



Exploring international student experiences in Chinese universities: Evaluating the influence of student experience on university brand equity

 Mingkai Chen¹

 Rowena M. Libo-On²⁺

^{1,2}Central Philippine University, Iloilo, Philippines.

¹Email: mingkai.chen-21@cpu.edu.ph

²Email: rmlibo-on@cpu.edu.ph

¹Jiangxi University of Applied Science, Nanchang, 330100, China.



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 28 February 2025

Revised: 11 July 2025

Accepted: 25 July 2025

Published: 14 August 2025

Keywords

Brand equity

China

Experience

Smart-PLS

Structural equation modelling

University.

This study aims to identify the factors influencing international students' perceptions of a university's image and brand equity. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods research approach was employed, involving interviews and a primary survey. Six interviewees participated, revealing four major factors: cultural attractiveness, cost attractiveness, discrimination policy, and health and safety. Based on these factors, along with image and university brand equity, 167 responses were collected through the survey. A structural equation model was developed using SmartPLS on this data. The model tested nine hypotheses, of which five were accepted while four were not supported. It was found that cost attractiveness and anti-discrimination policies significantly impact Chinese universities' brand image and equity among international students, while cultural appeal and health and safety do not. Cost attractiveness and anti-discrimination policies should be optimized as primary strategies for developing the university's brand image. This study provides empirical evidence for universities to refine their strategies and increase their attractiveness to international students. Moreover, the findings extend the university brand equity theory by highlighting cost attractiveness and anti-discrimination policies as key drivers of international students' perceptions and university selection.

Contribution/Originality: This is a study that combines qualitative evaluation with quantitative testing for an issue predominantly studied using either method in isolation. The first-hand student experience, coupled with structural model-based hypothesis testing, ensures that the main factors of brand equity are established, thereby extending current theoretical domains.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learn from the barbarians to ward off the barbarians, as quoted from the Wong (2007) study, has been China's motto for salvation since the Qing dynasty. The essence of this philosophy is to learn from Western culture and to improve upon it. China has a fundamental understanding of internationalization and applies it gracefully across many sectors. From technology to sports, nearly every industry in China has become comparable to or surpasses its Western counterparts due to internationalization. However, our research focuses on a less fortunate sector: education. The data suggest that the US, United Kingdom, and Canada are the three most popular university destinations for international students, whereas China ranks seventh (Dyvik, 2024). Only five Chinese universities (Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Zhejiang University) are prominently listed among the world's leading institutions (Ocallaghan, 2024). This limited representation raises concerns about the overall brand equity of Chinese universities on the global stage. Not only

that, [Li, Zhang, and An \(2023\)](#) have found that China's higher education market is shifting from a "seller's market" to a "buyer's market." This is concerning for stakeholders in this industry as well as organizations. It indicates that China's goal of internationalizing all industries may be lacking in the educational sector. If this trend continues without addressing the underlying causes, international student enrollment might eventually decline. [Ostojić and Leko Šimić \(2021\)](#) argued that students' perceptions of choosing international universities depend more on branding and reputation than on facilities. Even though universities offer similar courses or materials, branding plays a significant role in enrollment decisions ([Yaping et al., 2023](#)). This underscores the importance of enhancing the brand image of Chinese universities through effective brand equity management. Chinese Universities must improve brand equity by concentrating on student perceptions to compete globally and attract more international students.

Now, perception depends on experience ([Wang, Hahm, & Hammer, 2022](#); [Zacks, 2020](#)). Studies by [Matus, Rusu, and Cano \(2021\)](#) have pointed out how important it is to maintain student experience to increase brand reputation. As international students navigate the complexities of resettling in a new cultural and educational environment, their experiences significantly shape the image of the universities they attend. Understanding these experiences is crucial for preserving and enhancing the brand equity of Chinese universities as they continue to attract diverse cohorts. While prior research has examined the importance of international student satisfaction and academic outcomes, there needs to be more focus on how these experiences influence university brand equity, specifically in Chinese higher education institutions. By addressing this gap, the study aims to provide insights that can guide Chinese universities in aligning their service offerings and support systems with the needs and expectations of their international students, thereby improving their global competitiveness.

