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Branding from the Inside: A Qualitative Study of How Marketing and Admissions Officials Construct and implement Brand strategy in Bangladeshi Private Universities

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Abstract

Bangladesh's private university sector has grown from a handful of institution in the 1990s to 117 today but most research on university branding looks only at students how they choose a university. This study fills that gap by interviewing the people who do the branding: Marketing Officers, Admissions Head and Senior Managers. Using a qualitative, multi case study it draws on 15 semi structured interviews across 10 private universities chosen to represent different institution types (Elite, Entrepreneurial, Accessible/Affordable, Regional, Rural) and locations. The interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, producing four themes mapped to the study research questions. Officials of every type of university described 'brand' as a promise to the students, but what that promise contained depended on the university resources: inherited reputation at established universities, affordability at mid-tier universities, and basic credibility at regional and rural ones. Two problems recurred; departments publishing outdated materials without central approval, reported at eight of ten universities and a delay between leadership decisions and those decisions reaching frontline staff, reported at seven of ten. Together these patterns point to one underlying mechanism- centralized, cautious decision-making that is not reliably communicated downward whose cause differs by institution types from excess caution at elite universities to plain lack of budget at regional and rural ones. This study extends institutional branding theory into Bangladesh's private university sector not previously studied this way and suggests that an institution's resource level should be treated as a factor shaping how branding happens, not just a background variable.

Background and Rationale

Bangladesh's higher education market has expanded rapidly with 61 public and 117 private universities now competing for a limited pool of prospective students (UGC annual report, 2026) University branding almost exclusively from the demand side: surveying students, applying factors analysis and multiple regression that show that branding quality, education, brand image, learning environment and university branding activities positively influence admission decisions (Sawrov, 2024). Related Bangladeshi studies on private university advertising and student choice reach similar conclusions using survey and content analysis methods. A thematic analysis of what students say influenced their choice still analyses student accounts rather than institutional practice (Afrin, 2020). What remains largely unexamined in Bangladesh and more broadly in the higher education branding literature in the supply side, how the people inside universities build, defend and live with the brand under real institutional constraints. Corporate and internal branding argues that employees are the primary vehicles through which a brand promise is delivered and that brand support depends on staff understanding and internalizing brand values not merely on external advertising (Punjaisri et al.,2009; Vallaster & de Chernatony,2006). A 2020 case study of a Canadia university rebrand notes that internal branding in higher education specifically remains under researched (Clark et al., 2020) and although the literature on internal branding in higher education has since grown with qualitative studies now published from Egypt (EI Sheikh et al., 2024), Pakistan (Khan et al.,2023; Ikram et al.,2021), China (Jiang & Xiao,2024), sub-Saharan Africa (Duh & Wara,2024), Tanzania (Mushi,2025), and a qualitative internal perspectives study from Indonesia

(Dwitasari et al., 2025) no comparable qualitative study of internal branding has been conducted in the Bangladeshi private higher education context where resource constraints, rapid market entry and inconsistent messaging across departments are widely reported but rarely examined empirically. This paper is a qualitative study that treats marketing officers, admission heads, senior management as the unity of analysis, asking not whether branding works but how it is constructed, negotiated and delivered from within. This paper reports the design, the fieldwork adaptations and the findings, and situates them within the internal-branding literature

1. Problem Statement

Bangladeshi private universities are under sustained competitive pressure to differentiate themselves yet the institutional decision making, resourcing and internal coordination behind their branding efforts have not been studied directly. Existing accounts infer branding practice indirectly from advertisement or form what students say influenced them, none has asked the practitioner who designs and delivers that branding how they interpret their own role, what constraints they operate under and how their intended brand identity matches what reaches students.

1. Research Questions

Q1. How do marketing and admissions officials in Bangladeshi private universities understand and define their institution brand?

Q2. What processes, resources and internal coordination mechanisms shape how branding strategy is developed and implemented?

Q3. What tensions or gaps do officials perceive between the intended brand identity and how it is delivered across departments and communicated to students?

Q4. What contextual factors specific to Bangladesh (regulatory environment, market saturation, resource limits, ranking pressure) shape branding practice?

1. Research Objectives

- To explore how branding decision makers construct meaning about university brand in the Bangladeshi private higher education context.
- To identify the organizational processes and constraints that shape branding strategy formulation and delivery.
- To surface the gap if any between intended brand identity and its internal/external delivery.
- To develop a context specific conceptual model of university brand building in a resource constrained, high competition market, extended internal branding theory beyond its mostly western and increasingly other global south empirical base.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Branding and Student Choice in Bangladeshi Higher Education Demand Site

Bangladeshi studies consistently find that branding factors perceived education quality, brand image, learning environment, campus facilities and visible branding activity shape prospective students evaluation and choice of university typically measured through structure survey and regression (Sawrov, 2024) complementary work using discourse and content analysis of private university advertising shows that Bangladeshi institutions market themselves heavily around facilities faculty claims and career outcomes and a thematic analysis of Bangladeshi private university students similarly finds that brand image brand name and campus environment drive selection decisions (Afrin, 2020) though this body of work stops at describing message content and student perceptions rather than examining how those messages are produced internally no Bangladeshi study identified in this review takes universities officials rather than students or advertisement as its unit of analysis. A more recent Bangladeshi contribution published outside the university affiliated outlets this review otherwise draws on frames university branding explicitly as a driver of students enrollment arguing that brand reputation, perceived quality, and strategic market positioning determine enrollment outcomes in an increasingly saturated private higher education market (Yamin, 2024) the demand side literature reviewed above however this analysis operates and the level of market descriptions and strategic recommendation rather than at officials own account of how branding decisions are actually made inside an institution, so it reinforce rather than close the supply side gap the study address.

