

Strategic Branding and Competitive Advantage in International School Marketing: A Case-Based Analysis in Asia

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Abstract

This study examines how strategic branding contributes to the development of competitive advantage among international schools in Asia, specifically in China, Singapore, and Malaysia—regions experiencing rapid educational growth. Despite the established growth of international schools in these locations, little research has examined the relationship between strategic branding and market positioning in culturally diverse contexts. This study addresses this gap by evaluating how brand positioning and digital marketing programs relate to market perception and competitive advantage in the sector. Employing a multiple-case study design, the research collected data from interviews with school marketing executives and from analyses of digital campaigns, prospectuses, institutional reports, and enrollment figures from 2020 to 2025. The main findings reveal that three branding drivers—authenticity anchored in educational excellence, culturally adaptive brand narratives, and engaging digital storytelling—are key factors in successful differentiation and enrollment growth for these schools. These elements were found to significantly enhance market differentiation and contribute to sustained, long-term enrollment growth. The results underline that strategic branding not only enhances marketing effectiveness but also serves as a vital strategic asset, strengthening institutional identity and sustained competitiveness. This paper advances the literature on international education marketing by providing regional data showing how schools can balance global reputation with local cultural resonance, and it offers practical guidance for administrators and policymakers seeking to improve brand equity, international recruitment, and sustainable market impact.

Keywords

International Schools, Asia, Strategic Branding, Competitive Advantage, Brand Positioning, Digital Marketing, and Educational Management

1. Introduction

Strategic branding has emerged as a pivotal determinant of competitiveness in the rapidly expanding international school market throughout Asia. As the region undergoes economic growth and experiences an influx of expatriates and globally mobile families, international education has become increasingly diverse and competitive (Le et al., 2024). The expansion of this sector has intensified the need for schools to cultivate strong, distinctive brand identities that can differentiate them in a saturated market. Existing studies highlight that branding is no longer a peripheral activity but a central strategic tool that influences parental decision-making, school reputation, and long-term institutional sustainability (Wulyatiningsih & Mandagi, 2023; Islami et al., 2024).

However, despite the widespread recognition of branding's importance, research tailored to K-12 international schools remains limited, with most scholarship focusing on corporate entities or higher education institutions (Marvi et al., 2024; Hautamäki et al., 2024). In this context, the present study bridges this gap by examining how strategic branding fosters competitive advantage in Asia's international school landscape. Drawing on case-based insights and established branding theories, the study explores the mechanisms through which schools develop, communicate, and sustain differentiated identities to attract and retain students (Onalaja & Otokiti, 2021).

It also examines how branding efforts intersect with regional cultural, socioeconomic, and policy dynamics, factors that significantly shape parental perceptions and school positioning (Jørgensen & Fast, 2024). The investigation further emphasizes the role of branding in cultivating trust, perceived value, and long-term loyalty among stakeholders, thereby creating measurable competitive advantages in a crowded marketplace (Atanasovski & Veselinova, 2024; Mariam, 2024; Abba, 2024). Overall, this introduction positions the study at the critical intersection of branding theory, international education, and market dynamics across Asia. It establishes the study's relevance, articulates existing research gaps, and demonstrates the urgent need for a region-specific examination of branding strategies that shape institutional success in international K-12 schools.

1.1. Background of the Study

International education has experienced substantial growth across Asia, driven by economic development, cross-border mobility, and rising demand for internationally recognized curricula. Countries such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia have emerged as major regional hubs, attracting both expatriate families and local students to seek globally oriented educational pathways (Le et al., 2024). As international schools proliferate, competition intensifies, prompting institutions to seek strategies to differentiate themselves in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Therefore, strong, coherent branding strategies are essential. Scholars note that, while many international schools invest heavily in marketing, only a few establish compelling brand identities that effectively communicate their value, ethos, and