This study aims to identify the factors influencing international students' perceptions of a university's image and how these perceptions subsequently enhance the university's brand equity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student experience in higher education refers to how students feel about certain aspects within the chosen institution. [Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello \(2009\)](#) defined experience as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral dimensions that further affect a consumer's decision. However, [Waqas \(2022\)](#) argued that this definition is more product and brand-oriented, whereas this study revolves around student experiences. Students' experience with higher education institutions reflects their experiences with the services provided by organizations or universities ([Matus et al., 2021](#)). The author's perspective was that students are consumers of educational services. Their experience relies on specific dimensions similar to consumers' perceptions of a service. For international students, experience is the internal and subjective reaction to direct or indirect contact with higher education institutions at multiple touchpoints ([Meyer & Schwager, 2007](#)). Positive student experiences have improved student happiness, retention, and brand perception. University brand equity is the value a university's brand provides to its offerings compared to competitors. [Aaker \(2009\)](#) defines brand equity as brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. It is the value and strength that a brand poses ([Oliveira, Heldt, Silveira, & Luce, 2023](#)). [Haigh's \(2003\)](#) definition of brand equity is the most suitable one for the university as it says anything that changes brand identification into added value for the brand is equity. Here, university brand equity refers to what students and consumers perceive about the institution. University brand equity includes the institution's reputation. Concerning higher education institutions, the branding of colleges is a strategic dimension that attracts, engages, and retains students ([Wilson & Elliot, 2016](#)). In their research, [Stage and Hossler \(1989\)](#) said that "student college choice" refers to the ongoing decision-making process of higher education students. [Chapman \(1981\)](#) proposed a model for student college choice, identifying and analyzing factors influencing students' decisions and providing guidance for stakeholders to develop recruiting policies. In the model, he mentioned various factors that attract and influence students' decisions when choosing a college. A significant factor was institutional characteristics, such as location,

costs, campus environment, and the availability of desired programs. This study extends Chapman (1981)'s model to the international university selection domain.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach to determine what influences Chinese institutions' brand equity from the perspective of overseas students. Exploratory studies in mixed methods require two steps: qualitative and quantitative data analysis (Venkatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Song, Kim, and Hwang (2023) have used this method, citing the limited literature on the issue. Our topic also has minimal exposure from past studies; thus, exploratory mixed research is well-suited. The aim was to explore the views of some international students currently studying at Chinese universities regarding what they perceive as most important when choosing a university. Several dimensions based on this student experience were identified. These dimensions were considered variables similar to those of Song et al. (2023). The main objective of this qualitative research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). The experiences and perceptions of international students regarding the brand equity of their universities are relatively unexplored phenomena. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a non-random sampling approach was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the critical elements of the variables related to international student experiences that contribute to the brand equity dimension must be presented for empirical quantitative analysis. Six international students enrolled in Chinese universities were interviewed in-depth as part of the research's qualitative phase. The interviewees were purposefully chosen to ensure a range of viewpoints, representing various academic fields, years of study, and countries.

Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility in examining students' experiences while ensuring that important topics related to university brand equity were addressed. These questions included, "What do you research about the University before enrollment?" "What is your overall experience at your current University?" "Would you recommend this university to other prospective international students? Please explain why you would or would not, based on your experiences." Each 10-15-minute interview was recorded with the participants' permission. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed verbatim for further examination. After gathering the data, NVivo software was used to analyze the qualitative data. Important themes and patterns were identified through a rigorous coding process. The main goal of the investigation was to find recurrent terms and phrases representing students' opinions and experiences with the university's brand equity. The variables used in the study's subsequent quantitative phase were identified based on these keywords. After identifying the recurring themes and keywords, phase 2 of this study commenced. In phase 2, a quantitative analysis was conducted, similar to the approach used by Song et al. (2023). A survey questionnaire was distributed for the quantitative phase. The sample was selected using a snowball sampling process. Four international students from four universities were chosen and asked to participate in the survey. After participating, they were requested to distribute the survey among other international students they knew. This process eventually created a chain of responses from international students studying in China or interested in enrolling. A total of 167 responses were collected after ten days of data collection. The quantitative analysis was based on structural equation modeling (SEM), a multivariate statistical technique that combines factor analysis and multiple regression to test hypotheses. Westland (2010) stated that the sample size in SEM should be ten times the number of latent constructs. Based on this rule and the variables identified during qualitative data analysis, 167 samples were deemed sufficient for further analysis. The final analysis was conducted using SMART-PLS, an application designed for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Qualitative Data Analysis

4.1.1. Interview Transcript and Analysis

Interviewee 1: I mainly examined the university's global ranking, potential scholarships, and the courses offered in English. I also checked online reviews.

Interviewee 2: I researched the university's reputation in my subject. My parents are not wealthy, so I had to research the cost of living and the availability of scholarships. Once I found a scholarship program, I decided to apply.

Interviewee 3: To be honest, I was recommended by friends who studied here a long time ago. Still, before making my final decision, I researched the university's cultural environment, scholarship opportunities, and accommodation facilities. I also read blogs about student life here.

Interviewee 4: For me, it is always the reputation. I investigated the university's reputation in engineering from various online sources. I called some friends to find out how reputable each university is. I also read about the city's safety and cultural attractiveness.

Interviewee 5: I checked the academic programs, the cost of tuition and subsidies offered, and evaluations concerning student support services.

