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University as a Global Brand: A Systematic Literature Review through the Brand Reputation Lens

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ABSTRACT

Universities compete globally under intensifying pressure from massification, cross-border student mobility and ranking systems, yet existing brand theory only partially explains how institutional reputation is built and sustained. This paper reports a systematic literature review of 105 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024, examining how four independent variables (artifacts, organisational values, organisational culture and customer experience) shape university brand reputation, with human capital as a moderating variable. Three structural patterns characterise the literature. Researchers rely predominantly on cross-sectional survey designs rather than tracking reputational shifts over time. Faculty and staff are consistently framed as vital institutional resources but rarely modelled as statistical moderators. Universities have adopted digital branding artifacts at scale without a theoretical framework to account for their reputational effects. Seven research gaps emerge from the synthesis: First, the absence of a validated multi-stakeholder brand reputation scale integrating all four independent variables. Second, the lack of longitudinal designs capable of tracing reputational trajectories across institutional life cycles and crisis events. Third, the untested moderating role of human capital between the four antecedents and brand reputation. Fourth, the scarcity of cross-cultural comparative studies, leaving Southeast Asian, African and Latin American contexts largely outside the theoretical conversation. Fifth, the absence of systematic theorisation linking digital artifacts to reputation outcomes. Sixth, the near-complete neglect of negative brand events (academic misconduct, rankings decline, leadership crises) and their reputational consequences. Finally, the unstudied relationship between staff diversity, as a dimension of human capital, and brand reputation. The first and third gaps carry the greatest theoretical weight. A conceptual framework integrating all six constructs is proposed to guide future empirical work.

1. Introduction

Universities occupy an unusual position in the global marketplace. They operate simultaneously as public institutions, knowledge producers, economic actors, and brands competing for students, faculty, research funding, and geopolitical influence. This turn toward brand thinking in higher

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education is neither arbitrary nor purely commercial; it reflects real, measurable consequences. Rankings directly shape application behavior. Institutional reputation affects graduate labor market outcomes. Perceptions of a university's cultural and intellectual identity influence whether international partnerships are formed, whether endowments grow, and whether policymakers treat a given institution as a credible voice in public debate.

Brand reputation scholarship in the corporate domain has accumulated for over four decades. In higher education, the field is younger and considerably more fragmented. Studies draw variously from marketing, organisational theory, communication and education management. Each discipline brings its own assumptions, vocabularies and preferred methods. The result is a body of work that has produced genuine insights but has not yet cohered into a testable, cumulative theoretical structure.

This review addresses that fragmentation directly. The conceptual frame organises the literature around four independent variables: artifacts (the physical, symbolic and digital elements through which institutional identity is visually and materially expressed), organisational values (the core principles that institutions claim and enact), organisational culture (the internal normative environment shaped by shared history, rituals and professional norms), and customer experience (the cumulative perception formed through service interactions across the student lifecycle). Brand reputation is the dependent variable. We position human capital as moderator which refers to the knowledge, skills and credibility embodied in faculty, administrative staff and leadership. This choice rests on the premise that the reputational signal from the other four variables is amplified or attenuated by the quality and visibility of the people who carry institutional meaning.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the search and screening protocol. Section 3 reviews each variable through the lens of published scholarship, identifying what studies agree on and where they diverge. Section 4 synthesises those findings in structured tables comparing similarities, differences and research gaps. Section 5 presents the conceptual framework that integrates all six constructs. Section 6 discusses implications and Section 7 concludes.

2. Methodology

2.1 Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

The review follows PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Five databases were searched: Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar as a supplementary source. The search period spans January 2000 to December 2024. English-language peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers published in indexed journals were eligible. Book chapters, opinion pieces and grey literature were excluded.

Search strings combined terms related to university or higher education branding with terms representing each of the six constructs under study. For example: ("university brand" OR "higher education branding") AND ("reputation" OR "brand equity") AND ("organisational culture" OR "artifacts" OR "customer experience" OR "human capital"). Boolean combinations were adapted to each database's syntax. Duplicate records were removed using reference management software before screening began.

Inclusion required that a study: (a) addressed at least one of the four independent variables in relation to university brand identity, perception or reputation; (b) was empirically grounded or presented a conceptual model with clear theoretical propositions; and (c) had been published in a peer-reviewed outlet. Studies that used rankings as their sole conceptual and operational framework, without any engagement with brand theory, were excluded.

2.2 Screening Process

Screening proceeded in two stages. Title and abstract screening reduced the initial pool from 5,626 records to 957. Full-text review of those 957 papers yielded the final sample of 105 studies. Disagreements between two reviewers were resolved through discussion, with a third reviewer consulted in eleven cases where agreement could not be reached in the first round.

Table 1
PRISMA-Informed Database Search Results

Database	Search String	Initial Results	After Screening	Included
Scopus	"university brand" OR "higher education brand reputation"	1,247	318	34
Web of Science	"brand reputation" AND "university" AND "organizational culture"	984	241	27
Emerald Insight	"university branding" OR "higher education reputation" AND "human capital"	673	189	19
EBSCO / Business Source Complete	"artifacts" AND "brand" AND "higher education"	412	97	11
Google Scholar (supplementary)	University global brand customer experience reputation	2,310	112	14
TOTAL (after deduplication)		5,626	957	**105**

Note. Initial results include duplicates across databases. After deduplication and full-text review, 105 studies met all inclusion criteria.

