urgent need for HEIs (Celly & Knepper, 2010). It is not sufficient to rely solely on one aspect, so private HEIs need to develop a number of appropriate marketing-oriented strategies to overcome the competition (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Weinstein & McFarlane, 2017). One of the strategic aspects of marketing widely used in the management of HEIs is the brand (Farhat et al., 2021; Weinstein & McFarlane, 2017). In the context of higher education, a brand consists of a series of promises to students regarding the learning quality, distinguishing features, and external communications (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). The importance of a brand is related to its role as a product identity that is considered in the consumer buying process (Keller, 2013b). However, a brand is more than just a differentiating factor, but it is also a factor that reflects the institution's capacity to meet student needs and to deliver various types and levels of higher education (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Considering that the brand is a strategic asset to gain a competitive advantage (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Khoshtaria et al., 2020); Sujchaphong et al., 2020), brand development can be the right choice for private HEIs to face competition and ensure the sustainability of institutions.

Nevertheless, not a few private HEIs pay less attention to their brand. This valuable asset is often not managed properly, even though private HEIs should show a good impression of their brand to the stakeholder. Even, not a few private HEIs, just for the sake of profit or to achieve short-term goals, actually have taken various actions that unwittingly damage their brand image. This detrimental situation reflects what Jevons (2006) said that so far, the branding process in HEIs has not been understood holistically, is short-term oriented, and only focuses on promotions and certain identity elements, such as logo, mottos, and the like. This unfortunate circumstance shows the lack of understanding of the branding process at HEIs.

As a research context, this study was conducted at a private HEIs in Klaten Regency. Like other institutions that contribute significantly to Indonesia's higher education sector, private HEIs in Klaten Regency also contribute to supporting the government in developing higher education in this area. With its geographical location close to the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), private HEIs in the Klaten Regency are facing several unfavorable conditions. It is undeniable that the large number of HEIs, both government-run and privately managed HEIs with good reputation and quality, make DIY as the foremost destination for continuing higher education in Indonesia. This condition requires private HEIs in Klaten Regency to develop an appropriate strategy to attract prospective students from various regions in Indonesia. In this case, the development of HEIs' brand equity can be the right choice. The results can be the base for private HEIs in designing some long-term strategic policies related to student recruitment and retention. Therefore, based on all descriptions, this study aims to determine the effect of brand development at the pre-admission touchpoints, the course touchpoints, and the post-passing touchpoints on the private HEIs' brand equity.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative method with a correlational approach to comprehend the relationship between the variables. The sampling method used was purposive sampling that allowed researchers to use particular criteria adjusted to the research objectives (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). The sample in this study was the third-year students from two private HEIs in Klaten Regency. The consideration was that these students have been able to evaluate various aspects of the HEIs based on the understanding and experience formed from their interactions with the institution. The sample size was determined using Yount's (2006) criteria, that for a population consisting of 1000-5000 members, the sample size was 5% of the population. With a population of 1955 third-year students, the sample size was 97.75 (5% x 1955), rounded to 100 students.

The data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of a five-point response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The data collected were related to the variables under study. There were three independent variables in this research which are brand development at the pre-admission touchpoints (X1), brand development at the course touchpoints (X2), and brand development at the post-passing touchpoints (X3). All independent variables were measured using

an instrument developed by Khanna et al., (2014). In addition, the dependent variable in this study was the private HEIs' brand equity (Y) as measured by the instrument developed by Pinar et al., (2014). The research instruments used in this study were tested by validity test and reliability test. The data were analyzed using multiple regression consisting of coefficient of determination, t-test, and F-test to test the research's hypothesis. Previously, to fulfill the assumptions in the regression analysis, a classical assumption test consisting of normality test, linearity test, multicollinearity test, and heteroscedasticity test was conducted.

The research hypotheses are: (H1) brand development at the pre-admission touchpoints has a positive and significant effect on the private HEIs' brand equity, (H2) brand development at the course touchpoints has a positive and significant effect on the private HEIs' brand equity, (H3) brand development at the post-passing has a positive and significant effect on the private HEIs' brand equity, (H4) brand development: at the pre-admission touchpoints, the course touchpoints, and the post-passing touchpoints simultaneously have a positive and significant effect on private HEIs' brand equity. Furthermore, the research framework developed is presented in Figure 1.