Interviewee 6: I focused on the university's international rankings, the availability of my specific program, and the general student happiness scores. I also looked into campus safety.

Interviewees 1, 2, 4, and 6 specifically mentioned researching the university's reputation through rankings and images. This perspective is similar to Mai (2005), where the brand image was a significant vantage point for students. There is also an emphasis on scholarship and culture, suggesting these are important factors in the decision-making process.

Interviewee 1: My experience has been mixed. The city's cultural attractions are fantastic, but accommodation is expensive. The International Student Office is helpful, although I have encountered some challenges in obtaining support.

Interviewee 2: The academic experience has been great, but health and safety standards could be improved. The university's support is adequate, but the International Student Office should do more to assist us.

Interviewee 3: The infrastructure is impressive, and I enjoy the cultural traditions celebrated here. However, the help from the International Student Office is somewhat limited, and I have felt lonely at times. The fees are manageable, but I expected more from the academic side.

Interviewee 4: My campus experience has been satisfactory. I feel it is safe and healthy. However, I think the university could provide better career support. I have not yet had much exposure to international companies. The International Student Office is supportive, although there needs to be more integration with local students.

Interviewee 5: I love Chinese culture. I am from the Philippines, so I chose this university because I thought we shared a similar culture. My overall experience was positive. The people are great, the faculty are supportive, and the food is excellent.

Interviewee 6: I think campus safety needs to be improved. I love the culture here; it is a proper academic and competitive environment. My scholarship was accepted quickly, so I am quite satisfied here.

As indicated by interviews 1, 3, and 5, cultural attractiveness is emerging as the key theme. Interview 6 mentioned scholarships, so cost must also be a factor.

Q3: Would you recommend this university to other prospective international students? Please explain why you would or would not, based on your experiences.

Interviewee 1: I would recommend it if they are interested in Chinese culture and language.

Interviewee 2: I would recommend it for academic programs but not for people hoping for a bustling campus life. The educational culture among Chinese is also a positive aspect.

Interviewee 3: I recommend that one first applies for a scholarship. If you get it, then you can surely come. It is an excellent opportunity at a limited cost.

Interviewee 4: I would recommend it, especially for people interested in the engineering sector. The academic experience is good, and it costs significantly less than others, so cost-conscious individuals can attend.

Interviewee 5: It is a fantastic alternative for people interested in experiencing Chinese culture firsthand, so I recommend it to anyone from Southeast Asia who wants to study abroad.

- Interviewee 6: I would recommend it because I think the campus here is safe, and there is no discrimination against us.

Apart from culture, scholarship, and academic programs, emphasis is also placed here. Some interviewees indicated that campus safety and discrimination are significant issues that need to be addressed. The figure below shows the finalized code highlighted in the interview transcripts. The interview data identified five major key themes: costs, discrimination, health and safety, cultural attractiveness, and image. These are the factors that international students studying at Chinese universities perceive as influential before making a selection. Cost has been associated with many studies as a predictor of brand equity. In University selections, the cost has been used as a predictor by Maniu and Maniu (2014). The author argued that University students are rational and always make careful cost-benefit decisions before making their choices. Several other studies have also used differential dimensions of costs, such as fees for study fees for accommodation and family budgets (Schwartz, 1985; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2006). In this study, we have used another dimension of cost: cost attractiveness. Cost attractiveness includes costs and perceived benefits of quality education, accommodation, and return on investment. Cost attractiveness is examined in this study to better understand how financial factors affect international students' decisions to study in Chinese colleges. This approach emphasizes the necessity of viewing cost as a complex, multifaceted issue that can enhance or diminish a university's appeal and brand equity. Similarly, discrimination is defined by Girli, Sari, Kırkım, and Narin (2016) as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction that prevents a group of people from enjoying or exercising their fundamental rights and freedoms on an equal footing due to language, religion, gender, or physical differences. Discrimination is a critical factor that is getting noticed nowadays due to excessive social media exposure. Discrimination is highlighted in student perception because Heffernan and Harpur (2023) mentioned that international students' evaluations of courses and teaching, often biased and prejudiced, are used in faculty employment decisions, raising concerns about potential discrimination against university staff. This study will measure discrimination from the perspective of discrimination policy. Health and safety are other factors mentioned by students and primarily refer to university health, hygiene, and safety standards. Kuzmina and Searle (2024) mentioned that higher education institutes have diverse risk profiles, and their stakeholders can only understand these profiles through health and safety standards. In this study, health and safety standards are used as a dimension. Finally, cultural attractiveness is defined by Li, Brodbeck, Shenkar, Ponzi, and Fisch (2017) as the desirability of culture for members of another culture.



Figure 1. Word cloud depicting key themes emerging from a transcript.