2.3 Quality Assessment

Each included study was assessed using an adapted quality checklist drawing on the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) criteria. The checklist evaluated theoretical grounding, sampling adequacy, measurement validity, analytical rigour and generalisability of findings. Studies scoring below a minimum threshold were not excluded. Because the goal is to characterize the existing literature rather than calculate a pooled

effect size estimate, these lower-scoring studies were retained, and their specific limitations are highlighted directly in the synthesis where relevant.

3. Review of Variables

3.1 Artifacts and Brand Reputation

Brand artifacts, in the organisational sense, refer to the observable, material expressions of institutional identity: architecture, campus design, logos, ceremonial regalia, symbolic buildings and, more recently, digital presence. The literature on artifacts in higher education draws heavily from Schein's three-level model of organisational culture [37], in which artifacts constitute the visible surface beneath which values and underlying assumptions reside. In brand terms, this translates into the argument that material cues communicate prestige, heritage and distinctiveness before any interaction with people or services takes place.

Studies by Melewar and Akel [29] and Chapleo [12] established that campus aesthetics serve as a primary brand signal for prospective students. This is especially true for international applicants who lack prior experiential knowledge of an institution. Physical heritage carries a disproportionate reputational weight; centuries-old institutions use architectural identity as a form of brand capital that newer universities cannot easily replicate. While this point is made repeatedly in the literature, it is rarely examined critically. The assumption that heritage artifacts straightforwardly confer prestige ignores how different student populations read those cues. An ornate Gothic campus might signal academic excellence to one demographic while alienating another by looking inaccessible.

Where studies diverge most sharply is on the question of digital artifacts. A growing cluster of work, particularly post-2015, argues that websites, social media profiles, virtual campus tours and digital communication constitute a new artifact layer that has partially displaced physical campus experiences for international audiences [22,36]. Earlier work largely ignores this dimension. The methodological gap compounds the conceptual one: studies on physical artifacts tend to use qualitative case studies of traditional institutions, while digital artifact studies rely on content analysis and social media analytics. These two bodies of work rarely cite one another, which means the field lacks an integrated artifact typology applicable across institution types.

More recent scholarship has begun to address the digital dimension directly, though it hasn't yet resolved the field's theoretical fragmentation. Erjansola, Lipponen, Vehkalahti, Aula and Pirttilä-Backman [15] offered an unusual contribution by following logo reception longitudinally through a university merger at Aalto University. They demonstrated that new visual artifacts initially face resistance before becoming anchored in brand associations, a finding that directly challenges the static treatment of artifacts dominant in earlier literature. Examining universities in Sri Lanka and Vietnam, Perera, Nayak, and Nguyen [34] found that social media marketing shapes brand equity through brand credibility. In their model, social media content functions as a digitized artifact that carries institutional legitimacy signals to prospective students who may never visit a physical campus. O'Sullivan, Polkinghorne, Chapleo and Cownie [32]synthesized contemporary branding strategy across multiple institutional contexts, arguing that visual identity, online presence, and reputation management now constitute a mutually dependent system rather than separable functions. This position implies that the artifact concept needs to be completely reconceptualized rather than simply stretched to cover digital channels.

The most recent work pushes this idea further. Tukwayo and Mbukanma [41] conducted a qualitative case study of Walter Sisulu University in South Africa, finding that brand image and corporate identity function as primary decision cues for prospective students even within resource-constrained regional institutions. This finding confirms that artifacts carry reputational weight far

beyond elite Western contexts. The study stands out for its African setting and its reliance on student interviews rather than surveys. By providing a clear methodological contrast to the quantitative mainstream, it signals that non-Western institutional contexts produce artifact-reputation dynamics quite different from what the existing literature assumes.

The artifact-reputation relationship is also theorised unevenly. Most studies treat artifacts as inputs that mechanically produce reputational effects, with limited attention to how meaning is negotiated or how different stakeholders (staff, students, alumni, community members) decode the same physical or digital signals differently. Semiotic approaches, when used, tend to be confined to marketing-oriented studies and are rarely connected to the brand reputation literature's concern with trust and credibility.

3.2 Values and Brand Reputation

Values sit at the intersection of institutional identity and brand communication. The claim that shared, clearly articulated values underpin strong brands is one of the most consistent findings in the corporate branding literature, and it recurs in higher education research with similar regularity. Values such as academic freedom, civic engagement, research excellence, inclusivity and community service appear across dozens of studies as the values most frequently associated with positive brand reputation outcomes.

Gray, Fam and Llanes [20] were among the first to examine how value alignment between prospective students and institutions predicted enrolment choice and subsequent identification with the institution. Their works replicated in various forms across at least twelve subsequent studies. The core mechanism is straightforward: when a student's personal values align with those projected by an institution, brand trust and loyalty follow.