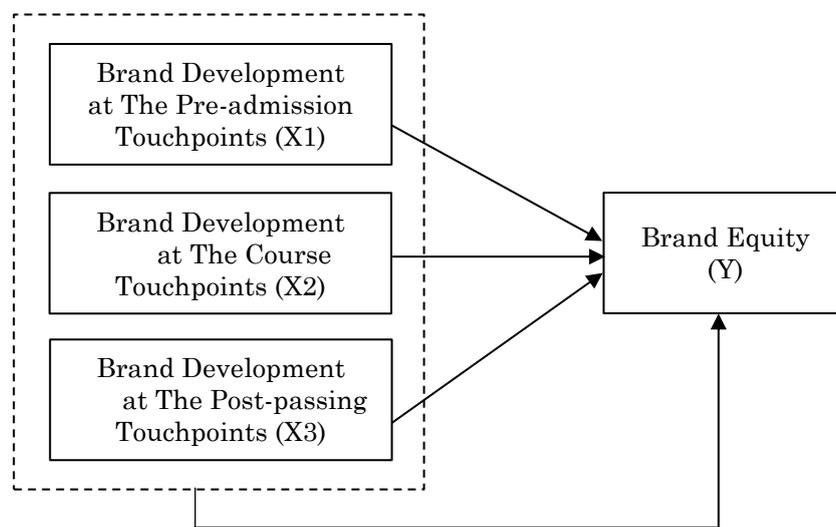


Figure 1. Research Framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the respondents in this study. The demographic factors consist of gender, institution, and study program.

Table 1. Respondent's Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	43	43
	Female	57	57
Institution	Private University	78	78
	College	22	22
Study Programs	Education	33	33
	Management	27	27
	Nursing	22	22
	Engineering	18	18

Source: primary data processed (2021).

Based on gender, female respondents had a slightly higher frequency and percentage (57%) than male respondents (43%). Meanwhile, from higher education institutions, 78% of respondents came from private universities (institution 1), while 22% of respondents came from health colleges (institution 2). Finally, based on the study program, the majority of respondents came from the education study program (33%), followed by the management study program (27%), and then the nursing and engineering study program that became the third and fourth study programs by 22% and 18%, respectively.

Validity and Reliability Test

The research instrument testing in this study used validity and reliability tests (Ghozali, 2016). The validity test results showed that each item in the research instrument of all variables had a calculated r-value higher than the r table (0.195), with a significant value lower than 0.05. Therefore, it was concluded that the research instrument used was valid.

The next was the reliability test by examining the Cronbach Alpha value. The reliability test result showed that all variables had a Cronbach alpha value of more than 0.60. Hence, it concluded that the questionnaire used in this study was declared reliable. The summary of the validity and reliability test result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability Test Results

Test	Item	Coefficient				Significance	Result
		X1	X2	X3	Y		
Validity	1	0.688	0.685	0.621	0.678	0.000	Valid
	2	0.737	0.436	0.718	0.664	0.000	
	3	0.660	0.816	0.654	0.696	0.000	
	4	0.719	0.758	0.560	0.743	0.000	
	5	0.704	0.409	0.689	0.650	0.000	
	6	0.750	0.528	0.461	-	0.000	
	7	0.560	0.816	0.809	-	0.000	
	8	0.520	0.642	-	-	0.000	
	9	0.528	-	-	-	0.000	
Reliability		Cronbach Alpha					Reliable
		0.838	0.799	0.755	0.715		

Source: primary data processed (2021).

Classical Assumption Test

The classical assumption test conducted included normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity test (Ghozali, 2016). The first classical assumption test carried out in this study was the normality test, which used the Kolmogorov Smirnov test. The results obtained show that the value of Kolmogorov Smirnov's statistical test was 0.067, with a significance value of 0.200, which was above 0.05. Therefore, the results indicated that the data in this study had a normal distribution. The following classical assumption test was the linearity test. The results showed that the significance value of the deviation from linearity for all independent variables on brand equity was above 0.05. The significance value of the deviation from linearity brand development at a pre-admission touchpoint, during the course touchpoints, and at post-passing touchpoint on brand equity were found 0.829, 0.280, and 0.967, respectively. Hence, it can be concluded that there was a linear relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable in this study.