Figure 1 illustrates a word cloud generated from qualitative responses, highlighting the most frequently mentioned themes related to international students' university selection experiences.

The keywords most used by the participants in the transcripts are shown in this figure. These keywords suggest decision-making processes and the lived experiences of international students, supporting the primary themes emerging from the data.

Figure 2 explains the conceptual framework of this study. Four institutional factors, such as cost attractiveness, discrimination policies, health and safety, and cultural attractiveness, have been chosen as predictors of image and brand equity. Based on the framework, the following hypotheses are proposed.

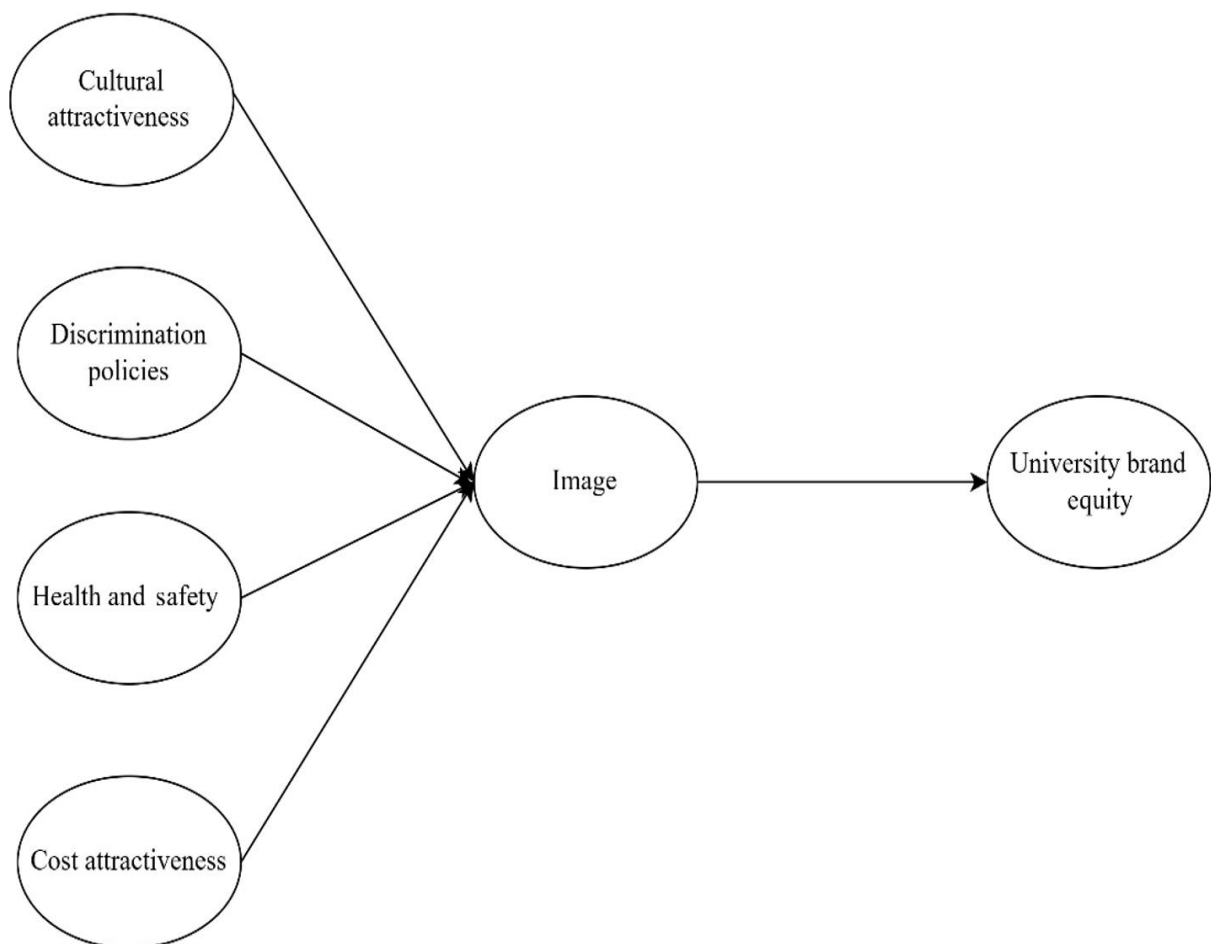


Figure 2. Conceptual framework.

H₁: Cost attractiveness positively influences the university's image.

H₂: Cultural attractiveness positively influences the university's image.

H₃: Discrimination policy positively influences the university's image.

H₄: Health and safety positively influence the university's image.

H₅: A positive university image enhances University Brand Equity.

H₆: Cost attractiveness indirectly influences University Brand Equity through its effect on the university's image.

H₇: Cultural attractiveness indirectly influences University Brand Equity through its effect on the university's image.

