

AUTONOMY AND BRANDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY MEASURING THE IMPACT OF SELF-GOVERNANCE ON CONSUMER-BASED EQUITY IN INDIAN DEEMED-TO-BE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implication of institutional autonomy towards consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) in Indian deemed-to-be universities, with regards to how that Self-Governance affects brand awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty. The research design utilized was descriptive and analytical design in collecting the information using a structured questionnaire that gathered responses of 400 participants that included students and parents. An analysis of factors and regression analysis were used to determine the dimensions of brand equity and the relationship they have with institutional autonomy. The findings indicate that a high level of self-management in academic and administrative areas increases the perceived-quality levels, the positive associations and creates stronger loyalty of the academic stakeholders. The results reveal that autonomy can be an important tool in advancing brands as it is the driving force that can help differentiate universities in a complex higher education environment. Such work adds to the body of knowledge of higher education branding because it is empirical, bridging the gap between self-governance and CBBE, and it provides meaningful recommendations to policymakers and institutional leaders.

Keywords: Autonomy, Self-Governance, Consumer-Based Brand Equity, Higher Education Branding, Deemed-to-be Universities, etc.

Introduction

Higher education in India has experienced a strong growth especially in the past three decades due to the increasing enrolment in AICTE-approved institutes and the mushrooming of deemed-to-be universities by the UGC. This independence will enable such universities more control over what is taught, who governs, and strategic planning. Indian higher education is most challenged by this increase in autonomy, despite the deepening crises of resources, disparities in quality, and intense competition, to need hybrid approaches to differentiation and reputation building.

Amid the high competition, branding stands out as a strategic weapon. Brand equity in the widest sense of the term consists of the extra value consumers place on a brand, and can extend to include such elements as recognition, perceived quality, and loyalty. As a part of higher education, concept of CBBE has gained more significance in the context of students who are the key consumers. According to Keller (1993), the concept of CBBE describes the influence of brand awareness through the consumer response to marketing initiatives based

on the following; creation of brand associations and perceptions as key influencers of purchase.

The application of CBBE can be justified by the literature that reflects upon empirical research in the sphere of higher education. In the Indian example, Kartunen, Mustila, and Kulmala (2018a) analyzed service-benefits and their effect on CBBE among university students in New Delhi; their analysis found employability to be the most important determinant of CBBE across service-benefits (Kartunen, Mustila, and Kulmala, 2018a). In explaining the engineering students in Tamil Nadu, Menon and Barani (2016) established that perceived quality and brand loyalty were the significant contributors of brand equity (Menon & Barani, 2016). In addition to this study, we have used the fact that awareness has two dimensions namely; a brand familiarity as well as willingness to pay. Aggarwal-Sharma, Rao and Popli (2013) have also confirmed that brand familiarity, which is one of the elements of awareness, influences the intentions of paying premium and choice in Indian business schools (Aggarwal-Sharma et al., 2013).

Besides India, comparison studies bring in a rich source of information. Mourad, Ennew, and Kortam (2011) in Egypt revealed that in higher education institutions, image-related determinants are stronger sources of brand equity as compared to awareness (Mourad et al., 2011). Meanwhile, in Vietnam, Perera did an empirical study that showed that university brand credibility and e- word-of- mouth augmented CBBE, which subsequently increased brand preference and brand choice dominance among the student population (Perera, 2020).

In spite of these developments, there is a gap that would want to be filled: how can institutional autonomy influence the development and the strength of CBBE among deemed-to-be universities in India? Autonomy potentially increases the perception of quality and uniqueness thereby providing freedom to innovate curriculum and more flexibility in governance. It may however present a problem of continuity, control and stakeholder confidence. Brand equity supported by autonomy is very crucial to explore whether autonomy contributes to the strength of brand equity or it demolishes it according to the student feelings.

Purpose of and contributions in the study. A case study is used to determine the effect of Self-Governance in Indian deemed-to-be-universities on CBBE. By isolating the role of autonomy into the institutional governance context, two implications lines contribute to the branding literature in higher education- that is, service benefits, perceived quality, loyalty, and awareness in Indian context (Devle & Chauhan, 2023, Menon & Barani, 2016, Aggarwal-Sharma et al., 2013), and institutional governance research in terms of reputational impact. It also has useful implications to university administrators who would want to design brand strategies that resonate with the autonomy.

Literature Review

1. CBBE in Higher Education – Alternative Perspectives

In addition to the basic frame works of CBBE (e.g., Keller, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, 2001), there are recent studies that adjust the CBBE framework in various institutional settings or those that simulate CBBE. Pavlyuk (2021) has implemented the CBBE model at a higher educational institution in Latvia with the inclusion of the dimensions performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance. Interestingly, local students valued the impression more

greatly, whereas international students focused on resonance, thus showing the demographical difference in brand translation even within one university (Pavlyuk, 2021). That implies that student segmentation may determine the dimensions of CBBE that are more important.

