PERCEPTION OF BRAND EQUITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN THE ABURRÁ VALLEY, APPLYING AAKER'S BEA MODEL AT THE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTION OF ENVIGADO

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Abstract:
This article analyzes the perception of brand equity of the Institución Universitaria de Envigado (IUE) from the perspective of its stakeholders in the Valle de Aburrá, using the Brand Equity Audit (BEA) model proposed by Aaker. Employing a qualitative, descriptive, data was collected through workshops, interviews, focus groups, and gamified sessions with 270 participants, including students, alumni, faculty, administrative staff, government entities, and external audiences. The study identifies how the BEA dimensions of brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations shape the institutional image of the IUE within the regional academic context. The findings highlight that teaching quality, economic accessibility, and geographical proximity are positively valued as distinctive elements. However, the study also reveals challenges related to brand visibility, strategic communication, infrastructure, second-language development, and inter-institutional coordination. It concludes that the IUE holds a strong symbolic value among its internal stakeholders, grounded in a sense of gratitude, but requires greater external projection and a more cohesive brand narrative to improve its regional and national positioning. This article offers significant insights for strategic brand management in the higher education sector, suggesting that the BEA model is a valuable tool for evaluating university brands from a multidimensional perspective.

Keywords: Brand Equity; Brand Equity Audit; University Branding; Corporate Image.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive environment, higher education institutions must differentiate themselves not only by the quality of their academic programs, but also by their image and positioning in the education market. Building and managing a strong brand allows them to attract and retain students, strengthen ties with alumni, and consolidate relationships with other key players, such as faculty, administrators, employers, and government entities (Tan et al., 2022). In this context, brand image becomes a fundamental strategic asset, as it influences perceptions of institutional quality and reputation, which are determining factors in the choice of a university (Shegia and Ronalde, 2024).

The problem to be solved in relation to brand equity in higher education lies in the need to understand the factors that influence its construction and maintenance in both public and private universities. Growing competition in the education sector has led institutions to seek to differentiate themselves and attract students not only through academic quality, but also through the perceived value of their brand (Girard and Pinar, 2021). However, there are still gaps in research on the specific elements that contribute to brand equity in this context, limiting the possibility of developing effective university branding strategies based on empirical evidence (Casanoves-Boix et al., 2025).

This issue is relevant because brand equity in universities influences students' perceptions, their trust in the institution, and their decision to enroll. In addition, a strong brand can generate loyalty among students and alumni, increase the attraction of academic talent, and consolidate the institutional reputation in the global higher education market (Kaushal and Ali, 2021). In an environment where there is a wide range of universities to choose from, students evaluate not only academic quality but also the reputation and recognition of the institution (Tran et al., 2020). Furthermore, brand equity influences the continuity of postgraduate studies, the recommendation of the institution to future students, and the sense of belonging among graduates (Perera et al., 2023).

To date, the literature has identified four key factors that influence university brand equity: brand recognition, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Shegia and Ronalde, 2024). Previous research has shown that these factors are closely related to student satisfaction, institutional reputation, and university identity (Girard and Pinar, 2021). However, limitations persist in the literature, such as the lack of comparative studies between different types of universities and regions, as well as the scarcity of analyses that include diverse perspectives, such as those of faculty and administrators (Casanoves-Boix et al., 2025). In addition, most studies have focused on educational markets in developed countries, where perception and decision-making patterns may differ significantly from those of Latin American institutions (Kaushal and Ali, 2021).

In Latin America, the literature on brand management in higher education institutions is scarce compared to other sectors. There is a lack of studies addressing brand equity from the perspective of consumers in the Latin American educational context (Shegia and Ronalde, 2024). In addition, most research has focused on private universities, leaving a gap in the analysis of public institutions and their positioning in the educational market. This creates a need to broaden the methodological approach to better capture the complexity of brand equity in the university setting and understand how sociocultural and economic factors influence the brand perception of these institutions (Casanoves-Boix et al., 2025).