H₈: Discrimination policies indirectly influence University Brand Equity by positively affecting the university's image.

H₉: Health and safety indirectly influence University Brand Equity by affecting the university's image.

Table 1. Descriptive data.

Category	Value	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Gender	Male	89	53.3	53.3	53.3
	Female	78	46.7	46.7	100.0
	Total	167	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age	18-20	47	28.1	28.1	28.1
	21-23	42	25.1	25.1	53.3
	24-26	37	22.2	22.2	75.4
	>26	41	24.6	24.6	100.0
	Total	167	100.0	100.0	100.0
University	Tsinghua University	29	17.4	17.4	17.4
	Peking University	26	15.6	15.6	32.9
	Fudan University	41	24.6	24.6	57.5
	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	29	17.4	17.4	74.9
	Zhejiang University	19	11.4	11.4	86.2
	University of Science and Technology of China	23	13.8	13.8	100.0
	Total	167	100.0	100.0	100.0
Nationality	South Korean	49	29.3	29.3	29.3
	Thai	20	12.0	12.0	41.3
	Pakistani	20	12.0	12.0	53.3
	Indian	34	20.4	20.4	73.7
	American	15	9.0	9.0	82.6
	Indonesian	24	14.4	14.4	97.0
	Others	5	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	167	100.0	100.0	100.0
Duration of study	< 1 year	48	28.7	28.7	28.7
	1 year	68	40.7	40.7	69.5
	2 years	29	17.4	17.4	86.8
	Four years or more	22	13.2	13.2	100.0
	Total	167	100.0	100.0	100.0

4.2. Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 1 presents the demographic data of 167 responses. The sample consisted of 53.3% males and 46.7% females, indicating a balanced gender distribution. The majority of participants were aged 18–26 years, with 28.1% in the 18–20 age group and 25.1% in the 21–23 age group. Fudan University had the highest representation with 24.6%, followed by Tsinghua, Peking, Shanghai Jiao Tong, Zhejiang, and the University of Science and Technology of China. The largest nationality group was South Korean (29.3%), followed by Indian (20.4%), Indonesian (14.4%), Pakistani (12%), and Thai (12%). Most participants had studied for one year. This data is quite representative of the research scope.

Table 2. Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis.

Factors	Original sample (O)
Cost attractiveness	0.891
Cultural attractiveness	0.898
Discrimination	0.876
Health & Safety	0.880
Image	0.900
University brand equity	0.881

Here, Cronbach's α coefficient has been used to test the reliability of the latent variables. The constructs within the instrument have been tested for reliability for further analysis through this parameter. As shown in the table above, Cronbach's alpha scores for each construct primarily ranged from 0.876 to 0.900. This indicates internal consistency, as Cronbach's alpha above 0.7 is generally acceptable, while above 0.8 indicates strong reliability (Cheung, Cooper-Thomas, Lau, & Wang, 2024). Overall, the constructs used in this study have enough reliability and internal consistency.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio.

Factors	Original sample (O)
Cultural attractiveness <-> Cost attractiveness	0.400
Discrimination <-> Cost attractiveness	0.512
Discrimination <-> Cultural attractiveness	0.534
Health & safety <-> Cost attractiveness	0.643
Health & safety <-> Cultural attractiveness	0.601
Health & safety <-> Discrimination	0.587
Image <-> Cost attractiveness	0.497
Image <-> Cultural attractiveness	0.383
Image <-> Discrimination	0.582
Image <-> Health & safety	0.455
University brand equity <-> Cost attractiveness	0.634
University brand equity <-> Cultural attractiveness	0.736
University brand equity <-> Discrimination	0.799
University brand equity <-> Health & safety	0.770
University brand equity <-> Image	0.593

Table 3 suggests the discriminant validity that measures construct distinction. In recent studies, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio, or HTMT, has emerged as a novel criterion for determining discriminant validity (Cheung et al., 2024). It is a statistical measure used to assess discriminant validity in structural equation modeling, particularly in Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM). HTMT values below 0.85 indicate construct distinction (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019). HTMT values below the threshold indicate good discriminant validity, for instance, Cultural Attractiveness and Cost (0.400) and Image and Health and Safety (0.455). However, some categories have high discriminant validity, such as University Brand Equity (0.799) and Health and Safety (0.770), which demonstrate more significant relationships, suggesting overlaps.

Table 4. AVE.

Factors	Original sample (O)
Cost attractiveness	0.756
Cultural attractiveness	0.765
Discrimination	0.800
Health & safety	0.806
Image	0.770
University brand equity	0.740

Table 4 presents the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct, indicating the degree to which each latent variable explains the variance of its indicators. The average variance explained, or AVE, should be greater than 0.5 (Cheung et al., 2024). This convergent validity requires the latent construct to explain at least 50% of the indicator variance (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). AVE indicates how much variance a construct explains from its indicators compared to the amount due to measurement error (Chin, 1998). The above table of AVE shows that (0.756), Cultural Attractiveness (0.765), and others (>0.5) have AVE values exceeding the threshold. This indicates that they accurately represent their underlying variables, and the latent construct explains more than 50% of the indicator variables.