5.2 Corporate and Internal Branding Theory.

The corporate branding literature argues that a brand is not simply an external communication, but an organization's wide identity that must be enacted by employees. Foundational works on corporate identity and corporate brand orientation holds that a brand coherence depends on aligning identity, culture and employee behavior, not only market facing messaging (Balmer, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Building on this, internal branding scholarship shows that employees understanding of and commitment of brand values shaped by internal communication, leadership and training determines whether they behave in brand consistent ways and that is that this internalization process is itself a legitimate object of qualitative inquiry rather than something to be assumed (Punjaisri et al., 2009; Vallaster & d Chernatony; 2006. Border reviews of higher education's marketing strategy make a relative related observations at the level of institution as a whole, nothing that university branding behave differently from branding in other industries precisely because school, faculties and departments often operate with their own semi-autonomous identities (Buyanza Mwidima & Nkeni, 2021) a strategy level echo of the coherence problem of these documents empirically a departmental drift.

5.3 Internal Branding in Higher Education

A small but rapidly growing stream applies these ideas to universities, and it has grown considerably in the years since the present study. One of the early studies positions inner branding as a university's most constructive intangible asset, arguing that without staff buy-in, a university's outer brand promise cannot be sustained (Whisman, 2009). Related work on reputation management in Finnish universities has identified practical dilemmas faced by administrators in the integration of academic values with market-facing branding (Suomi, Lemmetyinen & Go, 2013;) whereas case-study work on Finnish higher education characterizes a determined tension between a university's desire for a distinct brand personality and pressure to coordinate with sector norms. A mixed-methods study of inner branding among academic and managerial staff in the UK finds that brand-centred training and development activities, rather than communication alone, are what translate into staff brand support (Sujchaphong, Nguyen & Melewar, 2015). The study also concludes that transformational leadership largely unstudied in the internal-branding literature at the time is pivotal to whether internal branding is implemented successfully in a university setting.

This study is most similar in design to a qualitative case study of a Canadian university rebrand in 2020, which conducted nineteen depth interviews with mid-level administrators and deans and found that internal branding meaningfully shapes how such staff understand and engage with a rebranding campaign, while noting explicitly that internal branding in the higher-education sector remains under-researched (Clark et al., 2020). Related experiential work has also modelled how university staff and students co-create brand meaning through day-to-day interactions rather than through top-down messaging alone (Dean et al, 2016).

The literature has grown significantly since 2020, moving beyond its initial Western roots, though it has become overwhelmingly quantitative rather than qualitative. Structural equation modeling of teaching and non-teaching staff at private higher-education institutions in Pakistan confirms that internal brand management is a strong predictor of brand citizenship behavior and, through it, of student satisfaction (Khan, Hameed & Hussainy, 2023), while a separate PLS-SEM study of Lahore-based institutions finds that internal branding and internal corporate social responsibility jointly predict employee retention, explicitly framing this as a developing-country concern (Ikram et al., 2021). A large-sample SEM study of private-university teaching staff in Egypt finds that supervisory support, internal communication and clarity of vision and values predict staff commitment to the brand promise, but contrary to prior, mostly Western, literature finds no significant effect for formal training programs, which the authors tentatively attribute to cultural or resourcing differences (El Sheikh et al., 2024). Teachers contribute to the sustainability of a university's brand in China but only if they have an internal market orientation. It shows that even in a very different governance system, the mechanism at play is staff-facing brand communication, not external advertising (Jiang & Xiao, 2024). Internal information dissemination on brands in a private university in Africa is evidence that brand information internalized generates role clarity and brand knowledge, which then influences brand citizenship behavior and retention intention (Duh & Wara, 2024). Additionally, brand loyalty in a 2025 study conducted in public universities in Tanzania has been linked with internal information dissemination on brands (Mushi, 2025).

The only recent study that adopts a qualitative and internal-perspectives approach to identity in any context other than that of the West — an interview-based case study of visual identity at high-ranking Indonesian universities — reveals that even at well-endowed universities, the role of internal branding, particularly how it relates to the understanding and implementation of visual identity, remains “largely overlooked,” and claims that research into identity and reputation in higher education has not matched the evolution of the field (Dwitasari et al., 2025). This study is the closest published parallel to the current research and reinforces, from a different national perspective, the importance of qualitative analysis of how university staff make sense of brand.

