PARADIGMA, No.3, 2026, səh.98-107
https://doi.org/10.30546/30015.2026.002.03.1231

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE ON UNIVERSITY BRAND TRUST AND PERCEIVED INSTITUTIONAL VALUE

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Abstract. This article examines links between students' digital experiences, university brand trust and perceived institutional value. Drawing on recent research and official Azerbaijani and international reports, it develops a comparative conceptual framework and practical indicators. Published international evidence is distinguished from hypotheses that require empirical validation in Azerbaijan.

Keywords: Digital student experience, university brand trust, perceived value, higher education, digital inclusion.

Introduction

International higher education is increasingly experienced before a student reaches a campus. A prospective learner may compare programmes through a mobile website, watch an online lecture, contact an admissions adviser and assess the clarity of scholarship information. After enrolment, the same institution is judged through learning platforms, administrative portals, accessible resources and technical support. These interactions connect the student's everyday experience with the credibility of the university's public promises. The central analytical question is therefore not whether universities possess digital channels, but whether those channels provide reliable experiences that justify institutional trust. Contemporary university-brand research identifies academic reputation, organisational identity, communication and stakeholder relations as interconnected components rather than independent promotional instruments [6].

The distinction between digital visibility and digital experience matters especially when international applicants have little opportunity for an advance campus visit. A carefully designed advertisement can create awareness, but the strength of a brand promise is tested when the applicant opens a programme page, requests a response, or completes an online procedure. An informative platform may reduce uncertainty; a confusing procedure can produce precisely the opposite impression. Communication studies of international recruitment show that institutional content and students' own accounts jointly shape brand perceptions and intentions [4]. Digital experience consequently functions as a possible source of reputational evidence, while marketing content functions mainly as an invitation to form an initial judgement.

This article examines how the quality of digital services may be associated with brand trust and perceived institutional value. It develops a structured comparison between published international evidence and Azerbaijan's broader digital-development context. The focus is intentionally analytical: no survey of Azerbaijani students, institutional digital-system audit or causal experiment has been conducted for this paper. Its contribution is a framework specifying which relationships are supported by prior research, which institutional mechanisms are theoretically plausible, and how future university-level verification could be organised.

The Azerbaijani setting warrants careful interpretation. Official national statistics document the wider development of digital infrastructure and information and communication technologies, but population-level connectivity indicators cannot establish the usability of an individual university's learning platform or the trust of a particular student group [8]. In the absence of institution-specific comparable observations, claiming that one university has superior digital brand equity would be unwarranted. The present study treats Azerbaijan as a policy-relevant application context and international studies as external evidence whose transferability requires testing.

1. Conceptual framework and research approach

A university's brand can be understood as an organised set of expectations supported by tangible academic performance and intangible associations. Brand awareness makes the institution identifiable; perceived quality concerns the educational and service offer; trust reflects confidence that the institution will fulfil commitments; and perceived value involves weighing anticipated benefits against financial, temporal and psychological costs. Research on higher education branding cautions against reducing this architecture to a logo, ranking position or promotional slogan. Brand meaning is continually co-produced by students, staff, alumni and the wider public through formal and informal encounters [6].

Digital student experience refers here to the accumulated quality of interactions with university technologies before, during and, where relevant, after study. For analytical clarity, it is separated into four dimensions: information quality, transactional usability, learning-and-support quality, and inclusion. Information quality covers accuracy, timeliness, discoverability and consistency across languages. Transactional usability concerns applications, timetables, registration, payments and digital document submission. Learning-and-support quality relates to platform availability, course resources, help desks and responsiveness. Inclusion involves accessibility, affordable access, device compatibility and support for different levels of digital skill. These dimensions are distinct; strength in one does not compensate automatically for weakness in another.

Brand trust is also multidimensional. Competence-based trust rests on evidence that an institution can deliver programmes and services reliably; integrity-based trust concerns accurate information and fair processes; relational trust depends on respectful, consistent and responsive communication. The theory developed here is that students interpret digital interfaces as signals of these institutional qualities. A portal that communicates requirements consistently across departments may support perceptions of organisational competence. Conversely, conflicting admission dates across official channels can weaken confidence even where teaching quality is high. Such effects are propositions to examine, not empirically established consequences for any Azerbaijani university.

