

the impact of the Islamic Azad University Electronics Branch's brand on its competitive advantage, considering the mediating role of positioning and market orientation

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Receive:

22 August 2024

Revise:

17 November 2024

Accept:

15 December 2024

Keywords:

Brand recognition, competitive advantage, positioning, market orientation, Islamic Azad University.

Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of brand recognition of the Electronics Branch of Islamic Azad University on its competitive advantage with regard to the role of positioning and market orientation. In terms of purpose, this study is an applicable research conducted in a cross-sectional manner based on a survey approach (questionnaire) and using field studies and correlational research methods; data collection was carried out using a questionnaire among 194 students of this university unit who were selected by simple random method, and data analysis was performed using PLS software. The findings indicated the confirmation of the effect of brand recognition on positioning and market orientation and the effect of these two variables on competitive advantage; and the mediating effect of these two variables in the relationship between brand recognition and competitive advantage was also confirmed. Following the study of the Electronics Branch of Islamic Azad University, this study has also provided suggestions to improve the insight of managers of this university.

Please cite this article as (APA): KashefArzanagh, M. and Nayebzadeh, S. (2024). the impact of the Islamic Azad University Electronics Branch's brand on its competitive advantage, considering the mediating role of positioning and market orientation. *Journal of New Approaches in Management and Marketing*, 3(3), 1-26.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jnamm.2025.484881.1058>



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Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

With the onset of the post-industrial era, markets became highly competitive and learning faster and earlier than competitors became a competitive advantage, so the organization's focus was on awareness, knowledge, and information (Krakowski et al., 2023). The competitive market environment is such that future market trends, as well as competitors' activities, cannot be easily predicted and interpreted (Campagna et al., 2023). Businesses active in the education industry have also realized that gaining a competitive advantage in a market that has become complex and challenging with the increasing number of competitors and the diversity and breadth of services must pay more attention to the mindset of customers and target audiences; among the most key activities of managers and decision-makers, especially in highly competitive markets, is therefore investing in the brand (Permana, 2023). A review of the research literature indicates a research gap in the field of brand effects on competitive advantage in higher education, and in particular, the role of variables such as positioning and market orientation has received less attention in such studies, which indicates the necessity of the present study. Another important point is that the existence of numerous socio-economic and cultural problems has challenged the function and role of traditional universities and damaged people's mentality about their commitment to society. On the other hand, a society without efficient and effective higher education cannot progress and excel (Samani et al., 2022). This issue becomes more important in the case of the largest university system in the country, namely Islamic Azad University, with a significant number of students nationwide and its spread among target audiences with different characteristics, tastes and needs. Therefore, the present study seeks to answer the main question: how does brand recognition affect the competitive advantage of Islamic Azad University, Electronics Branch, with regard to the mediating role of positioning and market orientation??

Theoretical framework

Brand Recognition: The concept of brand awareness by the customer is essentially the customer's comprehensive understanding of how brand relationships with customers develop. Therefore, brands have realized that to enhance brand awareness among customers, they must invest in brand attributes such as credibility and differentiation, while also considering the attractiveness and impacts on perception, and giving importance to informing and enhancing the mental image of the audience (Gading et al., 2024).

Competitive Advantage: Competitiveness refers to how an organization aligns its internal capabilities and resources with external changes, and it can increase under conditions where resources are utilized in a way that directly or indirectly makes competition more challenging for other businesses (Beirami et al., 2024). Organizational competitiveness can be measured in various ways. To overcome the limitations of financial metrics, the use of marketing metrics such as brand reputation, customer loyalty, and employee loyalty has also been suggested for assessing competitiveness (Heydari et al., 2021).

Positioning: Positioning is a strategic concept that, over time, has entered other management discussions, such as marketing, and particularly strategic marketing. Business managers have realized that in today's highly turbulent environments, they must identify the environmental factors that contribute to their success in competing in an uncertain environment, given the presence of numerous competitors and rapid changes (Parhizgar et al., 2023).

Market Orientation: Market orientation is a type of behavioral norm that has spread throughout the business and responds to the current and future needs of target audiences and customers through innovation (Azimi et al., 2021). With the emergence of market orientation

in recent years, market-based organizational culture has increasingly been considered a key element in the superior performance of businesses, emphasizing the positive relationship between market orientation and performance (O'Cass & Sok, 2013).

Research methodology

The research method of the present study is applicable in terms of purpose. From the perspective of execution, this research is a non-experimental study of the correlational type, and regarding the time frame for data collection, it is a cross-sectional study conducted in the field using a questionnaire. The statistical population of this research consists of 337 master's degree students in business management at the Islamic Azad University, Electronic Unit, who are currently studying. The sampling method used in this research is simple random sampling, and to determine the sample size, a pilot study and Cohen's formula for a finite population were utilized, resulting in 194 completed questionnaires being analyzed. The questionnaire of Rua & Santos (2022) included brand awareness with 5 items; brand positioning with 6 items; market orientation with 2 items; and competitive advantage with 3 items. The measurement scale for the questions was a five-point Likert scale, and face validity was used for validating the content validity, while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. To examine the normality of the data distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was employed. The relationships between variables and factors were confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling techniques using PLS3 Smart software, which is a variance-based path modeling method that allows for the simultaneous examination of theories and metrics.

Research findings

The internal model framework was examined, and the structural model path was evaluated. Considering the t-statistic value and P-values for all paths except for the brand awareness to competitive advantage path, the t-statistic is greater than 1.96 and the P-values are less than 0.05, indicating that at a 95% confidence level, all paths except for the brand awareness to competitive advantage path have a significant impact.

Conclusion:

Regarding the first hypothesis of the research, which states that brand awareness has a positive and significant impact on the competitive advantage of the Islamic Azad University, Electronic Unit; the data analysis indicated that the first hypothesis of the study was not confirmed. The findings of the present research regarding this hypothesis do not align with the results of the study by Rua & Santos (2022) and Umukoro et al., (2023), who examined and confirmed the same hypothesis in their research. Concerning the second hypothesis of the research, which suggests that brand awareness has a positive and significant impact on the positioning of the Islamic Azad University, Electronic Unit; the data analysis showed that the second hypothesis of the study is confirmed. The findings of the present research regarding this hypothesis are consistent with the results of the study by Rua & Santos (2022) and Umukoro et al., (2023), who also examined and confirmed this hypothesis in their research. Regarding the third hypothesis of the research, which states that brand awareness has a positive and significant impact on the market orientation of the Islamic Azad University, Electronic Unit; the data analysis indicated that the third hypothesis of the study is confirmed. The findings of the present research regarding this hypothesis align with the results of the study by Rua & Santos (2022), who examined and confirmed the same hypothesis, and the research by Mampaey et al., (2019), which also referred to successful market orientation as a

result of increased audience awareness about the brand in their study on internal and external branding. Regarding the fourth hypothesis of the research, which suggests that positioning has a positive and significant impact on the competitive advantage of the Islamic Azad University, Electronic Unit; the data analysis indicated that the fourth hypothesis of the study is confirmed. The findings of the present research regarding this hypothesis are consistent with the results of the study by Rua & Santos (2022), who examined and confirmed this hypothesis in their research.

To practically benefit from the results of the present research, it can be suggested to the managers and decision-makers of the Islamic Azad University, Electronic Unit, that:

The growth and development of higher education institutions and universities depend on the effective utilization of marketing concepts, including brand awareness, positioning, and market orientation. Brands and businesses that play a vital role in the educational economy of the country and have been compelled to embrace transformation in the competitive arena due to changes in key environmental factors in the long term are guided in managing the perceptions of their audience.