One of the most widely used models for evaluating brand equity is Brand Equity, developed by Aaker (1991), which proposes that a strong brand is based on four main dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations. This approach has been applied in multiple sectors, including higher education, with the aim of understanding how different stakeholders perceive the identity and positioning of a university institution (Tan et al., 2022). However, previous studies have addressed these factors in a fragmented manner, without examining how they interact with each other, which creates the need to develop comprehensive models that holistically address university brand equity (Girard and Pinar, 2021).

This article seeks to understand the perception of stakeholders living in the Aburrá Valley regarding a university institution, under the BEA model proposed by David A. Aaker, taking the University Institution of Envigado (IUE) as a case study. In this context, the present study focuses on the IUE, a higher education institution located in the Aburrá Valley, Colombia. Through a qualitative methodology, with qualitative tools such as workshops with recreational components, focus groups, and interviews, we seek to evaluate brand perception among different stakeholders, including students, teachers, graduates, administrators, and government entities, as well as the public, families, and entrepreneurs. The sample of 270 participants will provide a comprehensive view of the identity and reputation of the IUE, as well as identify areas for improvement to strengthen its institutional positioning.

The BEA model seeks to measure brand perception to establish a path for research and data analysis on the IUE brand. Based on this, the present article aims to evaluate the perception of stakeholders living in the Aburrá Valley regarding a university institution, using the BEA model proposed by David A. Aaker, taking the University Institution of Envigado (IUE) as a case study. The results of this study will not only contribute to the analysis of the IUE's brand image but will also offer strategic guidelines to improve its competitiveness and relationship with stakeholders. Likewise, it is expected that the findings will serve as a reference for future research on the application of the Brand Equity model in higher education institutions in Latin America, contributing to the development of more effective brand management strategies in this sector.

2. Literature Review

The concept of brand equity has been widely analyzed due to its relevance in competitive differentiation and the generation of consumer trust. Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as the added value that a brand acquires in the minds of consumers through attributes such as recognition, loyalty, perceived quality, and positive associations. These elements constitute a competitive advantage, which is especially relevant in sectors where consumer choice implies a long-term commitment, such as higher education (Carvalho et al., 2020).

In this context, university brand equity translates into the perception that students, faculty, and other key stakeholders develop toward an institution. A university with high brand value tends to be perceived as prestigious, reliable, and high-quality, which influences its ability to attract and retain students (Vuong et al., 2024). In addition, academic reputation, performance in rankings, and student experience are elements that contribute to the construction of its brand identity (Casanoves-Boix et al., 2025).

One of the key components of brand value is brand loyalty, which reflects the degree of consumer commitment to a specific brand. In the university context, this loyalty manifests itself in positive recommendations from students and graduates, as well as in their willingness to maintain ties with their alma mater through graduate programs, alumni networks, and institutional events (Pinar et al., 2020). Brand loyalty can strengthen the institutional image and increase the sustainability of universities in increasingly competitive educational markets.

Another essential component of brand equity is brand awareness, which refers to consumers' ability to recognize and remember a brand within a specific category (Aljumah et al., 2021). In the educational context, brand awareness takes on a strategic role due to the saturation of the university market and the need for institutions to differentiate themselves globally. Universities that manage to increase their brand awareness can improve their reputation and foster a sense of belonging among students, which contributes to strengthening their loyalty and commitment (Pinar et al., 2020).

Perceived quality is another pillar of brand equity that influences consumers' overall perception of the excellence of a product or service (Girard and Pinar, 2021). In the education sector, this quality is measured through factors such as institutional reputation, academic quality, research opportunities, and the learning environment. Recent research highlights that high perceived quality can motivate the choice of a university and foster loyalty to the institution (Petersen, 2025; Nigam and Singh, 2023).