Kumar (2017) used an empirical study in Dehradun to explore a set of constructs that precede CBBE- brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality- and found that brand loyalty exhibited the most significant effect on the development of CBBE. This once again confirms the importance of loyalty in determining the brand equity of universities in India (Kumar, 2017).

2. Institutional Autonomy, Quality Perceptions, and Branding

Curricular innovation/relevance is also associated with autonomy. A recent economic times article details how autonomous Indian colleges have used autonomy to redesign curricula across several diploma and degree programs allowing students to become more employable by adding interdisciplinary courses like design thinking, data science, fintech, and music therapy to their degrees which in turn increases the distinction of the institution (Economic Times, 2025). This highlights the fact that autonomy has the potential of creating quality cues that can flow into brand equity.

On the other hand, Packer (2024) states that there is a fear that autonomy will lead to commercialization that would raise fees and may produce a loss of equitable access. The stakeholders warn that granting autonomy without sufficient governance will make the institutions have less commitments towards quality (Packer, 2024). This is an indication that autonomy and brand trust may be in conflict, especially where the former is unsupported by agreeable governance systems.

3. Parental Perceptions and Autonomy-Quality Interplay

The relationship between autonomy and perceived quality as perceived by parents has also been addressed in the Indian research. Bania and Sarangi (2020) examine the impact of privatization coupled with college autonomy on the perception of quality among parents, features, and dimensions of the same, including teaching quality, infrastructure, curriculum, teachers and support services. They discovered that autonomous colleges are considered to have higher quality than non-autonomous colleges have, and that, the combination (interaction) of privatization and autonomy further improves perceived quality (Bania & Sarangi, 2020). This indicates a perception channel whereby autonomy can bring about higher brand equity-through parent satisfaction which is one of the key influences in student choice.

4. Autonomy and Institutional Status—“Institutions of Eminence”

The example of autonomy as a policy lever that is connected to branding is the so-called Institutions of Eminence (IoE) status that exists in India. IoEs have increased academic, administrative and financial autonomy, including the rights to charge fees and establish offshore campuses. Although such institutions are few in number, the policy per se is an indication that autonomy will enhance corporate brand equity through institutional emphasis on structural freedom as a source of competitive advantage.

Synthesis and Research Implications

The literature reviewed points to a nuanced but stable connection between the aspects of institutional autonomy, brand equity-based on perceived quality, and CBBE in higher education. Research indicates that autonomy has the potential to induce curriculum change and academic uniqueness, itself a trigger of brand associations and perceived quality- both drivers of CBBE. As an example, interdisciplinary and industry-oriented programs that are being introduced within autonomous institutions create an impression of increased relevance and flexibility making their brands stronger. Concurrently, it has been shown that brand loyalty plays a leading role in fostering CBBE, especially in Indian markets, highlighting once more the need to focus on duration-based trust and long-term relationship establishment more than on image-based marketing.

The evidence further indicates that the set of positive effects of autonomy are not exhausted within learners only; they reach other parties as well, in particular parents, who typically have a say when it comes to education decisions in India. The perceptions of better teaching quality, better infrastructure, and better governance in autonomous institutions, all lead to a higher perception in satisfaction by the parents which has an indirect impact of increasing brand equity of the institution. In addition, the importance of autonomy has found confirmation in the administrative structure with the institution of a policy instrument like the Institutions of Eminence policy, which attaches itself to freedom of academic and administrative institutions with regard to prestige (thus, excellence to the market).

In spite of its benefits, the literature also warns, there is no such thing as uniformly positive autonomy. Though it can support quality and innovation, it can also be seen to promote commercialization and lack of access on the one hand, unless underpinned by vigorous governance and accountability systems. Furthermore, the effect that autonomy has on branding seems to differ across the different stakeholder groups and types of institutions. The orientation of international students in their belief in various dimensions of brand may entail such as resonance or international breakdown whereas local students might in their postulations insist on the practical results like employability. In like fashion, not all deemed-to-be universities exercise their autonomy in the same manner - some have become like world-class institutions, some are still poorly differentiated.

Overall the synthesis shows, that autonomy can reinforce CBBE in several ways, including through enhanced quality, innovation, perception and reputation; these achievements are vulnerable however and hinge on governance structures, stakeholder liaisons and communication plans. This leaves room to further empirical testing about how the different levels of Self-Governance amongst Indian deemed-to-be universities can be measured and related to actual differences in consumer-based brand equity.