The more contested terrain concerns the gap between stated and enacted values. Several studies, particularly those using ethnographic or documentary analysis methods, find that institutions' public value claims diverge substantially from internal practice [10,38]. This divergence is reputationally consequential because stakeholders, especially faculty, graduate students and alumni, are capable of detecting inauthenticity. The brand reputation damage from value-practice misalignment is not well quantified in the existing literature, but qualitative evidence suggests it is significant.

A further tension appears between institutional and national values. Studies from Asian contexts, particularly Malaysia, China, South Korea and Japan find that universities in these settings often embed national development values (technological advancement, social cohesion, economic competitiveness) as core brand messages rather than the individual-expressive values more common in Western brand narratives [1,31]. This differs from the individual-expressive values common in Western narratives. It implies that the relationship between values and brand reputation is culturally contingent in ways the dominant Western-centric literature rarely acknowledges.

Two recent contributions sharpen this picture. In a study of UK universities, Foroudi, Yu, Gupta and Foroudi [18]demonstrated that customer value co-creation behavior mediates the relationship between brand image and reputation. This highlights how value enactment, rather than mere value declaration actually generates reputational capital. While this finding strongly supports the enacted-values argument, it is rarely cited in the values literature, illustrating the siloed nature of the field. Voss and Moorman [45] took a different approach by developing the concept of brand authenticity in higher education institutions. Across two field studies, they showed that indexical, iconic, and existential cues function as authenticity antecedents. In their view, perceived authenticity is essentially a stakeholder judgment that institutional values are genuinely held rather than

strategically performed. This finding reinforced the enacted-values argument from a different theoretical direction and provides one of the few recent attempts to connect institutional values theory to measurable brand reputation outcomes.

3.3 Culture and Brand Reputation

The relationship between culture and brand reputation is theorised through multiple frameworks. Schein's cultural levels model, Deal and Kennedy's cultural typology and the competing values framework all appear in the literature, often without explicit justification for why one framework is preferred over another. Most studies are unified by a single premise: culture functions as a brand signal. Shared beliefs and practices within a university shape staff behavior and service quality, which in turn dictate the stories that circulate about the institution.

Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana [22] argue that culture acts as the connective tissue between internal identity and external brand image. When institutional culture is strong and coherent, the brand message that reaches external audiences is consistent across multiple channels: faculty communication, administrative interaction, alumni networks, media coverage. When that culture is fragmented, the resulting incoherence eventually surfaces in the stakeholder experience and damages the university's reputation.

The direction of influence between culture and reputation is a genuine theoretical dispute. Studies aligned with the resource-based view tend to treat culture as an antecedent of reputation: a stable internal asset that generates reputational capital over time [8]. A smaller set of studies, drawing from institutional theory and sense-making perspectives, argue the reverse: that external reputation pressures shape how an institution's internal culture evolves, particularly under rankings pressure where institutions adapt their practices to optimise on visible metrics. Both positions have empirical support, which suggests the relationship is likely bidirectional, but no study has modelled it that way.

The measurement problem in this area is acute. Culture is typically operationalised using survey instruments that capture individual-level perceptions rather than institution-level phenomena, which creates a fundamental unit-of-analysis mismatch. Qualitative ethnographic methods capture culture more accurately but are rarely feasible at the scale needed to support comparative analysis. This leaves the culture-reputation relationship empirically underspecified.

Recent work has begun to probe the internal differentiation of institutional culture in ways earlier studies ignored. Examining Lebanese universities operating through prolonged instability, Nauffal and Nader [30] found that the historical period of an institution's founding shapes its cultural architecture in ways that persist across leadership transitions. This finding complicates the assumption that culture can be managed as a brand variable through communications strategy. The study raised a broader question about whether the culture-reputation pathway, as commonly theorized, assumes a degree of managerial control that real institutional histories do not support. This issue was particularly relevant for universities in non-Western contexts, where political, religious, and ethnic pressures on institutional culture are much stronger than the Anglo-American brand management literature tends to acknowledge.

Two 2025 contributions extend this concern in different directions. Twabu [42], writing from a South African perspective, introduces the IRACE Framework as a structured model for cultural transformation in higher education. The study's focused on decolonization, Africanization, and inclusive governance illustrates precisely the kind of culture-reputation linkage that existing branding scholarship neglects. Here, cultural change was driven by socio-political imperatives rather than brand management strategy. The reality that both processes could happen at the same time, with an

institution rebranding externally while transforming culturally under pressure from equity and governance demands, presents a theoretical complexity that the culture-as-brand-signal literature cannot yet handle.

Fernández-Gubieda and Gutiérrez-García [16] approached the issue from a broader perspective. Covering 219 sources in a comprehensive review of university reputation, they found that organizational culture has been treated inconsistently across the literature and that the concept's boundaries remain unstable. Their bibliometric mapping supports the critique made in this review. Culture appears as a reputation driver in some studies, an outcome in others, and a mere contextual backdrop in still others, leaving the field without any real theoretical consensus.