5.4 The Research Gap

There are three gaps which this study is intended to address, and the review of the literature cited above indicates that two of these have shrunk since 2020 whereas the third has not. Geographically, internal branding research in higher education is not longer limited to Western countries. Recent studies have included Pakistan, Egypt, China, Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa. In South Asia, though, the available evidence is based on private institutions in Pakistan and is quantitative (Khan et al., 2023; Ikram et al., 2021). Among the sources discussed in this review, there is no qualitative study that looks at how marketing and admissions staff develop and implement brand strategy in Bangladesh's private higher education sector. This sector is competitive, close to being for-profit, and has grown rapidly. There is one partial exception to note exactly. When this paper was being completed, a qualitative study of employee branding among the faculty of private universities in Bangladesh was published (Huda, 2026). Instead of focusing on marketing or admissions officers, this study looks at the faculty, and rather than examining the development and delivery of brand strategy, it uses the concept of employee value proposition as its point of view. The specific gap that this study addresses therefore remains unresolved, even though the general statement that there is completely no qualitative research on Bangladesh is no longer true without this exception. Secondly, from a methodological point of view, the surge in internal branding research in higher education in developing countries after 2020 (Khan et al., 2023; Ikram et al., 2021; El Sheikh et al., 2024; Jiang & Xiao, 2024; Duh & Wara, 2024; Mushi, 2025) is almost entirely based on quantitative methods. It uses survey instruments to assess pre-established constructs such as brand citizenship behaviour, brand commitment and retention intention. The only exceptions are Dwitasari et al. (2025) in Indonesia and Clark et al. (2020) in Canada, who take an interview-based, sense-making approach, and in both cases the studies were not carried out in a resource-limited, rapidly growing private market such as Bangladesh's. The contributions from Bangladesh (Yamin, 2024), Indonesia (Luckyardi et al., 2023a, 2023b; Riofita, 2024) and Africa (Mogaji, 2019) mentioned above extend the geographical and sectoral reach of the literature, but they do not alter its methodological approach. These studies mainly focus on the visual and promotional aspects of branding or on its downstream effects upon students, rather than asking officials about how branding is produced within the organisation. Consequently, research into higher education branding in Bangladesh remains mostly quantitative or content-analytical and oriented towards the demand side, with very little attention given to practitioners or the supply side. Thirdly, in terms of substance, we have come across no study—whether Bangladeshi or international—that looks at how officials in a rapidly expanding and resource-stratified

private higher education sector manage their branding objectives in the face of resource and coordination limitations. Although Bangladeshi commentators often refer to these constraints on a casual basis, they have not been systematically documented. The present study is designed to deal with all three gaps simultaneously.

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1. Theoretical/ Conceptual Framework.

This study is anchored in internal branding theory understood as the organizational process by which staffs come to understand, internalize and enact brand values and incorporate brand identity theory which treats brand coherence as a function of alignment between an organization stated identity, its cultures and the behavior of its members. These two lenses jointly informed the interview protocols and the coding framework. Internal branding theory shaped questions about process, how brand values are committed and internalized, while corporate identity theory shaped questions about coherence where gaps appear between intended and between intended and delivered identity. The output is an inductively delivered conceptual model rather than a hypothesis testing exercise consistent with a qualitative theory building designs. This dual lens framework is further situated within cross-cultural marketing theory which holds that branding and communication strategies cannot be transplant uncritically across cultural context and must instead be adopted to local values, communication norms and market structures (de Mooij, 2022). The Bangladesh specific contextual findings reported in section 8.4 (regulatory constraints, market saturation and geography) are read through this broader cross-cultural lens as well as through internal branding theory narrowly construed.

Methodology

7.1 Anonymizations

Consistent with the studies ethics protocol which commits to anonymizing both participants and where sensitive competitive information is discussed, the institution themselves unless explicit constraints for attribution are obtained unless explicit consent for attribution is obtained; no participant gave such consent. Every institution and interview quoted value is therefore identified only by a code UE-1, UE-2, UEN-1, UA-1 to UA-4, RG-1, RG-2, RU-1. Codes are constructed to preserve the tire and location information the cross-grace analysis depends on elite established, entrepreneurial, accessible mid tire, regional, or rural, and Dhaka versus non-Dhaka location without revealing which named university is quotes refer to. The correspondence between code and actual institution name is retained in a separate access control file held by the researchers and is not reproduced in this paper direct quotations from participants are retained standard practice for anonymized qualitative reporting but role titles are kept generic example the marketing managers at UE-1 rather than naming individuals

Code	Tier description	Location type	Role(s) interviewed
UE-1	Elite/Established, long-standing market leader.	Dhaka	Officer Senior Management
UE-2	Elite/established, linked to a development-sector parent organization	Dhaka	Officer Senior Management
UEN-1	Entrepreneurial, founder-led, large, affiliated group of institutions	Dhaka	Officer Senior Management
UA-1	Accessible mid-tier, pioneer-era private university	Dhaka	Officer only
UA-2	Accessible mid-tier, waiver/scholarship-led positioning	Dhaka periphery (Ashulia–Savar)	Officer only
UA-3	Accessible mid-tier, waiver/scholarship-led positioning	Dhaka	Officer only
UA-4	Accessible mid-tier, waiver/scholarship-led positioning	Dhaka periphery (Savar–Ashulia)	Officer only
RG-1	Regional pioneer, first private university in its division	Divisional city (non-Dhaka)	Officer Senior Management
RG-2	Regional, smaller/newer entrant	Divisional city (non-Dhaka)	Officer only
RU-1	Rural-campus pioneer, first private university in its region	Rural/small city	Officer Senior Management

Source: Compiled by the author from interview transcripts and the anonymization key (fieldwork, 2026).

7.2 Design and sample realized.

The study followed the interpretivist qualitative multiple case design set out in the research protocol using semi-structured bilingual, Bangla and English, protocol-based interview as the primary data source and written response in hand. Fieldwork achieved 15 interviews across 10 private universities matching the target of 15 to 20 informants and the purposive maximum variation sampling logic. Institutions were selected to vary by market positions like established/ elite, entrepreneurial, accessible mid-tier, size and location, Dhaka-based versus divisional city versus rural campus. Two categorization schemes appear in

these sections, and their relationship is stated explicitly here to avoid ambiguity. The purposive of sampling frames that were used to select participating institutions during fieldwork was geographic and administrative, Dhaka-based urban, divisional city regional and rural campus institutions selected to maximize variations in locations and surrounding resource context. This frame yields 10 institutions and 15 interviews, seven urban institutions, 10 interviews, two regional institutions, three interviews and one rural institution, two interviews shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Original geographic sampling frame

Category (sampling frame)	Institutions	Interviews
Urban (Dhaka-based)	7	10
Regional (divisional city, non-Dhaka)	2	3
Rural	1	2
Total	10	15

Source: Compiled by the authors from fieldwork sampling records (2026).