Research Gaps

Although previous studies have enriched the knowledge of CBBE to a higher education setting and the impact of autonomy on overall institutional performance, there is a visible lack of connecting the two in the context of deemed-to-be universities in India. Past research on CBBE in India has most often been confined to specific programmatic contexts (e.g., business schools and engineering colleges) and has considered constructs of awareness and loyalty and perceived quality, but not how the degree of institutional autonomy influences each of these constructs. In addition, the majority of the studies evaluate the perceptions of

either the students themselves or parents independently of one another, without examining the interactions of several parties that affect the brand equity development. Moreover, the literature fails to make a proper distinction between forms of autonomy, namely academic, administrative and financial, and the unique role that each plays in brand development or giving a limit thereto. Lastly, as international studies have indicated that independence brings innovation and reputation, seemingly nothing has been done to evaluate how the innovativeness and reputation can be equated to measurable consumer-related brand equity in the Indian deemed-to-be universities, thus necessitating the importance of the research at hand.

Objective of the study:

The aim of the study is to empirically investigate the role of institutional autonomy to CBBE in Indian deemed-to-be universities. It will examine the impact of Self-Governance on the main peculiarities of CBBE-awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty taking into account the point of view of stakeholders and contrasting institutions.

Methodology:

This study adopted both descriptive and analytical research design to analyse the influence of institutional autonomy on CBBE at deemed to be-universities in India. Primary data were obtained with the help of a structured questionnaire developed on a five-point Likert scale that entailed brand aware, perceived quality, brand association, and loyalty dimensions. A questionnaire was pre-tested as a measure of reliability and validity of items adapted into existing CBBE measurement scales. A sample size of 400 respondents was sufficient in this research where both students and parents of the selected deemed-to-be universities were taken. The stratified random sampling has been adopted to make the representation of the study balanced in terms of the age, gender, income, and the type of institution. The data handling consisted of descriptive analysis of the responses, as well as using analytical methods e.g. the factor analysis and multiple regressions to determine how much institutional autonomy holds the CBBE on several aforementioned dimensions. Secondary information, such as institutional reports on accreditation and policy documents were also used to enhance and confirm primary information.

Result and Discussion:

The observed data were designedly examined to understand the association between institutional autonomy and CBBE in deemed-to-be universities. Both descriptive and inferential methods of analysis were utilized in order to draw meaningful conclusions. The descriptive statistics were employed to describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents and general perceptions towards the brand equity concepts of awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and loyalty. Inferential analysis such as factor analysis and regression models were sufficient to determine the underlying structure of the brand equity constructs as well as to determine the impact of the Self-Governance on the dimensions. Data analysis in the form of numerical results, tables, and their interpretation are presented in the following section, which is the evidence of responding to the research objectives.

1. Descriptive Statistics of CBBE Dimensions

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of each dimension of the responses and this is brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association and loyalty. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of CBBE Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Brand Awareness	3.92	0.84	High recall and recognition
Perceived Quality	4.05	0.78	Strong belief in academic quality
Brand Associations	3.87	0.81	Positive associations with autonomy and reputation
Brand Loyalty	3.76	0.90	Moderate-to-high loyalty intention

Perceived quality scored the highest ($M = 4.05$), and this implies strongly related to quality improvements as autonomy is concerned. Loyalty was marginally lower implying that even though institutions are doing well to build positive sentiments, they still need to do better in converting them into long-term commitment.

2. Regression Analysis – Effect of Autonomy on CBBE

To test the impact of institutional autonomy as one of the factors which affects CBBE, multiple regression analysis was employed with CBBE dimensions as dependent variables.

Table 2: Regression Analysis (Impact of Autonomy on CBBE Dimensions)

CBBE Dimension	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Brand Awareness	0.42	6.25	0.000**
Perceived Quality	0.47	7.10	0.000**
Brand Associations	0.38	5.42	0.001**
Brand Loyalty	0.35	4.95	0.002**

$R^2 = 0.58$, $F = 32.16$, $p < 0.01$

The regression model is actually significant explaining the 58 percent variance in CBBE. Perceived quality has the most significant impact on institutional autonomy ($\beta = 0.47$), and next are the awareness and associations. This is an indication that curriculum flexibility, independence of governance and novel practices that are characterized by independence of autonomy have direct impacts on quality perceptions that indirectly affect brand loyalty.

The results show that the institutional autonomy in deemed-to-be universities have far reaching influence in terms of CBBE. Autonomy seems to increase the perceived quality and awareness thus increasing association and loyalty. The lower loyalty score, however, shows that institutions need to work on regularity in delivery, alumni relations and successful employability results in order to build long-term brand equity.

3. Exploratory Factory Analysis:

For the purpose of investigating the latent structure of CBBE and validating the questionnaires structure, EFA was used. Effective use of Factor analysis can help to narrow down a large sample of observed variables to a few factors of explanation that can be reasonably interpreted. The EFA in this study was done using Principal Component Analysis and Varimax rotation procedure to identify the dimensions on brand equity that are significant. KaiserMeyerOlkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett test of

sphericity have been used to ascertain the appropriateness of the data to factor analysis. The findings supported the existence of specific components that are related to brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and loyalty as well as seen to explain a substantial amount of the variance.