Perceived institutional value is more comprehensive than tuition price. A student evaluates the relevance of the degree, pedagogical support, professional opportunities, administrative effort, social integration and the credibility of qualifications. Digital services can influence several of these components without replacing the core academic product. Access to recorded materials can reduce scheduling costs, for example, while reliable online advising can reduce uncertainty for a student planning an international move. Yet improved convenience alone cannot verify learning outcomes, employment returns or accreditation. The UNESCO 2023 technology report accordingly stresses that educational technologies should be assessed against appropriate learning needs, equity and evidence, rather than assumed to improve quality by their mere presence [10].

An important conceptual boundary separates satisfaction, engagement, trust and recommendation. Satisfaction evaluates an experience relative to expectations. Engagement concerns behaviour such as participating in digital discussions or using learning resources. Trust refers to a belief about future institutional behaviour, and recommendation is a potential downstream action. These concepts may correlate, but they are not interchangeable. A student can use a platform frequently because attendance rules require it and still distrust its reliability. Likewise, high social-media interaction does not necessarily imply either academic satisfaction or a later recommendation. Reviews of social-media marketing in higher education identify engagement, branding, recruitment and relationship management as separate research streams, reinforcing this analytical distinction [7].

Evidence on social-media communication lends plausibility to a trust-based pathway while also setting limits. Li and colleagues analysed responses from 156 international students at three institutions in Guangxi and reported relationships among social-media communication, brand image, brand preference and enrollment intentions. Brand image played a mediating role in their model [4]. The study does not measure actual enrollment outcomes across Azerbaijan,

nor does it establish that every form of digital service creates equal effects. Its main relevance here is the empirical demonstration that communication quality and institutional perceptions should be analysed together rather than as unrelated promotional variables.

Digital experience further produces negative reputational signals when accessibility or reliability failures affect identifiable groups. Inclusive design cannot be considered an optional addition for internationalisation. Incoming students may encounter unfamiliar login procedures, different patterns of device ownership and language-specific barriers. From a brand perspective, effective access is a test of whether the institution's commitment to equal opportunity is visible in everyday practice. The implication is not that all students need identical digital assistance. It is that differences in access should be measured and addressed rather than concealed by an overall satisfaction score [3].

The paper applies qualitative document-based comparative analysis and conceptual synthesis. Selected material comprises recent peer-reviewed studies of higher education branding and international marketing, the UK Jisc student digital experience survey, UNESCO's assessment of technology in education, and the State Statistical Committee's 2025 statistical yearbook on digital development in Azerbaijan. These sources were chosen because they illuminate complementary levels of the problem: individual responses, institutional communication mechanisms, educational technology governance and national digital context. The comparative units are therefore types of evidence, not matched university campuses.

At the first stage, concepts were defined and claims were assigned to the domains of digital services, student perceptions or observable behaviour. At the second stage, international results were examined for methodological scope: who responded, which constructs were measured, what period was covered and whether conclusions concern intention or realised behaviour. At the third stage, potential application to Azerbaijan was considered by identifying what can be verified through university records and structured student feedback. No numerical benchmarking scores were attributed to Azerbaijani universities; doing so without a common audit instrument would convert a proposal into a fictional result.

International evidence illustrates why this distinction is essential. Jisc's 2024/25 survey included 15,398 students from 30 UK higher education providers. Among respondents, 86% rated their digital learning environment above average; 60% reported connectivity problems, and 37% reported lacking a suitable device at some point. These statistics describe the participating UK providers, not Azerbaijan [3]. The simultaneous presence of positive assessments and access difficulties shows why a single aggregate satisfaction number can hide weaknesses relevant to institutional trust.

The survey report also cautions that participating organisations differ between years and that the sample is not weighted to reproduce the entire national higher education population [3]. These limitations are central to any comparison. Even if a similarly designed questionnaire were introduced in Azerbaijan, cross-national differences in programme mix, language, cost of living and survey recruitment would need to be addressed before treating observed percentages as equivalent. The framework proposed here uses international findings to formulate locally testable questions rather than to assign imported performance levels.

2. Comparative evidence and proposed evaluation framework

International studies link university branding increasingly to authentic relationships rather than one-way publicity. O'Sullivan and colleagues portray the university brand as an organisational construct influenced by internal and external stakeholders. Pawar's systematic review, based on 51 empirical articles, identifies social media as an instrument of engagement, university branding, enrolment decision-making, relationship management and strategic marketing [6] [7]. Taken together, these sources suggest that digital branding becomes credible only when communication is consistent with service delivery. They do not, however, demonstrate that online popularity is a valid proxy for academic performance.