3.4 Customer Experience and Brand Reputation

Of the four independent variables, customer experience has attracted the most methodologically rigorous treatment. The service quality tradition in marketing, anchored by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's SERVQUAL instrument [33]generated a substantial strand of higher education research that treats students as customers. These studies measure service quality perceptions across reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles dimensions. Extensions and adaptations of this framework (HEdPERF, SERVPERF, SERVQUALi) have been applied in numerous university contexts and consistently find positive relationships between perceived service quality and institutional reputation outcomes.

The shift toward service-dominant logic [43] opened a more nuanced framing. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of service, SDL-informed studies examine value co-creation. It looks at how students and institutions jointly produce the educational experience and shape reputational narratives in the process. Abdullah [2], Teeroovengadum et al. [40] and others working in this vein find that student agency in the experience co-creation process is a stronger predictor of brand advocacy than satisfaction with delivered services.

However, the conceptual scope of the term ‘customer’ remains a persistent source of tension. The student-as-customer framing, dominant in Anglo-American literature, is contested on both normative and empirical grounds. Critics argue it reduces education to a basic consumption experience. Furthermore, other stakeholder groups, including corporate employers, government agencies, and alumni, have equally consequential experiences with university brands but are rarely studied. A handful of studies incorporate employer experience and alumni experience as brand reputation determinants, but these remain a minority.

The temporal scope of experience studies is also narrow. The vast majority examine current students during their period of enrolment, typically in a single survey wave. The post-graduation experience, covering job market entry, alumni engagement, and the ongoing relationship between a graduate and their institution, is largely unexamined as a reputation variable. This remains a blind spot, given the obvious importance of alumni networks and graduate success stories to a university's global reputational standing.

Three recent studies push the customer experience-reputation relationship in methodologically useful directions. Drawing on Scopus and Web of Science, Amado Mateus and Juárez Acosta [5] mapped the dimensionality of university reputation. They found that student experience accounts for a consistently large but differently operationalized portion of reputation variance across studies, reinforcing the critique that the field lacks measurement convergence. In a follow-on empirical study, Amado Mateus, Guzmán Rincón, Juárez Acosta, Ramos Soler, and Rodríguez Valero [6] examined how student experience and perceived value influence university reputation across Colombian and Spanish contexts. They find that perceived value partially mediates the

experience-reputation pathway in ways that differ between the two national settings. This cross-cultural finding was one of the few recent direct comparisons between Latin American and European contexts, lending empirical support to the cultural contingency argument made in the values section above. Castro-Gómez, Sánchez-Torres, and Ortíz-Rendón [11] added a structural dimension, using structural equation modelling to show that perceived service quality dimensions carry different reputational weights depending on whether students are in the early or advanced stages of their degree. This temporal finding highlights exactly what cross-sectional designs are structurally incapable of producing. Fernández-Gubieda and Gutiérrez-García [16] confirmed this measurement inconsistency on a much broader scale. Across 219 sources, they find that while researchers consistently cite the relationship between student experience and reputation, they rarely operationalize it the same way twice. This widespread fragmentation reinforces the argument that a validated, multi-stakeholder instrument is the field's most pressing methodological need.

3.5 Human Capital as a Moderating Variable

Human capital theory, rooted in the work of Becker [9], treats education and training as investments that generate productive capacity in individuals. In the university context, human capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, credentials and professional reputations of faculty, administrative staff and institutional leadership. The link to brand reputation is made most explicitly in signalling theory: faculty credentials, research output, industry engagement and academic recognition serve as credible signals that reduce information asymmetry between the institution and external audiences.

Global ranking systems operationalise this logic directly. The QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education rankings and Academic Ranking of World Universities all weight faculty-related metrics heavily focusing on citations per faculty, staff-to-student ratio and major international prizes and Fields Medals. These metrics function as proxies for human capital. Their inclusion in ranking formulas reflects an explicit theoretical claim that faculty quality dictates global reputational standing.

Within the academic literature, human capital appears most commonly as an independent variable or a control. Studies examine how faculty research productivity affects rankings (and by extension reputation), how administrative leadership quality influences strategic brand direction, and how the presence of internationally recognised academics shapes institutional identity. The treatment is almost always linear, operating under the assumption that more human capital automatically produces better reputation outcomes. Rizard, Waluyo, and Jaswir [35] compared IIUM in Malaysia with UIN in Indonesia and found that brand equity significantly predicts institutional reputation and student enrolment intentions. However, because their model includes faculty-related signals as a component of brand equity itself, it missed the chance to test human capital as an independent moderating variable.

What researchers have missed is whether human capital moderates the relationship between the other four independent variables and brand reputation. The theoretical rationale for this moderation effect is compelling. High-quality faculty can amplify the reputational signal from an institution's values by embodying them visibly in their public conduct, research and teaching. Conversely, weak faculty capacity can suppress the potential reputational gains from excellent campus artifacts or a well-designed student experience. A university with beautiful campuses, coherent values and sophisticated student services, but staffed by faculty with poor research profiles and limited external recognition, will struggle to convert those brand assets into reputational standing in global markets.

Despite this theoretical logic, no study in the reviewed sample tests human capital as a formal moderator using interaction term analysis in a structural equation or regression framework. The moderation hypothesis is occasionally hinted at in narrative reviews and conceptual papers, but it remains empirically unverified. This lack of statistical testing represents a major blind spot in the current literature.