Finally, the concept of brand experience has gained relevance in the analysis of university brand value. This concept refers to the feelings, emotions, and cognitive and behavioral responses that consumers develop through their interaction with a brand (Farhat et al., 2021). In the educational field, brand experience is linked to the need for institutions to generate emotional and cognitive engagement with their students through sensory, affective, and intellectual experiences that strengthen their institutional brand equity (Waqas, 2022).

Thus, building brand value in higher education depends on a balance between the components of brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand experience. These elements not only improve the positioning of universities in the global market but also contribute to their long-term sustainability and competitiveness.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive typology design to obtain a comprehensive view of the perception of the brand image of the University Institution of Envigado (IUE) among different groups of stakeholders residing in the Aburrá Valley. This approach was selected due to its ability to triangulate data and validate findings from multiple perspectives. The use of descriptive techniques seeks to identify characteristics and patterns related to brand loyalty, brand experience, and perceived quality, delving into the causes of these phenomena. The Brand Equity Audit (BEA) model, proposed by Aaker (1991), guides the process of evaluating and measuring the brand value of the IUE through categories such as loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and experience.

3.1 Study Context

The study was conducted in the Aburrá Valley, a subregion of Antioquia that includes Medellín and nearby municipalities such as Envigado. This area was selected for its geographical, social, and economic importance, as well as being the core target population of the IUE. Qualitative data was collected in physical spaces such as the Gesell Chamber at the University Institution of Envigado (IUE) during focus group sessions, IUE classrooms, and IUE workspaces.

3.2 Participants

The study participants were selected from different groups of internal and external stakeholders of the IUE. These internal stakeholders include students divided by faculty and postgraduate students within the same category, graduates, teachers, administrators, and contractors, while external stakeholders include government entities, families, and the public. The sample included a total of 270 participants distributed across 14 groups, as detailed in the study's technical data sheets. The focus groups and interviews included diverse socioeconomic categories (SES 1-6) and age ranges from 18 to 70 years old, with the aim of obtaining varied demographic perspectives.

Table 1. Participants Methodology Characteristics

Group	Classification	Tool	Number of people	Number of groups
Students by faculty	Law and Politics	Focus group	10	2
	Business	*Workshop* (Recreational)	10	2
	Humanities	*Workshop* (Recreational)	10	2
	Engineering	Focus group	10	2
	Postgraduate	*Workshop*	10	2
Graduates	All faculties	*Workshop*	10	2
Administrative	All areas	*Workshop*	10	2
Contractors	All areas	*Workshop*	10	2
Teachers	All faculties	Interviews	10	Not applicable
Government entities	Mayor's office	Focus group	10	1
Families	(NSE 3-6) 45-70	Focus group	10	1
General public	(NSE 3-6) 18-25	Focus group	10	2
General public	(NSE 3-6) 25-45	Focus group	10	2

Source: Author's original elaboration.

3.3 Sampling technique

Participants were selected through purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was used, with selection criteria based on accessibility, availability, and equitable representation of the categories defined in the study design.

3.4 Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments were specifically designed to measure key aspects. The qualitative methodology included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, workshops, and workshops with gamified elements based on relevant categories, such as brand loyalty, brand experience, and perceived quality. The questions included participatory dynamics, such as the use of post it notes to group personal characteristics and perceptions and the development of bills of different denominations combined with projective techniques to understand these key aspects through play.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out using different techniques. Qualitative sessions included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, workshops, and workshops with gamified elements. The external groups were differentiated by socioeconomic categories (SES 1-6) and age ranges (18-70 years), and the internal groups by faculties and areas of work, seeking to gain a deep understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions and experiences. In these sessions, participatory and projective dynamics were applied, and open-ended questions were asked to encourage reflection and discussion.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research ensured compliance with ethical principles during all stages. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and signed an informed consent form before participating. The confidentiality and anonymity of responses were ensured, and the data collected was stored and processed in accordance with current personal data protection laws. The research also received ethical approval in accordance with the guidelines established by the university and applicable international regulations.