Table 5. Model fit (SRMR).

Fit indices	Original sample (O)
SRMR	0.060
NFI	0.835

The model fit indices SRMR and NFI are essential considerations before conducting path analysis. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the Normed Fit Index (NFI) indicate the quality of the

model's structural fit. As shown in Table 5, the SRMR value is 0.060. Structural equation modeling SRMR values below 0.08 are accepted according to Hu and Bentler (1999), thus indicating negligible correlation differences. This confirms the constructs' structural linkages because the model appropriately describes the data. A low SRMR indicates a good model fit, increasing the analyst's confidence. In this model, the SRMR value is less than 0.08; however, the NFI value is $0.855 < 0.9$. Still, Pavlov, Maydeu-Olivares, and Shi (2021) have said that the SRMR fit index is enough to judge a model's quality due to its benchmark performance and absolute nature.

Table 6. R-square.

Dependent factors	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics ($ O/STDEV $)	P values
Image	0.320	0.303	0.089	3.813	0.000
University brand equity	0.270	0.265	0.095	2.993	0.003

The R-squared values in Table 6 indicate that the constructs have explained at least some of the changes in the university image and brand equity. "Image" has an R-squared of 0.320 ($p = 0.000$), and "University Brand Equity" has 0.276 ($p = 0.003$), both showing substantial variance explained in their respective dependent variables. This suggests that discrimination policy, health and safety, cultural, and cost attractiveness have explained 32% of the variance in university image. Similarly, the university image explains a 27% variance in brand equity. Factors such as discrimination policy, health and safety, cultural, and cost attractiveness significantly influence university image, which in turn affects brand equity.

Table 7. Direct effects.

Direct path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics ($ O/STDEV $)	P values	Hypothesis
Cost attractiveness -> Image	0.219	0.228	0.093	2.365	0.018	Accepted
Cultural attractiveness -> Image	0.056	0.056	0.086	0.650	0.516	Not-accepted
Discrimination -> Image	0.347	0.341	0.090	3.854	0.000	Accepted
Health & safety -> Image	0.070	0.067	0.110	0.636	0.525	Not-accepted
Image -> University brand equity	0.519	0.516	0.092	5.632	0.000	Accepted

The structural equation model examines how latent constructs influence "Image" and subsequently how "Image" affects "University Brand Equity." Table 7 presents the direct effects of cost, discrimination, health and safety, and cultural attractiveness on the image. The results indicate that cost (0.219, $p=0.018$) and discrimination (0.347, $p=0.000$) significantly and positively influence the image. At a significance level of 0.05, these factors significantly impact how international students perceive the university's image. Conversely, health and safety (0.070, $p=0.525$) and cultural attractiveness (0.058, $p=0.489$) do not significantly affect the image. There is a significant positive correlation (0.519, $p=0.000$) between image and university brand equity. This direct relationship suggests that a positive image substantially enhances the university's brand equity.

The indirect effects of discrimination, cost, culture, health, and safety on University Brand Equity are presented in Table 8 via the mediating variable "Image." Cost benefits brand equity through Image, as evidenced by the considerable ($p = 0.028$) indirect effect of cost on university brand equity (0.119).

Table 8. Indirect effects.

Indirect path	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Hypothesis
Cost attractiveness -> Image -> University brand equity	0.114	0.117	0.052	2.202	0.028	Accepted
Cultural attractiveness -> Image -> University brand equity	0.029	0.033	0.047	0.618	0.537	Not-accepted
Discrimination -> Image -> University brand equity	0.180	0.180	0.065	2.755	0.006	Accepted
Health & safety -> Image -> University brand equity	0.036	0.035	0.057	0.634	0.526	Not-accepted

Additionally, discrimination has a substantial indirect effect (0.180, $p = 0.006$), indicating that addressing discrimination-related concerns might improve the university's reputation and benefit brand equity. The indirect impacts of Health & Safety (0.036, $p = 0.526$) and Cultural Attractiveness (0.029, $p = 0.537$) on University Brand Equity through Image are insignificant. This suggests that, in both cases (direct and indirect), culture and health do not have any effects. Therefore, despite their importance, both factors contribute to brand equity and image.