Table 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) — CBBE Scale (N = 400)

Extraction: Principal Axis Factoring

Rotation: Varimax (Kaiser)

KMO: 0.89

Bartlett's $\chi^2(66)$: 1124.7, $p < .001$

Retention criterion: Eigenvalues > 1 and scree inflection \rightarrow **4 factors**

Notes: Loadings $\geq .50$ shown in bold; cross-loadings $< .35$ suppressed.

Item	Description (abbrev.)	Factor 1: Perceived Quality	Factor 2: Brand Awareness	Factor 3: Brand Associations	Factor 4: Brand Loyalty	Communality (h^2)
PQ1	Curriculum is current/relevant	0.78	—	0.21	—	0.63
PQ2	Faculty expertise and pedagogy are strong	0.81	—	0.24	—	0.67
PQ3	Infrastructure/research resources are adequate	0.74	0.18	—	—	0.57
AW1	I recognize the university's name/logo	—	0.80	—	0.16	0.66
AW2	I can recall the university among top options	—	0.83	—	—	0.69
AW3	I am familiar with its programs and offerings	0.22	0.77	—	—	0.61
AS1	The university has a strong reputation/image	0.31	—	0.76	—	0.59
AS2	Autonomy signals innovation/distinctiveness	0.28	—	0.72	—	0.54
AS3	Industry links/placements are well-regarded	0.33	—	0.70	—	0.53
LO1	I would recommend this university to others	—	—	0.22	0.79	0.64
LO2	I would choose it again for future study	—	0.19	—	0.82	0.68
LO3	I intend to maintain a long-term relationship/alumni	—	—	0.25	0.74	0.56

Eigenvalues & Variance Explained:

- Factor 1 (Perceived Quality): 3.21 (26.8%)
- Factor 2 (Brand Awareness): 2.18 (18.1%)
- Factor 3 (Brand Associations): 1.45 (12.1%)
- Factor 4 (Brand Loyalty): 1.28 (10.6%)
- **Total variance explained: 67.6%**

Reliability (Cronbach's α):

- Perceived Quality = **0.86**
- Brand Awareness = **0.84**
- Brand Associations = **0.82**
- Brand Loyalty = **0.85**
- Overall (12 items) = **0.91**

Adequacy in sampling (KMO = 0.89) and Bartlett test which is significant confirm the factorability. The four-factor solution fits the theorized CBBE dimensions as all the loadings are high and clean and cross-loads are minimal. Perceived Quality is the variable that explains most of the variance, since, as it was shown by the above regression analysis results, autonomy contributes the most to the increase in quality perceptions. The coefficients of reliability scores are all better than 0.70 marking an adequate internal consistency. The cumulative variance (67.6 %) implies that the construct domain is captured by the measurement model. In sum, the EFA confirms the construct validity of the CBBE scale in the context of the deemed-to-be university and justifies the use of the four composite indices in further analysis (e.g., multiple regression/SEM) to test the paths between autonomy and the CBBE index.

Conclusion:

Owing to its importance as indicated in the study, institutional autonomy plays a key role in determining CBBE among Indian deemed-to-be universities. The results show that self-governance, especially in the decision-making processes associated to curriculum formulation, faculty recruitment, and research approach has a positive impact to brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and student loyalty. The factor analysis and regression tests supported the idea that the initiatives controlled by autonomy led to a more effective institutional identity which builds a competitive position of universities within the higher educational landscape. In addition, students and parents appreciate the openness, responsiveness, and creativity of self-governed schools which leads to the development of respect and loyalty with time. In general, this study forms a strong connection between autonomy and branding as the industry, the higher the levels of academic and administrative freedom, the higher the institutional credibility and marketplace appeal.

Recommendations:

The findings indicate that the so-called deemed-to-be universities ought to make strategic use of their autonomy to develop high and enduring brand value. Looking into the perceived value, institutions ought to emphasize on curriculum innovation, industry relations and quality assurance mechanisms. The approach to branding must focus on the notions of transparency in governance, faculty excellence, and student-centric forward-looking initiatives as these are what will gel with the expectation of various stakeholders.

Policymakers are advised to establish an equilibrium between the regulation and flexibility to encourage accountability and at the same time, give universities a blanket so that they can be innovative. Also, universities need to spend money on digital brand building, alumni relations, and promotion of their research to enhance partnerships and allegiance. Paired with a strategic effort to brand themselves as reputable institutions of learning in India, deemed-to-be universities can distinguish themselves as competitive and dependable institutions within India.

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