The subsequent two classical assumption tests were multicollinearity and heteroscedasticity test. The multicollinearity test was carried out by examining the tolerance value and the variance inflation factor (VIF). The results obtained indicated that the tolerance value for all independent variables was above 0.10. The tolerance value for brand development at the pre-admission

touchpoint, the tolerance value for brand development during the course touchpoints, and the tolerance value for brand development post-passing touchpoint was 0.511, 0.504, and 0.946, respectively. While for the VIF value, all independent variables had a VIF value below 10.00. The VIF value for brand development at pre-admission touchpoint, the VIF value for brand development during the course touchpoints, and the VIF value for brand development at the post-passing touchpoint was 1.957, 1.984, and 1.057, respectively. Therefore, it can be concluded that there was no multicollinearity in the regression model. Lastly, the heteroscedasticity test used the Glejser test. The results obtained indicated that the significance value of the Glejser test for all independent variables in this study were above 0.05, including 0.646, 0.408, and 0.845, respectively. Thus, it can be concluded that there was no heteroscedasticity. The summary of the classical assumption test result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Classical Assumption Test Result

Type of Testing	Result	Interpretation
Normality	Kolmogorov-Smirnov test statistic 0.67; significance 0.200 > 0.05	Normal
Linearity	The significance value of deviation from linearity for each independent variable on dependent variable > 0.05 [Y * X1 (0.829); Y * X2 (0.281), Y * X3 (0.967)].	Linear
Multicollinearity	Tolerance value for all independent variables > 0.10 (X1 = 0.511; X2 = 0.504; X3 = 0.946). VIF value for all independent variables < 10.00 (X1 = 1.957; X2 = 1.984; X3 = 1.057).	No Multicollinearity
Heteroscedasticity	Significance value of The Glejser test for all independent variables > 0.05 (X1 = 0.597; X2 = 0.408; X3 = 0.845).	No Heteroscedasticity

Source: primary data processed (2021).

Regression Analysis

After investigating classical assumptions test with the results that meet all the assumptions, the next step was to perform multiple regression analysis to examine the research hypotheses. The results of the regression analysis obtained in this study are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. The Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.988	1.651		1.204	0.232
	Pre admission	0.390	0.047	0.668	8.289	0.000
	Course	0.104	0.049	0.170	2.103	0.038
	Post-passing	0.092	0.046	0.118	2.001	0.048

a. Dependent Variable: brand equity

Source: primary data processed (2021).

The effect of each independent variable partially on the dependent variable was analyzed by examining the standard beta coefficient and the t-test coefficient. Testing the influence of brand development at pre-admission touchpoint on brand equity showed a beta coefficient of 0.668, and the t-count value of 8.289 is greater than the t-table (1.985) with a significance of 0.000 below 0.05. This result showed that brand development at the pre-admission touchpoint had a positive and significant effect on private HEIs' brand equity. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is supported.

The subsequent analysis examined the influence of brand development during course touchpoint on brand equity. The result showed that the value of the beta coefficient was 0.170. Moreover, the t-count value of 2.103 was higher than the t-table (1.985), with a significance of 0.038 below 0.05. This result indicated that the brand development at the course touchpoint had a positive and significant effect on the private HEIs' brand equity. Hence, hypothesis 2 is supported.

The examination of the influence of brand development at the post-passing touchpoint on brand equity obtained a beta coefficient of 0.118, and the t-count value was 2.001 higher than the t-table (1.985), with a significance of 0.048 below 0.05. This result indicated that the brand development at the post-passing touchpoint had a positive and significant effect on the private HEIs' brand equity. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is supported.

The value of the coefficient of determination (R^2) obtained in the regression model is presented in Table 5. The results showed the coefficient of determination was 0.684. This result indicated that the contribution of all independent variables in this study was able to predict the variation in the value of the private HEIs' brand equity variable of 68.4%. While the remaining value, which equaled to 31.6%, was determined by other factors excluded in the regression model in this study.

Table 5. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Model Summary			
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.827 ^a	.684	.674	1.429

Source: primary data processed (2021).

Furthermore, to test the simultaneous effect of independent variables brand development at the pre-admission touchpoint, brand development at the course touchpoint, and brand development at the post-passing touchpoint on the dependent variable brand equity, the Anova test (F test) was carried out. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. The Anova (F-Test) Results

	Model	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	423.719	141.240	69.153	.000 ^b
	Residual	196.071	2.042		
	Total	619.790			

Source: primary data processed (2021).

The results obtained show the calculated F value of 69.153 higher than F table 2.70 with a significance of 0.000 below 0.05. This result indicated that the brand development at the pre-admission touchpoint, brand development at the course touchpoint, and brand development at the post-passing touchpoint simultaneously and significantly affect the private HEIs' brand equity. Therefore, it can be concluded that hypothesis 4 is supported.

Discussion

This research explored the influences of brand development at various touchpoints of the relationship between private HEIs and their students as a determinant of private HEIs' brand equity. The results obtained showed that brand development at pre-admission touchpoints, brand development at the course touchpoints, and brand development at the post-passing touchpoints had a positive and significant effect, both partially and simultaneously, on the private HEIs' brand equity. The results of this study supported previous research that emphasized the importance of brand development as well as brand equity in the context of higher education.