The five-tier market position typology used throughout section 8 (elite/ established, entrepreneurial, accessible mid-tier, regional, rural in a second analytic categorization rather than a second sampling frame. It was derived after data collections from each institutions founding era ownership and governance models and fee positioning strategy and it is collaborated by how officials themselves describe their own institutions brand section 8.1 rather than imposed on the data from outside. It was not used to select institutions. It exists because the seven urban institutions in Table 1 are not behaviorally uniforms and geographic frame alone would obscure that internal variation which is precisely what sections 8.2 onward analyzes. Table 2 set out this analytical categorization of the criteria behind each tire assignment and how it maps on to the geographic frame above. The elite UE-1 UE-2 entrepreneurial UEN-1 and accessible mid-tier UA-1 to UA-4 codes are three subdivisions of the seven urban institutions in Table 1 while the regional and rural codes carry the geographic frame through unchanged.

Table 2
Analytic tier categorization, criteria, and mapping to Table 1

Category	Institution codes	Institutions	Marketing/Admissions	Senior Management
Urban / Elite-established	UE-1, UE-2	2	2	2
Urban / Entrepreneurial	UEN-1	1	1	1
Urban / Accessible mid-tier	UA-1, UA-2, UA-3, UA-4	4	4	0
Regional (divisional city)	RG-1, RG-2	2	2	1 (RG-1)
Rural	RU-1	1	1	1
Total		**10**	**10**	**5**

Source: Compiled by the author from fieldwork interview data (2026).

Within its institutions, one or two informants were interviewed, a marketing, admissions or publicity officer, the operational frontline rule and where accessible a senior manager with branding oversight, deputy register, pro-vice chancellor or equivalent. Five of the ten institutions yield a paired officer management interview, UE-1, UE-2, UEN-1, RG-1, RU-1, permitting within institution comparison of how the same brand is described from two organizational vantage points. The remaining five, UA1, UA2, UA3, UA4, RG2, yield only the operational rule interview which limits within case triangulation for those institutions but does not affect the cross-stair comparison that anchors RQ1 to RQ4.

7.3 Data Collection as Conducted

Data collection departed in one respect from the original plan of recorded transcribed interview responses were captured against fixed bilingual interview protocol and answer from rather than as free following recorded conversation. This has two methodological consequences that are stated transparently rather than treated as incidentals.

Comparability gain: because every informant answered the same numbered items (1 to 16 with marketing admissions and senior management variants as items 9v and 11v) cross case and cross tire comparison on identical prompt is more direct than a fully emergent interview would allow.

Spontaneity loss: written or pre-considered answer are more polished and less prone to the digressions hesitations and follow up probing that typically surface tacit or contradictory sensemaking in interpretivist interviewing several respondents notably the promotions and advertising advisor at RG2 explicitly declined to elaborate or sensitive items " I would rather not share those instance with you" which is itself treated as data on the power dynamic and disclosure risk anticipated in the study ethics protocols rather than as a gap to be filled retrospectively.

Two items (9 and 9v., 11 and 11v) were role conditionals so senior management responded answered the coordination mechanism variant 9v and marketing admission responded answered the pressure to misrepresent variants 11v this was applied consistently and "N/A “responses were coded as a substantive absence (i.e., the item did not apply so that responded role) rather than as missing data.

7.4 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis followed 'Braun and Clarke’s (2006)' six pass process

1) Familiarizations: all 15 written protocol responses were read in full against and shared protocol structure

2) Initial coding: responses were coded inductively within each protocol sections (opening /role RQ1 brand definition, RQ2 process/resource/ coordination’s RQ3 intent delivery gaps, RQ4 Bangladesh specific context closing) case by case before any cross-case comparison using institutions code throughout rather than names.

3) Generating themes codes were then clustered across cases first within institutional tire elite/ entrepreneurial/ accessible/ regional/ rural and then across tires and separately by rule marketing/ admission versus senior management

4) Reviewing theme: candidate themes were checked against negative or disconfirming cases (e.g., senior management informants who reported few coordination problems rather than only against confirming instances

5) Defining and naming theme: four theme clusters had retained one mapped to each research questions

6) Producing the analysis: findings integrate illustrative evidence with interpretations drawn through the study to theoretical lens internal branding theory and corporate brand brand identity theory. Coding was conducted manually against the protocol existing section structures rather than in Nvivo since the fixed question design already imposed a comparable coding frame across cases a spreadsheet-based case by theme matrix to institutions code rather than several served the same audit trial functions NVivo would provide.

7.5 Trust Worthiness

Credibility is supported by the peer officer management design for five institutions which function as a form of internal triangulations comparing how the same brand is narrated from the two hierarchical positions in place of the member checking steps originally proposed which were not feasible within the data collection window. Transferability is supported by the tire stratified sampling and by retaining tire

level details rather than collapsing immediately into pulled themes so a reader can just which findings travel across tire and which are tire specific without that detail depending on institution's identity.