Two 2025 publications push the boundaries of what the existing literature has treated as settled. Khanna, Singh, and Bedi [27] developed a serial multiple mediation model for building brand equity in Indian higher education institutions. They found that the path running from service quality through brand image, attachment strength, and word-of-mouth was the most significant route to brand equity. Crucially, their finding that retaining talented faculty and staff is a precondition for a lasting reputation provides a close empirical approximation of the human capital-reputation mechanism. Even so, they still framed this relationship as a direct input rather than a moderating condition.

Haddad-Adaimi, Abi Zeid Daou, and Ducq [21] challenged the standard ranking-as-reputation proxy head-on. Writing in Corporate Reputation Review, they argued that international ranking surveys cannot adequately measure institutional reputation, proposing a broader set of objective indicators instead. This argument has direct implications for the human capital moderation hypothesis. If reputation is measured through ranking proxies that already encode human capital metrics as inputs, then testing the relationship between the two becomes entirely circular. A clean empirical test requires reputation measures that are genuinely independent of the human capital dimensions hypothesized to moderate them.

There is a further problem that the existing literature has not addressed at all: human capital is almost certainly endogenous to brand reputation. Universities with strong reputations attract high-calibre faculty and staff; those faculty then further strengthen the institution's reputational standing. The causal arrow does not run exclusively from human capital to reputation yet it runs in both directions. Highly ranked institutions routinely use their reputational status as a recruitment lever, drawing scholars whose credentials would not have been attainable under a weaker brand. This reverse pathway, where reputation attracts talent rather than just talent building reputation, complicates the proposed moderation framework. It does not invalidate the moderation hypothesis, but it means any empirical test must grapple with simultaneity bias. Cross-sectional designs are particularly ill-suited to this task because they cannot separate these temporal pathways. Researchers will need to adopt longitudinal or instrumental variable approaches if they want to credibly identify the true direction of the human capital effect. Ignoring this feedback loop has left the field with a major theoretical blind spot and serious methodological vulnerabilities. The field has not yet engaged with this problem, which is a theoretical oversight with real methodological consequences.

4. Synthesis: Similarities, Differences and Research Gaps

The following tables consolidate the comparative analysis across all six constructs. Table 2 presents the variable-by-variable comparison of similarities, differences, theoretical lenses and methodological patterns, along with the specific research gaps identified for each. Table 3 presents a consolidated research gap inventory with proposed directions for future investigation. Table 4 maps the theoretical foundations and operationalisation approaches for each construct.

Table 2
Similarities, Differences, Theoretical Lenses, Methods and Research Gaps by Construct

Variable	Key Similarities Across Studies	Notable Differences	Dominant Theoretical Lens	Methodological Predominance	Research Gaps
Artifacts (Physical & Symbolic)	Consistent agreement that physical campus environments, architectural heritage and symbolic objects shape perceptual cues. Visual identity signals legitimacy and prestige.	Disagreement on whether digital artifacts carry equal weight to physical ones. Some studies treat digital presence as peripheral; others position it as dominant for international audiences.	Semiotics and institutional theory. Brand identity frameworks (Aaker, 1996; Balmer, 2008).	Largely qualitative case studies; limited large-N surveys.	No study has longitudinally tracked how artifact decay or redevelopment affects brand reputation scores. Digital artifact taxonomy for universities is underdeveloped.
Values	Values such as academic freedom, civic responsibility and research excellence recur across contexts as core brand drivers. Mission-vision alignment is widely seen as a reputational signal.	Studies diverge on whether stated values or enacted values matter more. Western-centric studies privilege research prestige values; Asian contexts often foreground social harmony and national development.	Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984); Corporate identity theory.	Survey-based; mostly single-institution studies.	Cross-cultural value hierarchies in university branding are underexplored. Value-reputation linkage models rarely account for stakeholder heterogeneity (students vs. employers vs. government).
Culture	Internal culture widely recognised as a brand signal. Shared norms, rituals and institutional history are treated as authenticity cues that influence external perception.	Studies conflict on the direction of influence: some argue culture precedes reputation while others treat reputation as a shaper of internal culture. Measurement instruments differ substantially.	Culture-excellence frameworks (Schein, 1985); Resource-based view.	Mixed methods; qualitative dominates in European contexts.	The role of subcultures (faculty vs. administrative vs. student cultures) in fragmenting or reinforcing brand identity has received minimal attention. No validated scale exists specifically for university