The result of the study confirmed that brand development at pre-admission touchpoints became the most prominent variable in determining private HEIs' brand equity. Attributes like reputation, educational quality, course program offered, institutional image, institutional ranking, infrastructure, recommendations from current students and alumni, well-informed promotion, institutional websites, tuition fees, and location became the indicators of brand development on pre-admission touchpoints. These findings confirmed the research carried out by Khanna et al., (2014) that placed brand development at the pre-admission touchpoint as the most significant factor in the HEIs' branding process. In addition, the results were also found in line with the research conducted by Mourad et al., (2011) that shows the importance of brand equity for HEIs. In that research, among the three antecedents, a brand image had become the most prominent determinant of brand equity than brand awareness and consumer attributes in shaping HEIs' brand equity. Evaluation before a purchase decision becomes a decisive phase in the purchasing process, whereas consumers will consider various factors. Hence, the brand image that can be observed before enrolling in certain HEIs can be a crucial significant indicator for prospective students to minimize the risk of errors in the HEI selection (Mourad et al., 2011). Moreover, the notable role of brand image, which can be observed in the pre-admission stage, even continues to shape student satisfaction and loyalty (Panda et al., 2019; Schlesinger et al., 2021). This prominent influence of brand image confirms that the pre-admission touchpoint, which occurs before the purchase decision, plays a salient role in the HEI brand development process.

In addition to brand development at pre-admission touchpoints, the brand development at the course touchpoints was also found to have a positive and significant effect on the HEIs brand equity. Some of the attributes that become indicators of brand development during the course touchpoints include learning methods, academic activities, working experience/internship during the study, synergistic relations with the industry, alumni associations, and others. This study finding is in line with the research conducted by Khanna et al., (2014) that also showed the salient role of brand development during the course touchpoint in the HEIs branding process. Moreover, related to brand equity, this research was also found in line with the study conducted by Pinar et al., (2014), showing the core dimensions and supporting dimensions as two antecedents that affected the HEIs brand equity. One of the indicators in the core dimensions of the HEIs branding process, namely the quality of lecturers and the completeness of learning resources in the library, is a dimension that plays a salient role in the formation of HEIs' brand equity. During the lectures, access to the library as a source of learning and interaction with lecturers are the two most crucial intersections in daily academic activities affecting the student experience. Therefore, brand development at the course touchpoint will also affect the brand equity of HEIs.

The finding of this research also showed that the brand development at the post-passing touchpoint also positively and significantly affected the HEIs brand equity. In this study, attributes like increasing knowledge and capability after graduation, job-related skills enhancement, getting a job after graduation, ability to perform a high-performance job, developing a career, and alumni supportive behavior became the indicators of brand development at the post-passing touchpoint. The findings of this study confirmed the research carried out by Khanna et al., (2014) that showed the significant role of brand development at the post-passing touchpoint in the HEIs' branding process. The post-passing touchpoint is closely related to alumni. In this case, many studies have confirmed the importance of alumni for HEIs. Research conducted by Pedro et al., (2021), for instance, exhibited the importance of alumni commitment for HEIs. Next, concerning brands, the study of Khanna et al., (2019) confirmed the importance of alumni brand resonance for HEIs. In addition, the research findings of Schlesinger et al., (2021) provided empirical evidence that depicted the crucial role of brand image as a prominent driver of positive word of mouth intentions of alumni towards their institutions. Despite being the antecedent that has the least effect on brand equity, brand development at this post-passing touchpoint is also crucial, thus requiring serious attention from HEIs. In this case, considering the experience formed during the study, alumni may carry out supportive behavior towards HEIs, especially related to their willingness to recommend their institution to other parties.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

This study aims to determine the factors that influence the brand equity of private HEIs. Based on the analysis results, this study concludes that brand development at three touchpoints, namely pre-admission touchpoints, during the course touchpoints, and post-passing, had a positive and significant influence on the private HEIs' brand equity. The effect of brand development at those touchpoints on the private HEIs' brand equity occurred either partially or simultaneously.

Regarding managerial implications, the results of this research can be the foothold for private HEIs in designing certain long-term strategic policies related to student recruitment and retention. Given the significant role of students' experience formed in their relationships with the institutions, it is suggested that brand development efforts focus on various touchpoints throughout the relationship. Further, private HEIs can become an important option considered by prospective students for continuing higher education. Thus, in the future private HEIs can assure their existence and sustainability. Meanwhile, regarding the research, further research is recommended to examine brand development by studying the size of private HEIs. The size of an institution may differentiate which touchpoints will be the priority in developing private HEIs brands.

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