Dependability rest on the shared protocol and the case by theme coding matrix com confirmability follows the studies disclosure requirements the researchers peer quantitative demand side study of this topic is acknowledged as a possible source of peer assumptions particularly the expectation confirmed inductively below rather than assumed that coordination failure not advertising spent would be the dominant practitioners account on branding difficultly. One limitation is carried forward honestly here rather than smoothed over without audio recording dependability cannot rest on bar betim transcript fidelity in the usual sense and the polished something sometimes guarded characters of written answer most visible at RG 2 may understand the tensions RQ3 is designed to service this is addressed directly in sections 8.3

7.6 Ethical consideration

- Written informed consent was obtained from all participants with a clear right to withdraw and to decline recording
- Both individual participants and where sensitive competitive information was discussed university names were anonymized consistently with the fact that no participants or institutions consented to attributions
- Formal ethics approval was not required for this study under institutional policy.

Findings and Analysis

The analysis is organized by research questions within each cross-case patterns are reported first followed by variations by institutional tire (elite/ established, entrepreneurial, accessible mid tire, regional or rural) and by role marketing/ admission versus senior management and closed with interpretations through internal branding and corporate brand identity theory all institutions are referred to only by code.

8.1 RQ1- How officials understand and define "brand".

Pattern: Brand as promise, not decoration.

Across all 10 institutions informants rejected narrow, cosmetic definitions of brand (logo, colors, taglines) in favor of brand as an institutional promise or credibility claim. This was near universal pressing regardless of tire the marketing managers at UE-1 described brand as "the promise we are making to students " the director of branding and UA-1 said much the same and the officer at RU-1 framed brand as "affordable educations at the doorsteps". The consistency of this brand framing across such different institution suggests it is not idiosyncratic to anyone respondent but reflects a shared sector-wide vocabulary of brand plausibly diffused through marketing training and competitor watching in the first consolidating sectors consistent with the RQ-4 expectations that market saturations shape practice (see sections 8.4).

Tier Variation: What the promise is about

The content of the promises diverges sharply and tracks institutional tire closely enough to function as a genuine axis of variation rather than noise.

- Elite/ established UE-1, UE-2: Brand is defined around inherited credibility, history and international connections. The Deputy Registers at UE-1 called brand "institutional credibility accumulated over three decades" and respondents at UE-2 tied brand explicitness to a parent development organization and to research ranking substantiations "proof of impacts"
- Entrepreneurial UEN-1 and accessible mid-tire UA-1 to UA-4, brand is defined around accessibility, affordability and practical outcomes. The officer at UEN1 said brand is "proving the quality, career focused education doesn't have to be exclusive" or expensive. The officer at UA2 said brand "means accessibility and value".
- Regional and rural RG1, RG-2, RU-1: brand is defined as being approved and trustworthy in a context where the university itself not just its programs need to be legitimized. The officer at RG-1 said "parents first questions is always it is approved and it is reliable?" and the senior manager said RU-1 called brand "a promise of access" rooted in regional heritage.

Interpreted through corporate brand identity theory, this is best read as not as three unrelated definitions, but the same underlying construct, brand as promise filled in by whatever asset each tier processes. History and global standing where those exist, price and access where facilities substitute for prestige and basic legitimacy where market entry itself is recent. This extends empirically the expectations that Bangladeshi private university branding is shaped by resource tire positions, a dimension, the demand side literatures which service students rather than officials cannot see. An unrelated content analysis of Israeli university social media finds the same elite prestige versus accessible personal spilt in what institutions broadcast independently collaborating that resource tires not idiosyncratic institutional choice drives drives promise constant (Bamberger, Bronshtein and Yemini, 2020).

Role Variation, Absorbed versus Formalized Knowledge.

A second smaller but consistent pattern appears at the item asking where the brand understandings come forms. Marketing admission officers across nearly every institution describe their understanding as absorbed from meetings, senior staff and campaign experience rather than from a written manual. Senior management informants more often pointed to formal strategic planning documents. This gap between formal and absorbed understanding of the brand itself is a textbook internal branding finding. It suggests brand meaning is transmitted informally through inculturations rather than documentations for the staffs who most directly deliver it to prospective students precisely the mechanism Punjaisri et al. (2009) and Vallaster de Chernatony (2006) identify as a risks to consistence brand supporting behavior and one that the more recent Egyptian findings that formal training programs did not significantly predict staff commitment (El Sheikh et al 2024) makes newly relevant. If training is not doing the work of

formalizing brand knowledge in this sector something else absorbed informal inculturations is filling the gap for better or worse.

8.2 RQ-2 Process Resource and Coordination's

Pattern: Centralized Approval as A Universal Bottleneck

Every institution is the same sample regardless of tire routes branding decisions above a routine threshold through a small apex price Vice Chancellor, register, board of trustees or the chairman office while leaving day to day content to the marketing admissions officer. This structural similarity across otherwise very different institutions indicates that centralized sign off is not a symptom of anyone universities dysfunctions but a structural feature of how Bangladeshi private universities govern reputational risks

Tire variations: what shows executions

What official cite as the practical obstacle differs by the resource tier, and the difference is informative rather t6han incidental:

- Elite institution (UE-1, UE-2 describe deliberate caution as the constraint "less budget, more caution," the Deputy registrar at UE-1 said, farming slowness as protective of an established asset. Budget itself is described as adequate or generous.
- The entrepreneurial, founder dribven institution (UEN-1) describes scales and coordination across an affiliated group of colleges as the constraint with budget explicitly described as "fairly large".
- Accessible mid-tier institutions (UA-2, UA-3, UA-4) describe the timing of waiver/fee decisions as the recurring bottleneck: creative work is repeatedly finalized "a few days before" launch because pricing decisions are made late.
- Regional and rural institution (RG-1, RG-2, RU-1) are the only tier to name budget scarcity itself, directly and repeatedly, as the primary constraints "money comes first" (RG-2) limited resources mainly" (senior management at RU-1) with promotion explicitly competing against faculty, laboratories, and infrastructure for the same funds.