Variable	Key Similarities Across Studies	Notable Differences	Dominant Theoretical Lens	Methodological Predominance	Research Gaps
					organisational culture as a brand variable.
Customer Experience	Student experience is the most-studied proxy for customer experience. Service quality (SERVQUAL-derived instruments) consistently correlates with reputation outcomes.	The appropriate scope of 'customer' is contested: alumni, industry partners and community members are often excluded. Experience measurement periods vary from single-semester snapshots to longitudinal alumni tracking.	Service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004); Service quality theory.	Quantitative, structural equation modelling predominates.	Post-enrolment experience (graduate employability journeys, alumni engagement) is understudied. Negative experience recovery and its brand reputation consequences are absent from the literature.
Human Capital (Moderator)	Faculty quality, academic credentials and administrative expertise are consistently referenced as reputational assets. Rankings explicitly use faculty metrics as proxies.	Most studies treat human capital as an input variable or control, not a moderator. No consensus on which dimension (teaching quality, research output, or professional credentials) is most reputationally salient.	Human capital theory (Becker, 1964); Signalling theory.	Secondary data (ranking indices); bibliometric analysis.	The moderating role of human capital on the culture-reputation and experience-reputation pathways has not been empirically tested. Staff diversity as a reputational moderator is conspicuously absent.
Brand Reputation (Dependent Variable)	Reputation is broadly treated as a multidimensional construct encompassing trust, credibility and perceived quality. Its link to	Operationalisation is inconsistent: some studies use ranking position as a proxy; others use stakeholder perception surveys; a minority use media	Reputation capital theory (Fombrun, 1996); Social identity theory.	Survey and ranking data; few experimental designs.	Longitudinal models tracking reputation capital accumulation over institutional life cycles are rare. The role of crises (academic

Variable	Key Similarities Across Studies	Notable Differences	Dominant Theoretical Lens	Methodological Predominance	Research Gaps
	institutional survival and competitive positioning is widely accepted.	sentiment analysis. These approaches rarely converge.			misconduct, leadership scandals) in destroying reputation capital and the moderating effects thereof are almost entirely absent.

Note. Synthesised from 105 reviewed studies. IV = Independent Variable; DV = Dependent Variable

Table 3
Research Gap Inventory and Proposed Research Directions

#	Identified Gap	Why It Matters	Suggested Research Design	Priority Level
G1	Absence of a validated, multi-stakeholder brand reputation scale for universities that integrates all four IVs simultaneously.	Existing instruments borrow from corporate branding contexts. University-specific psychometric tools are methodologically underdeveloped.	Scale development study using EFA and CFA across multiple institutions and stakeholder groups.	High
G2	No longitudinal study examines how brand reputation in universities changes across institutional life cycles, crisis events and leadership transitions.	Cross-sectional designs cannot capture reputational trajectory, which is essential for strategic brand management.	Panel study spanning 10+ years across diverse institutional types (research-intensive, teaching-focused, technical).	High
G3	Human capital has not been empirically tested as a moderator between the four IVs and brand reputation. Existing studies treat it as a control or independent predictor.	The theoretical logic that people carry institutional meaning and amplify or suppress the reputational signal from artifacts, values, culture and experience has not been modelled.	SEM with moderation analysis using multi-group comparisons across institution types and geographic regions.	High
G4	Comparative cross-cultural studies on university branding are rare. Most published work draws from Western European,	Brand reputation is socially constructed. The meaning of artifacts, values and experience differs substantially across	Multi-country comparative survey using equivalent sampling protocols. Qualitative	High

#	Identified Gap	Why It Matters	Suggested Research Design	Priority Level
	Australian, and North American contexts.	Southeast Asian, African and Latin American higher education systems.	comparative analysis (QCA) for institutional-level comparisons.	
G5	The role of digital artifacts (virtual campuses, social media presence, online brand voice) has not been theorised systematically in relation to brand reputation.	As international student recruitment increasingly operates through digital channels, physical artifact dominance in existing theory underserves the contemporary context.	Netnographic study combined with digital sentiment analysis. Experimental design testing artifact type effects on prospective student brand perceptions.	Medium-High
G6	Negative brand events (academic misconduct, rankings decline, leadership crises) and their reputational consequences are absent from the university branding literature.	Brand resilience theory is well-developed in corporate contexts but has not been applied to higher education, where public accountability adds complexity.	Event study methodology. Archival analysis of institutional reputation before and after documented brand crises.	Medium
G7	Staff diversity (ethnic, gender, disciplinary) as a dimension of human capital that moderates brand reputation has not been studied.	Diversity signals are increasingly used by prospective students as reputational heuristics, yet this is theoretically unaddressed.	Multi-level modelling study incorporating institutional diversity data with student-level reputation perception surveys.	Medium

Note. Priority levels are relative within the context of this review and reflect frequency of gap identification, theoretical consequence and feasibility of investigation.

5. A Proposed Conceptual Framework

Drawing from the reviewed literature, a conceptual framework is proposed that positions brand reputation as the central outcome construct, shaped directly by four antecedent variables and moderated by human capital. The framework is not presented as a definitive model. It is a structured proposition intended to guide empirical testing and stimulate theoretical refinement.

Artifacts, values, culture and customer experience are conceptualised as operating through partially distinct mechanisms. Artifacts work primarily through perception: they are decoded by audiences through culturally conditioned schemata about what prestige, heritage and quality look like. Values work through alignment and authenticity, generating reputational benefits only when they are consistent, visible and credibly enacted. Culture works through internal coherence, meaning a strong, coherent institutional culture produces consistent brand behaviour across stakeholder

touchpoints. Customer experience works through accumulation: reputation is built through repeated, direct interactions that either confirm or disconfirm the institution's brand promise.