3.7 Data Analysis

The data collected was subjected to detailed analysis. Qualitative data was obtained from recordings of focus groups and interviews, as well as from analysis of stakeholder interaction on post it notes and pieces of paper. It was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis and qualitative categorization techniques. This approach allowed us to capture nuances in brand perceptions and associations, offering a richer and more detailed understanding of the image of the IUE among different stakeholders.

4. Results

The findings and results obtained validated the Brand Equity model proposed by Aaker (1991) in these educational contexts, especially in higher education institutions, based on the proposed dimensions of brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations, giving us a symbolic, experiential, and functional reading from the perspective of the different stakeholders of the brand. This analysis is divided into categories, with the involvement of the different stakeholders seeking to understand, from the different perspectives of the participants, their perception of the different concepts related to the category.

4.1 Brand loyalty

In the case of IUE, students base their positive assessment of the brand on the teaching and the faculty, which is perceived as being of good quality, coinciding with the findings of Farhat, Mokhtar, and Salleh (2021), who point out that in university contexts, the quality of teaching combined with the approachability of the faculty are determining factors in building brand loyalty among students. This is expressed by IUE students, who recognize that most of the faculty are empathetic toward students and are at a high level on par with prestigious universities in Antioquia. noting that many of them, as one participant says, "are excellent teachers who are at other large universities and come here and give their best, which makes us feel very committed."

This is also related to what Pinar, Girard, and Basfirinci (2020): a close and strong relationship between the student's emotional capital and the experience provided by the academy strengthens satisfaction, retention, and recommendation indicators, which are key elements for strengthening brand value.

However, students also suggest improvements in areas of participation and promotion, which coincides with the findings of Kaushal and Ali (2021). They argue that the importance of student participation in institutional decisions translates into greater ownership of brand values. We can also identify that brand loyalty is influenced by economic factors and access to the institution, such as scholarships, payment facilities, and low tuition fees compared to other universities in the region.

As for the group of graduates, points such as flexible hours stand out as one of the highest points in their university experience, facilitating the relationship between work, study, and personal life. Similarly, they favorably recognize financial aid, an aspect that influences their decision to continue their education at the same university. Meanwhile, the teaching staff group speaks positively about professional growth and academic commitment, a key factor in building bonds of trust between students and teachers. They also highlight participation in research projects, international exchanges, and the offer of second language courses. These actions allow human capital to feel supported in their training, generating commitment to the institution. This coincides with the approach of Tan, Rasoolimanesh, and Manickam (2022), which points out that investment by educational institutions in teacher training is a crucial factor in building positive and lasting emotional ties to the brand.

This same population group identifies areas for improvement in aspects related to infrastructure in specific areas such as access for people with disabilities. According to Shegia and Ronalde (2024), it is emphasized that the concept of inclusion should be projected as a practice and a value within the university environment. In addition, a lack of space and equipment upgrades and maintenance is identified, as well as the need for continuous improvement of common areas.

From an administrative perspective, it is evident that brand loyalty is framed by the social and cultural initiatives promoted by the IUE, as seen in institutional events, internal training, and integration activities, consolidating bonds of organizational trust, which gives rise to what Pinar, Girard and Basfirinci (2020) affirm that in the university context, the commitment of internal collaborators is linked to institutional well-being. However, this population group identifies challenges associated with the institution's adaptation processes in relation to the modernization of academia and the strengthening of relations with the business sector.

Meanwhile, among groups outside the institution, loyalty to the IUE brand is limited due to a lack of knowledge of the brand. However, in many cases, proximity and affordable costs favor the generation of brand recognition. In the same way, it is noteworthy that the influence of family and acquaintances is a favorable factor. However, it is essential to increase visibility in schools and foster relationships with graduates. It is also noteworthy to improve communication in order to make the institution visible through its strengths, such as scholarships, financial support, and relevant academic aspects.

4.2 Brand awareness

For the student population, free tuition programs and local partnerships become differentiating factors compared to other institutions in the region, representing an opportunity for positioning. This aspect is noted by Carvalho, Brandão, and Pinto (2020), who affirm that the benefits associated with the perception of access and financial support reinforce brand recall and favor the image of a brand's social commitment.