This gradient cautions at the top of the market timing pressures in the accessible fee segment outright resource scarcity at the regional and rural margin is a clearer pictures of resource constraint branding practice than either the demand side literatures or a single tire case study could produce and directly extend internal branding theory beyond the resource adequate settings in which it has mostly been tested.

Pattern: Departmental Drift Is Near Universal

At the relevant protocol item nearly every marketing admissions officer at UE-1, UE-2, UA-1, UA-2, UA-3, UA-4, RG-1 and RU-1 volunteered an almost identical incident type without being led towards it a department institutes or affiliated college publishing outdated materials because it bypassed the central

marketing office. The recurrence of this specific incident unprompted across eight of ten institutions is the strongest single patterns in the data set and is treated here as the closest the study comes or to thematics saturation additional interviews at this design would very likely reproduce the same findings rather than surface a materially different one.

Senior management respondents at the peer institution described the same problem from the other side as an enforcement rather than a design gap the deputy registers at UE-1 and the senior management at RU-1 both said guidelines and sign of requirements exist but depends on the people following the process voluntarily. Read through corporate brand identity theory this indicates that coherence failures in the in this sectors are not primarily failures of stated identity but failures of behavioral alignment departments acts inconsistently with a written standard they are aware of which is precisely the gap internal branding theory predicts when the brand values are communicated but not reinforced through training incentives or consistent enforcement and which the Chinese findings that internal marketing orientation drives teachers contributions to brand substantivity (Jiang & Xiao 2024) and the Pakistani findings that internal brand management predicts brand citizenship behavior only when it is lived rather than merely documented (Khan et al 2023) both both corroborate from very different institutional settings.

8.3 RQ3 Gaps between intended and delivered brand identity

Patterns: *the "last mile" lag*

At the relevant protocol item, a strictly uniform incident structures recurs across most marketing admission respondents a decision made upstairs a new tagline a research initiative a revised waiver figure and extended deadline takes days to weeks to reach the counselors regional education fair staffs or affiliated college front desk who actually talk to applicants. The marketing managers at UE-1 called this a gap between what's decided upstairs and what reaches the counter respondent at UA-1, UA-2, UA-3, UA-4, RG-1 and RU-1, each independently used near identical language. Senior management respondents at paired institutions described a middle version of the same lag usually attributes it to scales rather than in single failure. This is clearest evidence in the data set from the study central promise that intended brand identity and delivered brand identity are not the same things and that the gap is organizational rather than motivational.

Pattern, perceived brand is simpler than intended brand.

A second related but distinct gap appears at another protocol items. Officers across every tire report that families perceive the institutions through simpler, more concrete course than the institutions intends to project. Elite institutions intend to be known for research and driver but are perceived through campus facilities and word of mouth. UE-1, UE-2, accessible institutions intend to be known for career outcomes but are perceived through the size of a fee waiver. UA-2, UA-3, UA-4, regional and rural institutions intend to be known for practical relevance but are perceived through basic legitimacy and comparison to public

universities or to Dhaka, RG-1, RU-1. This is not the same phenomenon as the last mile lag above. It persists even where delivery is prompt and is better interrupted as a structural mismatch between what institutions have the incentive to emphasize and what resource constraints. First generation heavy audience must have the have means to evaluate price safety and word of mouth. This qualifies the demand side Bangladesh literature findings that facilities and fees drive choice, Afrin 2020, Sawrov 2024 by showing from the supply side that officials are generally aware of this mismatch and are not simply failing to communicate. They are communicating a message the audience is not yet in positions to receive on its own terms.

Pattern with an important gap in the data: pressure to overstate.

At the pressure to misrepresent protocol variant five of the seven marketing admissions respondent who received this variant UEN-1, UA-2, UA-3, UA-4, RG-2 reported direct pressure to lead with a claim they consider it overstated risky or premature relative to what they believed the institutions could substantiate a founder personnel recognitions UEN-1, a headline waiver figure without its conditions UA-2, UA-3, UA-4, or unspecified pressures the RG-2 respondent declined to detail. No senior management respondents reported feeling equivalent pressures from this above this is not because the questions were not relevant to them, but it does mean the data set cannot directly compare how the two rules experience the specific tensions which is a genuine limitation rather than a finding. What can be said is that the burden of recon organizations brand provisional message with what a frontline officer believes is defensible or fair to an applicant is reported exclusively by staff closest to the applicant consistency with internal branding theories accounts of frontline employees as the point where an organizations brand promises is tested against reality and consistence with the ethical concern flagged in this study on design about power asymmetry between junior marketing staffs and senior management.

8.4 RQ4 Bangladesh Specific Contextual Factors.

Market Saturation as A Shared Tired Neutral Driver.