educational experience (Rinjany, 2025; Haryanto et al., 2023). In markets where curricula, facilities, and academic programs often appear similar, branding emerges as the key means through which schools articulate differentiation, build trust, and influence parental choices (Ramos et al., 2024; Mahdiraji et al., 2024). These developments form the backdrop of this study's exploration of strategic branding as a driver of competitiveness and long-term institutional sustainability.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite significant investments in marketing and communication, many international schools in Asia struggle to build authentic brand differentiation and achieve a lasting competitive advantage. Existing literature indicates that most branding research focuses on corporate sectors or higher education (Hautamäki et al., 2024; Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024; Marvi et al., 2024), leaving a significant gap in K-12 international schools, where stakeholder needs, cultural influences, and decision-making differ sharply. Additionally, comparative and cross-cultural studies of Asian markets are scarce, hindering the evaluation of branding strategies across varied regulatory, cultural, and economic contexts.

The scarcity of studies addressing the nuances of parental perceptions, brand trust, and emotional connections within the K-12 international sector further compounds this gap (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a; Hautamäki et al., 2024). Consequently, international schools lack context-specific evidence to guide the development of effective branding strategies tailored to the Asian markets.

1.3. Research Objectives

This research aims to:

- Examine the development of strategic branding efforts in international schools across Asia.
- Analyze the role of branding in creating competitive advantages and facilitating institutional differentiation.
- Investigate how the cultural, economic, and policy environments influence branding success across Asia.

1.4. Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

- 1) How are international schools leveraging branding to achieve a competitive advantage?
- 2) What elements of strategic branding have the most significant impact on parental choice and beliefs?
- 3) What are the effects of the local cultural and institutional contexts on brand effectiveness?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it ex-

tends strategic branding theory into the under-researched terrain of K-12 international education, providing an academically grounded framework that reflects the unique characteristics of Asian markets. In practice, the findings provide school administrators, marketing professionals, and policymakers with evidence-based insights to design effective branding strategies that align with cultural expectations, strengthen online and offline communication, and enhance stakeholder engagement. Additionally, the study supports policymakers and education authorities seeking to expand the region's global education footprint by providing knowledge relevant to internationalization, transnational partnerships, and education export initiatives. By addressing a gap in the existing literature, this research provides meaningful guidance for schools seeking to establish strong brand identities and achieve enduring competitive advantage in Asia's dynamic international education sector.

2. Literature Review

The literature review establishes a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how strategic branding contributes to gaining a competitive advantage in the Asian K-12 international school sector. It synthesizes research from various fields, including branding theory, service quality, educational marketing, and cross-cultural communication, to create a conceptual basis for this study. Additionally, this section highlights significant gaps in the existing body of knowledge, underscoring the need for a context-specific investigation of branding in international schools.

Previous studies have emphasized that parental satisfaction, brand trust, and perceived service quality are essential factors influencing positive word-of-mouth referrals and overall institutional competitiveness (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a). Moreover, this review examines how international schools employ strategic branding to adapt to dynamic educational environments and the evolving preferences of parent communities across Asia.

2.1. Branding, Brand Equity, and Identity in Educational Institutions

Brand equity and brand identity theories provide foundational insights into how educational institutions construct values, shape perceptions, and cultivate long-term loyalty. Aaker and Keller's frameworks have traditionally guided branding research by emphasizing dimensions such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty, which remain highly relevant to the non-profit, service-based nature of international schools.

In educational contexts, brand credibility, trustworthiness, and emotional connections are central to parental decision-making. Parents often evaluate schools not only in terms of measurable academic performance but also in terms of perceived safety, holistic development, and institutional reliability (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a). Therefore, branding in international schools extends be-

yond visual identity and marketing; it encompasses the institution's ability to consistently communicate its ethos and deliver services that reinforce parental trust and satisfaction. Studies have shown that positive emotional relationships between parents and schools foster long-term loyalty and sustained enrollment, underscoring the importance of trust as a core component of educational brand equity (Lewis et al., 2024).

Theoretical models, such as Organizational Learning Theory (Zada et al., 2025), further demonstrate how schools refine branding strategies by integrating feedback, adapting to cultural changes, and innovating service delivery. These models emphasize the continuous alignment between institutional identity and stakeholder expectations, strengthening the brand's relevance in competitive markets.