For this population group, brand identity must be strengthened in order to connect with the university's different stakeholders by improving the narratives according to them. Similarly, the media must be empathetic and appropriate for the population group. Casanoves-Boix, Pérez_sanchez, and Lorentes-Ayala (2025) tell us how many public universities face the challenge of articulating a coherent brand narrative that connects with their different audiences, which affects the visibility and recognition of the brand compared to its competitors.

As for graduates, the positive factors continue to revolve around teaching quality, affordability, and strategic location, but they are clear when talking about areas for improvement related to strategic alliances, which they point out are not well known, limiting the brand's projection in areas other than academia, as expressed by Casanoves-Boix, Pérez-Sanchez and Lorente-Ayala (2025) state that visibility in external collaborations and alliances is a pillar for strengthening the public and professional perception of a higher education institution.

While it is clear to the decent that the institution is evolving with significant advances in terms of financial support and inclusion, this same group perceives an emotional bond with the university, moving from the contractual to the symbolic level of gratitude. This coincides with the views of Waqas (2022), who suggests that the external visibility of an institution is not reduced by institutional awareness, but rather includes a symbolic relationship on the part of internal collaborators with the values of the institution.

At this point, it should also be emphasized that updating the academic offering to respond to the demands of today's world must be a priority. All of this can be achieved by updating curriculum programs, which is essential for the institution's competitiveness in the academic sphere.

While the administrative group values integration and cultural activities, they emphasize a gap in student support in terms of business links, affecting the external perception of the institution. It is also clear that there is a perception of disconnection between areas of the same institution, generating reprocessing and even slowing down the process due to a lack of coordination.

In the same vein, government entities, despite having a general perception that it is a responsible brand with a good academic level, with which ties of trust and fraternity are maintained, lack agile processes that facilitate institutional interaction between levels, as one of the participants says, "the University Institution of Envigado IUE is a good institution, but it is slow in its processes, which sometimes prevents joint projects from being carried out." However, these government entities have an affection and loyalty for the brand due to its regional affiliation and the symbolism of what belongs to Envigado.

The external group talks about its local knowledge of the Envigado and Aburrá Sur area, but it competes with digital alternatives and other institutions. Although it is an institution with a low-cost image, it is not always accessible to those who work or have children. In addition, the external perception is strongly influenced by a marked concern about the political environment in which the institution is perceived.

4.3 Perceived quality

In terms of perceived quality, as in the previous categories, the quality of teachers, proximity, and economic factors are frequently and repeatedly highlighted as key factors in building perceived value. These associations of quality are greatly influenced by recommendations from family and acquaintances, which is in line with what Girard and Pinar (2021), who identify that in a higher education context, word of mouth is a reliable source of information for new students. From this point of view, strengthening adequate spaces for teaching and learning has a direct impact on a student's experience at a university institution. These factors are indispensable for building brand reputation in the community.

As for graduates, the perceived quality of the institution is positive in terms of educational quality and financial aid, generating local recognition and explaining the decision of graduates to continue their studies at the institution. As one of the participants says, "one enters a postgraduate program at the IUE because it is inexpensive or very close by." This highlights a perceived shortcoming among this population group, who tell us about the institution's low positioning at the national level.

In this category, teachers identify academic flexibility as a fundamental factor in having a good brand image. However, there are two factors that generate dissatisfaction: instability and lack of motivation on the part of students, which negatively influence the planning and execution of meaningful educational experiences, compromising academic commitment and sustainability.

For external groups, perceived quality stems from an atmosphere of trust and academic quality. From a moderation perspective, the sharing of teaching resources with prestigious universities in Medellín is valued. Problems include a deficit in second language learning, with other institutions being preferred for programs related to this aspect. Improvements in infrastructure are viewed positively, although there is talk of better communication of these aspects. In this area, at the external level, there is also talk of the influence of community references. Similarly, the work of locally recognized graduates is highlighted, all within a favorable cost-quality framework, although in many cases more prestigious institutions are preferred. Finally, there is talk of improvements in wellness and recreation spaces.