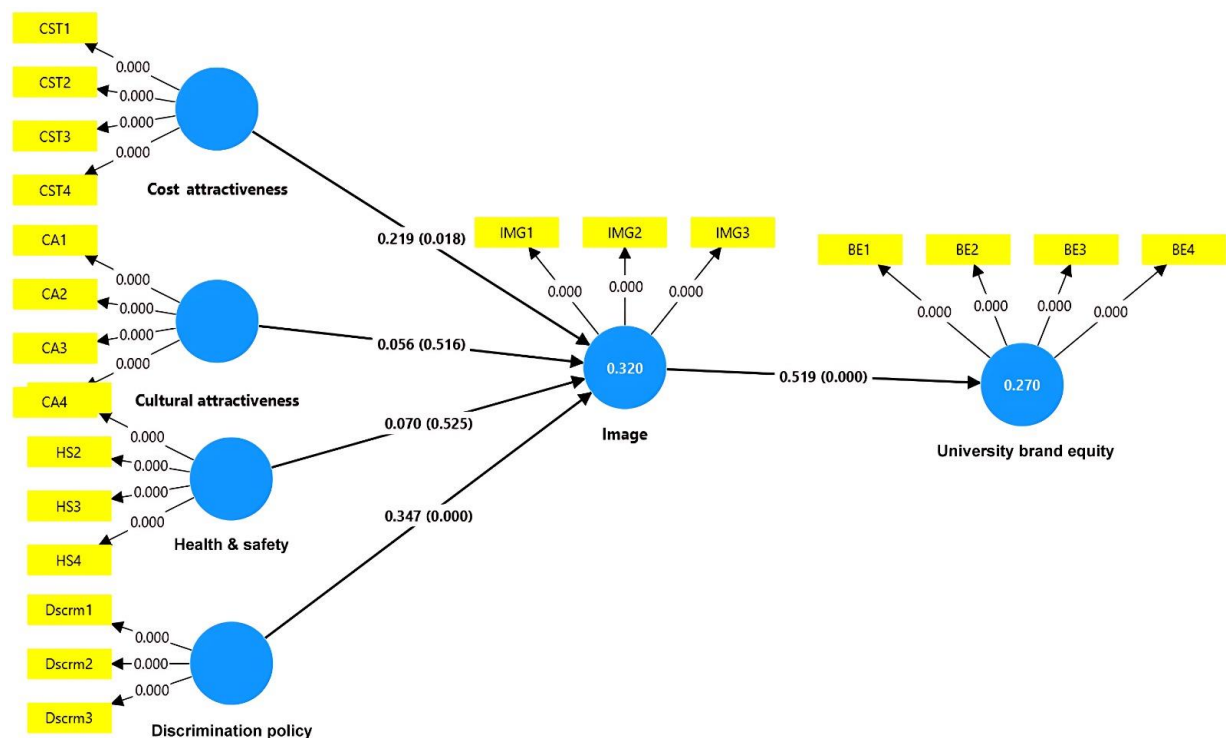


Figure 3. Structural model.

Figure 3 is the final structural model depicting the path relations among the latent constructs. The image ($R^2=0.320$) is significant concerning discrimination policy and cost attractiveness, whereas university brand equity ($R^2=0.270$) is significant with the image. The final structural model also suggests that each latent construct and its item factor loadings are significant and above the threshold value.

5. DISCUSSION

The NVIVO-based interview data analysis identified four significant themes: discrimination policy, cost attractiveness, cultural attractiveness, and health and safety, which international students perceive when selecting a university. Subsequently, a quantitative structural equation model was employed to examine whether these factors

directly influence the university's brand image and brand equity. The analysis revealed that cost attractiveness and discrimination policy have a significant direct relationship with brand image, indicating that improvements in these areas could enhance the university's brand perception. Chung, Holdsworth, Li, and Fam (2009) already mentioned in their research that Generation Y faced challenges in paying higher fees for their higher education than previous generations. Similarly, Generation Z is even more concerned about price and cost. Therefore, the university's image will improve if international students perceive the cost and pricing structure as attractive. The result of this study directly coincides with the findings of Connie, bin S Senathirajah, Subramanian, Ranom, and Osman (2022) who also found that the pricing of courses and fees influence students choosing colleges. Like their predecessors, Generation Z understands the cost of higher education. Affordable options are sought as student debt and the financial pressure of studying abroad become significant concerns. Similarly, discrimination policies have shown a significant relation to image, suggesting that international students prioritize policy environments. International students often face discrimination based on race, nationality, or other characteristics (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Dupree & Boykin, 2021; Harper, 2012; Hurtado, 1992). A university's policy stance on discrimination affects social interactions and the academic environment (Nora & Cabrera, 1996). Therefore, having a discrimination policy that supports all races, genders, and nationalities can make institutions more attractive to prospective students. However, the remaining two factors, cultural attractiveness and health and safety, do not significantly affect the university's image or brand equity. This is because these elements are considered baseline expectations rather than distinctive qualities of the university. Almost every international institution has its own safety and health standards. Similarly, international students choosing to study abroad are influenced more by the cost associated with the country than by cultural factors. Students prioritize academic reputation, cost, and anti-discrimination regulations that directly impact their decisions. The subjective nature of cultural attraction and the universal standards for health and safety limit their apparent influence. Therefore, this research highlights two factors that most affect the university's image: cost and the discrimination environment. These findings also suggest that Chinese universities seeking to improve their brand image and equity should focus on competitive pricing and fostering an inclusive, anti-discrimination environment to attract international students.