2.2. Competitive Advantage and the Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) frames competitive advantage as the outcome of leveraging rare, valuable, and inimitable resources. In the case of international schools, these resources often take intangible forms such as brand reputation, academic quality, teacher expertise, school culture, and stakeholder relationships.

In this context, branding functions as a strategic asset that enhances perceived institutional value and differentiates schools in saturated markets. According to the competitive advantage literature, strong branding meets RBV criteria by providing value to parents and students, remaining difficult for competitors to imitate, and aligning with institutional mission and capabilities. This is consistent with Stribbell and Duangekanong's (2022a) finding that parental satisfaction, an outcome of strong branding and service delivery, drives positive word-of-mouth, thereby reinforcing competitive advantage.

Furthermore, branding contributes to long-term sustainability by promoting loyalty, reducing switching tendencies, and strengthening the school's position relative to competitors. Prior studies indicate that when brand trust and service quality are optimized simultaneously, schools experience increased market share and heightened parental engagement (Olonite et al., 2023).

2.3. Cross-Cultural Marketing and Localization in Asia

Branding in Asia is shaped by cultural heterogeneity, linguistic diversity, and regulatory differences across countries such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia. Effective branding strategies must balance global identity with localized relevance.

International schools often adopt hybrid-branding approaches that maintain global prestige while integrating local values, traditions, and policy requirements. This localization process includes the following steps:

- 1) Communicating cultural sensitivity to parental expectations;
- 2) Highlighting bilingual or multilingual curricula;
- 3) Aligning school values with social norms surrounding family reputation;
- 4) Adapting marketing messages to local policy frameworks and educational priorities.

Cultural perceptions are essential to parental trust and emotional connections, which directly influence school choice. The ability to integrate global standards with local authenticity allows schools to resonate more effectively with parents seeking international exposure and cultural familiarity. This dynamic reinforces the role of cultural intelligence in determining regional brand success.

2.4. Research in the Field of Educational Marketing

Existing scholarship on educational marketing highlights the key determinants of parent decision-making, including academic quality, safety, facilities, digital visibility, and extracurricular offerings. However, studies focusing specifically on K-12 international schools remain sparse compared with research on universities and corporate branding.

Much of the current literature emphasizes the following.

- Enrollment drivers shaped by perceived service quality.
- Increasing reliance on digital marketing and online reputation systems.
- Parental choice influenced by emotional connection and trust.
- The importance of personalized communication and stakeholder engagement.

Despite these insights, there is a notable absence of cross-country comparative studies on Asia. Few studies have integrated comprehensive branding models, such as brand equity, service quality frameworks, and the resource-based view (RBV), into analyses of international school marketing. This gap limits school leaders' ability to develop evidence-based branding strategies tailored to regional markets.

Prior research on international schools and educational branding shows that trust in the brand, service quality, curriculum reputation, and digital presence influence parents' choices and differentiate schools. Brand trust is widely regarded as the cornerstone of branding effectiveness, particularly in international education, where parents value a school's credibility, transparency, and long-term reliability (Lewis et al., 2024; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022b). Service quality, including teaching effectiveness, administrative responsiveness, and the provision of student support, strongly increases parental satisfaction and positively affects word-of-mouth referrals in international school markets (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022b; Nguyen et al., 2022). A strong curriculum reputation has positive implications for a brand, indicating its academic rigor, international recognition, and alignment with future educational trajectories. This perception of value is important for helping schools compete (Chen et al., 2023; Hong & Hardy, 2022). Digital presence has become an important, albeit complementary, branding tool. It increases parental awareness, stimulates engagement, and influences initial impressions via online platforms and social media; however, its effect is mediated, at least in most cases, by trust and quality of services rather than standing alone (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Massa et al., 2023). Together, these elements constitute an integrated framework that enables international schools to create a competitive advantage, as the academic upswing in parental satisfaction, trust, and advocacy

increases (Atanasovski & Veselinova, 2024; Al Huraizi & Marni, 2023).