Human capital moderates all four pathways. The core argument is that the same branding inputs will generate different reputational outcomes depending on the quality and visibility of the people associated with it. High-profile faculty transform a merely attractive campus into an intellectually distinguished environment. Staff with strong professional reputations enact organisational values credibly in ways that less credentialled counterparts cannot. A culture of scholarly rigour, visible in staff behaviour and public discourse, amplifies the culture-reputation linkage. Finally, the customer experience pathway depends heavily on human capital quality. A student's interaction with a world-class academic is an experience that carries reputational weight that a service encounter with administrative staff of any quality cannot fully substitute.

Table 4
Conceptual Framework: Theoretical Foundations and Operationalisation

Construct	Theoretical Foundation	Key Indicators	Measurement Approach in Literature	Proposed Operationalisation
Artifacts (IV1)	Semiotics; Institutional Theory; Brand Identity Theory	Campus aesthetics, symbolic objects, visual identity, digital presence	Perception surveys; content analysis	5-item perceptual scale; digital artifact audit index
Values (IV2)	Stakeholder Theory; Corporate Identity Theory	Mission alignment, stated vs. enacted values, value visibility	Document analysis; survey	Stakeholder value congruence scale (adapted from corporate branding)
Culture (IV3)	Schein's Culture Model; Resource-Based View	Shared norms, rituals, institutional memory, subcultures	Qualitative ethnography; mixed methods	Culture strength index; qualitative narrative analysis
Customer Experience (IV4)	Service-Dominant Logic; SERVQUAL	Student journey touchpoints, service quality, emotional engagement	SERVQUAL adaptations; SEM-based surveys	Customer experience index spanning pre-enrolment to alumni stages
Human Capital (Moderator)	Human Capital Theory; Signalling Theory	Faculty qualifications, research productivity, staff	Secondary data (rankings, CV analysis)	Composite HC index with faculty, staff and leadership dimensions

Construct	Theoretical Foundation	Key Indicators	Measurement Approach in Literature	Proposed Operationalisation
		diversity, industry engagement		
Brand Reputation (DV)	Reputation Capital Theory (Fombrun); Social Identity Theory	Trust, credibility, prestige, perceived quality, stakeholder pride	Ranking proxies; stakeholder perception surveys; media analysis	Multi-stakeholder reputation scale with trust, quality and credibility subscales

Note. IV = Independent Variable; DV = Dependent Variable; EFA = Exploratory Factor Analysis; CFA = Confirmatory Factor Analysis; SEM = Structural Equation Modelling.

The framework acknowledges that these relationships are not static. Reputational capital accumulates over time and is subject to decay through crisis events, leadership failures and shifts in the competitive environment. Future empirical work should incorporate time as a structural element rather than treating reputation as a cross-sectional outcome.

One theoretical tension requires explicit acknowledgment. Human capital is positioned here as a moderator, but the reviewed literature gives grounds for treating the human capital-reputation relationship as bidirectional rather than unidirectional. Prestigious universities attract distinguished scholars precisely because of their reputational standing. In this context, the brand draws talent as much as talent builds the brand. This endogeneity problem does not undermine the moderation argument, but it does constrain how that argument can be tested. A study that measures human capital and brand reputation at the same time point cannot cleanly attribute the moderation effect to human capital rather than to the reputation that attracted it in the first place. The framework therefore carries an implicit causal claim that requires longitudinal data or instrumental variable methods to sustain. Researchers adopting this framework should treat the human capital moderation pathways as directional hypotheses in need of designs that can handle reverse causation, not as settled causal propositions.

6. Discussion

6.1 On the Dominance of Cross-Sectional Methods

The most consistent methodological observation across the 105 reviewed studies is the dominance of cross-sectional survey designs. Approximately 68% of quantitative studies collected data at a single time point from a convenience sample of current students. This approach produces findings that are difficult to generalise and impossible to interpret in terms of how reputation develops, declines or recovers over time. Brand reputation is not a static snapshot nevertheless it is a trajectory. Yet the literature has largely theorised and measured it as though it were.

The reasons for this pattern are practical. Longitudinal studies are expensive, require sustained institutional access and are highly vulnerable to sample attrition. However, the cost of avoiding the current approach is theoretical stagnation. The field knows a great deal about what correlates with reputation at a single moment in time point within Western university contexts. It knows almost

nothing about causal dynamics, about how shocks propagate through the system, or whether the determinants of reputation remain stable across different stages of a university's life cycles. This reliance on one-survey represents a collective methodological failure that future research agenda in this field needs to address directly.

6.2 On the Western Bias in Theory and Sampling

Just under 75% of the reviewed studies were conducted in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States or Western Europe. Of the remaining 25%, the majority came from a narrow band of middle-income countries with active higher education research communities: Malaysia, South Africa, Egypt and Turkey. African, Latin American and Central Asian university contexts are almost completely absent.

This imbalance is a structural validity problem rather than a simple lack of diversity. Brand reputation is constructed through social and cultural processes. The meaning of a campus artifact, the perceived authority of an academic credential and the experience of educational service quality are all culturally embedded concepts. A theory of university brand reputation built primarily from Anglo-American data cannot travel cleanly to contexts where the social contract between universities and their communities operates differently, where ranking participation is limited or contested, or where institutional heritage carries different meanings.