Every institution regardless of tire named the growth in the number of private universities routinely described as well over a hundred as saving changed how it approaches branding, but the direction of change differs by starting positions. Elite institutions describe having to defend rather than assume an inherited position. UE-1 "we now have to actively defend those positions rather than assume it". Entrepreneurial and accessible institutions describe having to differentiate on something other than price as price competition intensifies. UEN-1, UA-4 regional and rural institution, describes competing less against local rivals than against the pool of Dhaka itself. RG-1, RG-2, RU-1.

UGC Regulation as A Converging Homogenizing Constraint

In contrast to the variation above every institution described university grant commission UGC and ministry regulations in almost identical terms a constraint on advertising claims that pushes messaging towards conservative factual defensive pressing regardless of an institution market position. This is one of the few themes in the data set with essentially no tire variations and it is interpreted here as a

structural ceiling on brand differentiation in the sector regulation compresses the range of claims in institution can make which may itself help explain why official across tire converge on similar promise brand definitions sections 8.1. There is only so much regulatory room to differentiate the substance of the claim, so institutions differentiate mainly through which claim through history price or legitimacy they chose to foreground.

Geography as A Substantive Not Incidental Brand Input.

For institutions outside central Dhaka RG-1, RG-2, RU-1 and notably the Dhaka periphery institutions UA-2 and UA-4 commuting safety hostel provisions and connectivity are described not as logistical footnotes but as central to the brand message itself on equal footing with academic claims. This cuts across the tire boundary as officially defined in the sampling frame section 7.2 and suggests that physical distance from central Dhaka rather than administrative classifications alone is the more precise driver of this theme a refinement of the sampling categories or carrying into a subsequent pass of coding or write up.

8.5 Cross Cutting Interpretation

Read together the four analyses converse on a single organizational level explanation rather than four unrelated findings official across all 10 institutions define brand consistently as the promise 8.1 wrote significant decisions through a narrow cautious approval apex 8.2 and then struggle with high consistency across a very heterogeneous sample to get that decisions to travel intact to the people who actually speak to applicants 8.2 departmental drift 8.3 last mile lag. This pattern maps closely on to Clark Chapleo and Suomi's (2020). Canadian findings that internal branding shapes how middle level staffs understand and engage with a rebrand and on to Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, and Wilson (2009) argument that brand supporting behavior depends on internalizations not communications volume guidelines and sign of requirements exist at most of the sampled institutions yet stills depends on voluntary compliance and timely briefing which is exactly where the data show it breaking down.

What this Bangladeshi sample adds to the literatures in the resource gradient documented in 8.2 the same structural problems centralized cautious decision making combined with weak downstream reinforcement recurs at every tire but its proximate cause shifts from institutional cautions (elite) to pricing decisions timing (accessible mid tire) to outright budget scarcity (regional rural). A conceptual model built from this data set or therefore need to treat resource tire not as a control variable but as the mechanism that determines which part of the internal branding chain is weakest at a given institution’s approval speed message reinforcement or basic capacity to produce reinforcement materials at all.

Discussion:

Three points of contact between these findings and the internal branding literature as it now stands are worth drawing out of explicitness because it does more than confirm an existing finding in a new setting, each sharpness a mechanism the quantitative global sought literature can detect but not explain.

First, on why training does not appear to be doing the work internal branding theory of it. El sheikh et al. (2024) found in a large SEM study and Egyptian private university teaching staffs the formal training programs did not significantly predict brand commitment against the weight of peer literature and could only speculate that culture of resourcing explained the anomaly. The present findings supply a candidate mechanism at every tire in the Bangladeshi sample brand understanding among frontline officer is described as absorbed rather than formally taught section 8.1 and reinforcement of superficially made decision depends on people following the process voluntarily rather than on structured training or incentive sections 8.2. If this pattern generalizes beyond Bangladesh, it suggests that in resource constraint private higher education market formal training is frequently the first internal branding investment to be deprioritized not because it is ineffective in principles but because centralized approval and adopt briefing substitute for it in practice leaving staff commitment to raise on informal in culturation instead. This is consistent with and extend the resource tire gradient in section 8.2 institutions that can least effort training investment regional or rural are also the institutions most dependent on the informal absorbed transmissions mode that this study documents.

Second on the balance between formal policy and light enactment, Jiang and Xiao's (2024) findings that internal market orientation, not formal branding policy per se, is what predicts Chinese universities teachers' contributions to brand sustainability and Khan, Hameed and Hussainy's (2023) findings that internal brand management drives brand citizenship behavior among Pakistani higher education staffs. Both point to the same conclusion the study reaches qualitatively. Written guidelines are necessary but not sufficient. The departmental drift patent in section 8.2 volunteered unprompted by informants at eight of ten institutions is the clearest illustrations available in these literatures of what necessary but not sufficient look like in practice. Signs of requirement exist almost everywhere in the in this sample. Yet they are bypassed often enough to be the single most consistent findings in the data set where the Pakistani and Chinese studies can show that internal market orientation correlates with better outcomes, this study can show from the inside why the correlation exist. It is the gap between a guidance existence and the department compliance that internal market orientation is presumably closing. A near simultaneous qualitative study of Bangladeshi private university employee branding reaches a parallel conclusion from the faculty side. Marketing facing employee branding there is an ad hoc unstructured and lacking strategic planning with no formal policy governing how faculty are positioned as brand assets (Huda 2026). The same absence of formal reinforcement in the same national market. That is the study documents from the official market side.