Student-centred measures provide an important corrective to marketing-only dashboards. The 2024/25 Jisc report finds that respondents value flexibility and access to learning materials but also report obstacles involving connectivity, equipment and navigation. Nearly half of respondents preferred online or blended learning, while a substantial proportion studied predominantly on campus [3]. The finding argues against treating digital transformation as equivalent to replacing face-to-face education. The strategically relevant issue is whether digital resources support different study patterns while sustaining educational community and human contact.

Azerbaijan's national digital statistical reporting supplies a contextual foundation for assessing readiness, including the development of information technology and patterns of digital access [8]. Such reporting is useful for specifying infrastructure assumptions, but it is not a dataset on university branding, student trust or perceived institutional value. Thus, a valid Azerbaijani comparative study would require university-level indicators: platform outages, response times, accessibility checks, service-language coverage and responses from students enrolled in comparable academic programmes. It would also require separating domestic from international students where their information and onboarding needs differ.

Recruitment-related studies sharpen the distinction between contact and trust. Hung and Yen's research on innovative marketing strategies for international student recruitment assigns

importance to the fit between institutional offerings, brand image and prospective students' priorities [2]. Mishina and Pace identify networks, mobile communications and relationship-management tools as practical components of higher education marketing, while noting the limitations of existing evidence concerning costs and geographic transferability [5]. In a credibility-oriented framework, such channels should therefore be evaluated for message accuracy and quality of assistance, not solely for volume of traffic.

The comparative question is also linguistic and cultural. Prospective learners interpreting an English-language programme page may need information on assessment methods, visa documentation, tuition and student support that is not necessary for local applicants. Translations that retain words but omit context can create false expectations. A defensible brand promise requires that admission conditions be communicated in accessible language and kept consistent across university websites, email responses and official programme documentation. International research on the communication of universities in social media highlights the need for appropriate content strategy and audience differentiation rather than a uniform posting formula [9].

A related risk concerns excessive reliance on platform engagement statistics. Large numbers of reactions may reflect entertainment value, controversy or algorithmic distribution. They do not necessarily identify readers who understood entry requirements, trusted institutional information or benefited from course delivery. Gharbi and co-authors examine how the form and communication features of Facebook posts influence university engagement [1]. This type of evidence is valuable for content decisions, but brand trust requires different measurements. The proposed analytical rule is to link every communication indicator to a student-relevant process or perception before treating it as evidence of institutional value.

Further complexity arises when education is framed too narrowly as a marketable service. Zhou and colleagues discuss tensions in higher education internationalisation between promotional strategies and sustainable development [11]. For the current topic, this means that brand-value assessment should not reward an institution merely for recruiting more fee-paying students if digital access, fairness or academic standards deteriorate. Effective reputation should be evaluated through the continuity between communicated promises and educational obligations. Investment in accessible academic resources may consequently have a stronger long-term reputational rationale than a short-lived promotional campaign, even if its immediate visibility is lower.

The central comparative inference is therefore conditional. International studies provide support for relationships between digital communication and elements of brand perception.

Digital-experience surveys provide descriptive evidence concerning students' access, support and satisfaction. Azerbaijani official statistics describe the enabling environment. None of these sources, separately or combined, measures a nationwide causal effect of digital student experience on university brand trust in Azerbaijan. What can be established is a feasible research agenda in which such effects become observable through paired service indicators and validated perception scales, measured within defined university populations.

The proposed framework begins with a pathway rather than a score: digital service performance influences interpreted experience; interpreted experience is expected to inform perceptions of competence, integrity and care; these perceptions may contribute to brand trust and overall institutional value. Trust may then be associated with willingness to recommend, continue study or participate in alumni activities. Each arrow is a hypothesis subject to possible alternative explanations. Programme reputation, scholarship availability, teaching quality, income and prior institutional familiarity can influence both perceived experience and perceived brand value. Consequently, even strong survey correlations would not establish causality without an appropriate design.

Operationalisation should combine technical logs and student-reported measures. The quality of a digital service can be described by the percentage of successful login attempts, completion rates for documented processes, average response times, accessibility findings and the frequency of contradictory programme information. Student surveys should separately ask whether services are reliable, whether the institution acts transparently and whether the perceived benefits of studying there justify the resources invested. Questions should use consistent response scales and verified translations; a local pilot should test clarity and cultural relevance. Administrative measures are not a substitute for perception data, and perception data cannot by themselves demonstrate service performance.