6. CONCLUSION

This mixed-research study was dedicated to understanding the factors that Chinese higher education stakeholders must prioritize in their internationalization strategy. The aim was to evaluate what factors can increase China's international universities and schools' brand equity to attract more international students. The research found that cost, cultural attractiveness, discrimination, health and safety, and image are associated with brand equity. However, their effects on university brand equity may vary. Cost attractiveness significantly affected the university's image and brand equity, while discrimination policies affected both. This study found no statistically significant effects of cultural appeal, health and safety, or other crucial factors on brand equity. This implies that although these components are essential, they may not primarily influence international students' perceptions of brands. Instead, the view of the university serves as a crucial mediating factor, connecting several variables to the idea of brand equity. Hence, the brand equity of universities remains majorly reliant on cost attractiveness and discrimination policies. This underscores the need for Chinese institutions to address affordability and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students to enhance their global appeal.

This finding theoretically extends Chapman (1981) university selection model to a new extent. The institutional factors already included cost as a determinant; however, discrimination was not considered. This study now expands the institutional dimension to include discrimination. University brand equity-related theories must now consider this discrimination policy as a dimension within their future models. By integrating discrimination as

a factor, this study recognizes that students' perceptions of institutional fairness and inclusivity are crucial in shaping university brand equity.

The respondents' concerns are primarily cost-related. These students perceive cost as a significant factor. Therefore, university brands or marketing managers should promote their offerings through competitive pricing. The most effective approach would be to provide more scholarships and discounts on courses. Managers must communicate the value proposition to international students, emphasizing how they offer courses at substantially lower rates than competitors. Additionally, they can promote personalized financial solutions tailored to the unique needs of international students. Similarly, managers should advocate for more inclusive policies on campus, which should be highlighted in marketing campaigns. These strategies will likely enhance the university's image and increase brand equity among competitors. Recognizing the importance of choice factors can help higher education institutions allocate funds more efficiently, segment the student market, identify demographic and cultural differences in preferences, and differentiate themselves from competitors by offering additional services beyond training.

Despite shedding light on university brand management, this study has specific limitations. The cross-sectional nature of the survey limits the ability to produce more generalizable conclusions. The sample size is small, and its representativeness regarding race has not been confirmed. It includes several racial and demographic participants, but not all. Chinese international universities target almost all countries, demographics, and racial groups for their internationalization programs. However, sampling from every group is challenging, given the limited budget and time constraints. Therefore, future studies should adopt a longitudinal design with an extended sample that includes more racial and demographic groups.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Jiangxi University of Applied Science, China has granted approval for this study on 29 January 2024 (Ref. No. JUASE-106889).

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 presents the questionnaire items grouped under six constructs: Cost, Brand Equity, University Image, Discrimination Policy, Health and Safety, and Cultural Attractiveness.

Appendix 1. Questionnaire.

Construct	Item	Source
Cost	I'm glad to hear this university offers student scholarships and education loans.	Connie et al. (2022)
	This is the first time I heard about this private university, but I'm delighted with the scholarship offered	
	I thought private universities were expensive, but this college exceeded my expectations regarding education fees.	
	The university offers excellent educational value based on tuition costs.	
Brand equity	The university has a well-known academic reputation.	Pinar, Trapp, Girard, and E. Boyt (2014)
	The university offers well-known degree programs.	
	The university's graduates are well-recognized in their professions.	
	The university graduates earn higher incomes than the industry average.	
University image	The university has a positive public image.	Self-developed
	The university is perceived as a prestigious institution.	
	The university is associated with high academic standards.	
	The university's image positively influences my decision to study here.	
Discrimination policy	Have you experienced any racial discrimination?	Morita (2012)
	Do you find it easy to make friends with Chinese students?	
	Do you find it easy to make friends with other international students?	
Health and safety	The university provides comprehensive health and safety services for students.	Self-developed
	I feel safe on the university campus at all times.	
	Health and wellness resources are easily accessible to all students.	
Cultural attractiveness	The university offers a culturally diverse and inclusive environment.	Self-developed
	The university actively promotes cultural activities and events for students.	
	I feel welcomed and valued as a part of the university's multicultural community.	
	The local culture around the university is attractive and engaging for students.	

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