Third on geography, Dwitasari et al (2025), qualitative internal perspective study of visual identity at top ranked Indonesian universities is to date the closest published comparator to the present study design and its central findings that internal branding remains largely overlooked even at elite, well resource institution echoes the pattern this study documents at UE-1 and UE-2 where budget is described as adequate but cautious, not resource scarcity is what show branding decision section 8.2. The two qualitative studies conducted independently in two different south and southeast Asian market but finds that elite resource adequacy does not translate into faster or more coherent internal branding suggests this is not an artifacts of the Bangladeshi sample, specifically but a more general features of how

internal branding functions at the top of a rapidly maturing reputation sensitive higher education market. At the same time neither the Indonesian study nor any of the quantitative global south studies reviewed above sampled across a full resource tire from elite to rural within a single design which is precisely what allows the present study to show that the underlying mechanism is tire invariant even though its proximate cause is not.

Taken together, the discussion above suggests revisions to how resource tires should be modeled in internal branding research going forward. The dominant quantitative approach in the recent global south literature treats country, sector, or institution type as a moderator of an otherwise universal internal branding to outcome relationship (Ikram et al., 2021; Duh and Wara, 2024; Mushi, 2025). The present findings suggest the resource tire determines which link in the internal branding chain is the blinding constraints at a given institution's approval speed at the elite tire, message reinforcement timing at the accessible tire, or basic capacity to produce reinforcement materials at all at the regional and rural tire, which is a mechanism claim rather than a moderation claim and one that only a qualitative cross-tire design of the kind used here is positioned to surface.

10. Limitation

- Written protocol-based responses rather than recorded, free-flowing interviews' section 7.3 likely understate spontaneous contradictions and prob elicited nuance and may explain why some senior management answer read as more polished consistent than official level answer.
- Five of ten institutions UA-1, UA-2, UA-3, UA-4, RG-2 lack a paired senior management interview limiting within case triangulations for those cases specifically.
- The pressure to overstate section 8.3 cannot be directly compared across rules because the protocol route marketing admission and senior management respondent to different items variants by design.
- Institutional documents prospectus website recent advertising proposed in the original design as a triangulating source were not part of the material analyzed here and with straighten the RQ3 perception gap findings if incorporated in a subsequent pass.
- The RG2 interviews brevity and explicit non-disclosure on several sensitive items section 7.3 means regional tire conclusion rest more heavily on RG1 than on RG2 and should be read as provisional for that institution specifically.
- As with any qualitative case study of 10 institutions, the findings describe patterns within the sample rather than statistically generalizable population parameters transferability not generalizability is as is the appropriate standard section 7.5.

Conclusion and Contributions.

The study is set out to ask not whether branding works in Bangladeshi private higher education, already established quantitatively by the demand side literature, but how it is constructed, negotiated and

delivered from within. The answer that emerge from 15 interviews across 10 institutions spanning the full resource tire of the sector is a single coherent organizational accounts official converse on a promise based definitions of brand whose content is supplied by whatever asset their tire actually processes; branding decisions of consequence are centralized almost everywhere and the resulting decisions travel unreliably to the staffs and departments who deliver the brand day to day for reason that shift from institutional questions at the elite end of the market to outright budget scarcity at the regional and rural end.

Theoretically, the study builds upon internal branding and corporate brand identity theory in a private, high-competition higher education market in South Asia, where, to our knowledge, it has not hitherto been explored in the accounts of marketing and admissions officials. It emerges at a moment when the wider internal branding literature has begun to diversify beyond its Western origin into Egypt, Pakistan, China, Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa. Read alongside that literature, the study's main theoretical contribution lies in proposing resource tier as a mechanism variable, not a control variable, in models of internal brand delivery. The same structural weakness (centralized, risk-averse decision-making combined with weak downstream reinforcement) recurs across the sector. Which link in that chain fails (approval speed, reinforcement timing or basic production capacity) is contingent on where an institution is located in the market.

Empirically, the study is, to our knowledge, the first qualitative one to examine, from the viewpoint of the marketing and admissions officials, how Bangladeshi private universities build and deliver brand strategy. It complements a demand-side literature that has had no supply-side counterpart as well as a recent qualitative study of faculty perspectives (Huda, 2026).

Practically, the findings point toward a specific low-cost intervention that Bangladeshi private university administrators could test directly because the strongest and most consistent findings in this data set is departmental drift outdated materials published outside central marketing control, and because of this occurs despite guidelines existing almost everywhere, the highest leverage intervention available to most institutions in this sector is not new policy, but a lightweight, low-cost verification step: a shared, dated master asset repository, a single sign-off checkpoint before any departmental-level publication that closes the gap between a guideline's existence and its enforcement. This is a modest recommendation, delivered it follows directly from what officials in this sample describe as the actual point of failure, rather than from a general call for better internal communication that the internal branding literature has already made many times over. It also directly extends the practice-facing recommendations already produced by the quantitative demand-side predecessors to these studies.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval:

Formal ethics approval was not required for this study under institutional policy.

Consent to participate:

Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants consented to take part but not to be attributed, so all participants and institutions are anonymized.

Consent for publication:

Not applicable.

Use of AI tools

AI tools were not used in this study beyond grammar and style editing. The authors reviewed all text and take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Author Contribution

M.H.S. and M.S. contributed to the study conception and design. Data collection and analysis were performed by M.H.S. and M.S. The first draft of the manuscript was written by M.H.S., and both authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability:

The datasets generated during this study consist of participants' written responses. They are not publicly available because of the anonymity commitments made to participants and institutions. Anonymized excerpts are reported in the article.

Code availability:

Not applicable.

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