The Southeast Asian context illustrates this friction clearly. In Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, universities operate within national brand narratives that tie institutional reputation directly to national development goals. Research-intensive prestige, the currency of global rankings, competes with community service, graduate employability and religious or cultural alignment as reputational criteria. Studies from these regions show that Western-derived constructs require fundamental reconceptualization, not minor adaptation to fit local stakeholder perceptions. This systemic misalignment should prompt theoretical humility regarding how generalizable current branding models actually are.

6.3 On the Moderation Gap and the Endogeneity Problem

Perhaps the most intellectually consequential gap identified in this review is the absence of any empirical test of human capital as a moderator. This is not a trivial omission. The theoretical logic is well-established: human capital functions as a signal in knowledge-intensive contexts, and universities are primary signalling institutions. Yet 105 reviewed studies, cumulatively representing over two decades of scholarship, have not produced a single interaction-term test of whether human capital quality moderates the relationships between artifacts, values, culture or experience and brand reputation.

Part of the explanation may be methodological. Human capital is notoriously difficult to measure at the granularity required for individual-level moderation analysis. Faculty research productivity data exists but requires careful aggregation. Staff diversity and credential data are not always publicly available. Linking institutional level human capital indices to the individual level brand perception surveys requires a data structure that most single institution studies simply are not designed to accommodate.

The gap also reflects a kind of theoretical inertia. Human capital entered the higher education branding literature primarily through the lens of global rankings, where it appears as a direct performance metric rather than a moderating condition. Shifting the theoretical framing from human

capital as performance input to a moderating factor requires a conceptual step the field has not yet taken. The proposed framework in Section 5 is one attempt to prompt that shift.

The more difficult theoretical problem here is endogeneity. Brand reputation and human capital reinforce each other over time. An institution builds a strong reputation partly through the quality of its people that reputation then attracts higher-quality applicants and those individuals further strengthen the institution's standing. Treating human capital as a moderator assumes a degree of exogeneity that the actual historical relationship between prestigious institutions and distinguished faculty does not support. Oxford and MIT attract top academics largely because of what they already are.

Cross-sectional survey designs, which account for nearly 70% of the quantitative studies in this review, cannot separate these distinct pathways. Researchers who adopt the moderation framework proposed here must choose research designs that can handle this simultaneity. This means moving toward panel data with lagged indicators, quasi-experimental comparisons around recruitment events, or instrumental variable approaches that exploit exogenous shocks to institutional human capital supply. The endogeneity concern does not make the moderation hypothesis wrong, but it does mean the hypothesis cannot be credibly tested using the static methods dominant in the existing literature.

7. Conclusion

Two decades of research on university branding and brand reputation have produced a literature that is empirically active but theoretically fragmented. This review has mapped that landscape across four antecedent constructs, one moderating variable, and the final brand reputation outcome. The synthesis tables document what the literature agrees on and where the disagreements are sharpest. These disagreements are often more informative than the consensus because they highlight where current models break down.

Rather than simply restating those findings, it is more useful to be direct about what this review itself cannot claim and where the methodology of a systematic literature review introduces its own distortions.

First, publication bias is a genuine problem. The 105 studies included here were all successfully published, meaning that null findings. Studies that found no significant relationship between culture and brand reputation, for example are almost certainly underrepresented. Systematic reviews inherently inherit the publication record's optimism. The consistently positive correlations reported between the four independent variables and reputation outcomes should be read with this inflation in mind. The true effect of any single antecedent or absent publication bias is likely more modest than the aggregate literature suggests.

The English-language restriction compounds this problem. Non-English scholarship on university branding, particularly from Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and French language traditions was excluded by the search protocol. This is a standard practical constraint, but it is not a neutral one. Higher education systems in China, Brazil, the Arab world, and Francophone Africa represent hundreds of millions of students and institutional contexts that differ substantially from the Anglo-American norm. The conceptual framework proposed in Section 5 cannot claim cross-cultural generalizability when the evidentiary base is this geographically and linguistically narrow.

Furthermore, the constructs themselves suffer from definitional instability across the reviewed studies. Artifacts, values, culture, and customer experience are operationalized so differently across separate papers that aggregating their findings assumes more conceptual equivalence than actually exists. This is a characteristic problem of narrative systematic reviews in management and marketing.

It should restrain the confidence with which the proposed framework is presented. The framework is a structured hypothesis, not a distillation of settled knowledge.

The most productive directions for the field are those that directly confront these limitations rather than working around them. That means adopting longitudinal designs capable of tracing reputational trajectories instead of single snapshots. It requires multi-lingual search protocols and sampling strategies that reach non-Western institutional contexts on their own terms. It demands research designs equipped to handle the endogeneity of human capital rather than treating it as a clean, exogenous moderator. Finally, researchers must begin publishing null and mixed findings rather than only confirmatory ones. The seven gaps identified in this review are not just absences in the literature yet these gaps become invitations to do harder, more methodologically demanding work than the field has largely been willing to attempt.

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