A comparative design could recruit domestic and international students at multiple institutions while holding programme level, year of study and delivery mode observable. Data collection should distinguish a pre-entry applicant phase, first-semester induction and later academic experience. The applicant survey can capture information clarity and expected value, while the enrolled-student survey can capture delivered experience and updated trust. Analyses could assess the reliability of multi-item scales and estimate associations through regression or structural-equation models, reporting confidence intervals and potential confounders. Such a protocol would test a plausible mechanism without misrepresenting the present article as a completed primary study.

Table 1. Proposed dimensions for evaluating digital experience and university brand trust

Dimension	Observable indicator	Interpretive relevance
Information reliability	Consistency of programme, tuition and admission information across channels	Supports integrity-based trust
Transactional usability	Completion rate and time required for key student procedures	Signals institutional competence
Learning and support	Platform availability, help-desk responses, accessible course resources	Shapes experience of delivered value
Inclusion and feedback	Device/access barriers; multilingual assistance; response to complaints	Tests fairness and stakeholder care

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on [3], [10], [6] and [4]; indicators are proposed, not measured results.

The dimensions in Table 1 are not rankings or measured scores. They specify observable variables and the kinds of evidence needed to compare institutions responsibly. In particular, indicators should not be averaged into a single brand index until their measurement properties, weights and relationship with substantive academic outcomes have been justified. A composite number that hides severe access failures could reward precisely the behaviour that diminishes trust. Universities can instead begin with a transparent dashboard showing each domain separately and trace improvements over successive student cohorts.

Governance determines whether the model can be implemented. Data management responsibilities should be assigned jointly to academic leadership, information technology teams, quality assurance units, admissions and student services. Students should be invited to comment on barriers through channels that do not penalise critical feedback. Institutions should publish an accessible description of what data are collected and how responses will be used. Transparency is not simply a moral addition: it is part of the integrity-based trust that the model seeks to examine. UNESCO's report also underlines the need to assess educational technologies in terms of appropriateness, equity and sustainability [10].

The most important policy implication for Azerbaijan is a change in the question posed to university managers. Instead of asking how many digital systems were installed or how many posts were published, decision-makers should ask which student problem each system solves, how its performance can be independently checked and whether students perceive the institution as more dependable after interacting with it. This approach treats digitalisation and reputation as related but separate policy objects. It protects against confusing investment activity with verified student benefit and clarifies which evidence would support future international comparisons.

Conclusion. Digital student experience is a credible candidate mechanism linking everyday university service delivery to brand trust and perceived institutional value. Recent international studies support the relevance of communication quality, institutional image and stakeholder relationships, while survey evidence shows that high general satisfaction can coexist with significant access difficulties. The Azerbaijani digital-development context justifies local examination but does not supply university-specific estimates of these relationships.

The principal contribution is a measurable, non-causal conceptual framework that distinguishes digital performance, interpreted experience, trust and perceived value. For research, the next step is a multilingual, multi-institutional design that combines verified platform measures with student perceptions and controls for differences in academic programmes. For management, priority should be given to information accuracy, accessible services, timely support and clear accountability. Trustworthy university branding is better understood as a consequence of dependable institutional behaviour than as the immediate product of online visibility.

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RƏQƏMSAL TƏLƏBƏ TƏCRÜBƏSİNİN UNİVERSİTET BRENDİNƏ ETİMADA VƏ QƏBUL EDİLƏN İNSTİTUSİONAL DƏYƏRƏ TƏSİRİ

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Xülasə. Məqalədə tələbələrin rəqəmsal təcrübəsi, universitet brendinə etimad və qəbul edilən institusional dəyər arasındakı əlaqələr araşdırılır. Müasir tədqiqatlar və Azərbaycanla bağlı rəsmi məlumatlar əsasında müqayisəli konseptual çərçivə və göstəricilər hazırlanır. Beynəlxalq nəticələr Azərbaycanda empirik yoxlanılması tələb olunan fərziyyələrdən fərqləndirilir.

Açar sözlər: Rəqəmsal tələbə təcrübəsi, universitet brendi, institusional dəyər, ali təhsil.