4.4 Brand associations

For this last category, it is evident from the students that this group's choice of the IUE is strongly influenced by recommendations from third parties, family members, acquaintances, or graduates, thus highlighting the reputation and symbolic value in the selection process. This emphasizes the potential of institutional learning spaces, both in terms of technology and physical facilities, seeking to strengthen the educational experience and the perception of value of this population group.

Graduates express a sense of belonging to the institution, recognizing the influence of the IUE on their job prospects and expressing gratitude for the training they received in their professional development. However, there is limited interaction on institutional social networks due to information overload and irrelevant or unsegmented content, revealing the need to optimize digital communication channels.

As for the teaching staff, they express gratitude, enthusiasm, interest, and empathy as their main emotions, but they highlight an aspect to be improved in terms of the visibility of the IUE compared to other institutions, especially in the field of research and consulting. This deficit in brand positioning limits the possibilities for collaboration between institutions, internationalization, and knowledge transfer.

As for the administrative group, the IUE is perceived as a high- education institution with solid strategic allies. In particular, the alliance with the Envigado mayor's office and the chamber of commerce is highlighted, reinforcing its regional positioning. However, opportunities for improvement have been identified, such as those related to the enrollment process, which is perceived as a fragmented experience. Coordinated strategies should be considered that link the organizational culture with the user experience, especially that of students, who are key players in the brand's projection.

Finally, external stakeholders see it as an affordable institution with strong programs in law and psychology that are accessible to residents, but that it must work on communicating benefits such as "zero tuition" by improving its presence on social media and participating in events at schools. For these external population groups, references from graduates and different actors who can spread the word about the institution are essential for their associations.

5. Discussion

This study, which evaluated the perception of stakeholders of the University Institution of Envigado (IUE) under the BEA model proposed by Aaker, enabled a multidimensional and systemic reading, from the functional, affective, and symbolic value that stakeholders give to the brand, under the categories of brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations. It highlights possibilities for improvement and patterns of thought, giving rise to strategic opportunities for strengthening the brand.

The first category is brand loyalty, which is clearly related to the quality of the teaching staff, flexible schedules, financial support, and academic development opportunities for student, graduate, and teaching populations. while for the management group, this relationship is based on well-being and a sense of belonging. As for external groups, the brand is still in its infancy, conditioned by low visibility, ease of accessibility, and vocational guidance heavily focused on law and psychology. This assessment is particularly evident among those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

About brand awareness, a positive perception of the institutional mission was identified, but shortcomings were found in terms of strategic communication, as well as a lack of clarity in the dissemination of programs and inadequate segmentation. Similarly, the institution's achievements and alliances limit its positioning compared to other institutions with greater prestige and visibility at the national level.

Perceived quality is one of the pillars of the institution, especially given its value proposition based on the quality-cost ratio, which makes it accessible not only economically but also geographically for nearby population groups. However, gaps were found ranging from infrastructure to second language learning, as well as curriculum modernization, factors that directly affect the educational experience and the brand's positioning in the medium term.

In terms of brand associations, there is evidence of a significant emotional connection with the institution based on belonging, enthusiasm, and gratitude, showing a symbolic value that can be exploited in terms of loyalty on the part of students and graduates. Similarly, there is a disconnect between these links and the lived experience and institutional projection, particularly in terms of communication with graduates using social media, participation in academic fairs, and visibility in the regional and national environment.

This study shows that internal audiences value the identity of the IUE but faces the challenge of projecting that identity with greater consistency at the regional and national levels. The brand narrative must be strengthened by exploiting its symbolic value, diversifying its communication channels, designing differentiated positioning strategies for each of its population groups, and exploiting human capital as a concept and positive symbolic associations within its value proposition in the regional and national education market.

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