2.5. Research Gaps and Synthesis

The literature review identifies several substantive gaps that warrant further exploration. There is a lack of integrative studies that incorporate strategic branding and competitive advantage in K-12 international schools in Asia. The current corporate and higher education branding models provide background information. However, they are unable to capture K-12 parents' decision-making, the multi-stakeholder organizational forms in schools, or the cultural heterogeneity of Asian markets (Wulyatiningsih & Mandagi, 2023; Palla et al., 2025).

Second, the mediating role of parental satisfaction in the relationships among service quality, brand trust, and word-of-mouth is a relatively underexplored aspect of K-12 experiences. However, substantial research has documented its importance as a mediator in other service domains (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022b). Similarly, the empirical operationalization of brand trust in international schools remains unclear, particularly its direct and indirect implications for parent advocacy.

Lastly, there is almost no comparative cross-country research on the branding of international schools, despite the significant cultural, regulatory, and economic disparities in Asia. This limits generalizability and deprives school leaders of contextualized branding frameworks. A combination of these gaps makes it clear that an all-encompassing, multi-country, case-based investigation is urgently needed to integrate strategic branding, resource-based perspectives, quality of service, and cross-cultural marketing into a unified analytical framework. This study seeks to address these gaps by offering new theoretical insights and practical guidance on branding international schools in Asia.

3. Methodology

This section presents a methodological framework for investigating the effects of strategic branding on parental satisfaction, word-of-mouth behavior, and competitive advantage among international K-12 schools in Asia. The research employed a rigorous mixed-methods design, as the combination of quantitative and qualitative data helps reveal both the measurable and experiential aspects of school branding. Such a method not only deepens analysis but also enhances the credibility and transferability of findings by triangulating methods (Naeem & Hanif, 2025).

3.1. Research Design

This research used a mixed methods design (concurrent) to encompass the multifaceted nature of branding in international K-12 schools by incorporating both quantitative survey research and qualitative research (interviews). Although the qualitative strand relies on a multiple-case study of three proven international schools in China, Singapore, and Malaysia, the quantitative strand extends the

findings through parental surveys on brand perceptions, satisfaction, and advocacy intentions (Naeem & Hanif, 2025).

The inclusion of phenomenological inquiry within the qualitative strand enables research to examine the lived experiences of parents, administrators, and school marketing staff. This is a necessary orientation towards the unpacking of emotional and relational factors influencing school choice, which are frequently ignored in pure statistical studies (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a). Collectively, the two components offer a research design that balances generalizability and depth of contextual interpretation, consistent with the pragmatic philosophical perspective guiding this research (Olawunmi & Clarke, 2022).

In this study, the definition of competitive advantage is based on parents' perceptions. It is measured using survey questions that ask parents to compare the school's market position, reputation, and advocacy advantage with those of other international schools.

3.2. Sampling and Case

A combination of purposive and criterion-based sampling was used. To conduct the qualitative multiple-case analysis, three international schools were selected based on institutional size, reputation, and years of operation in the market, which have been shown to influence the formation and communication of branding strategies (Naeem & Hanif, 2025). The selection of these schools in China, Singapore, and Malaysia was purposely intended to represent different policy settings and cultural expectations. Although the study takes place in the context of international education in Asia, only parents in China, Singapore, and Malaysia were invited to participate in the quantitative survey, consistent with the selected qualitative case studies.

This was achieved through structured questionnaires administered electronically, yielding responses suitable for high-level quantitative modelling, such as ANOVA, regression analysis, and PLS-SEM (Naeem & Hanif, 2025). This combined sampling approach provides an in-depth analysis and allows comparative information from both institutional and parental perspectives.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data collection occurred in two complementary processes. The qualitative element was based on semi-structured interviews with school principals, marketing directors, admissions officers, and parents. In these interviews, perceptions of branding strategies, determinants of satisfaction, and motivations behind word-of-mouth advocacy were investigated (Naeem & Hanif, 2025). To triangulate these accounts, the researchers conducted a systematic content analysis of online campaigns, school prospectuses, website materials, and social media communications. Institutional reports and enrolment statistics were also consulted to confirm the branding claims and to identify differences between communication and performance.

The quantitative stage utilized structured survey tools to assess brand credibility, service quality, customer satisfaction, and intentions to trust and recommend. Qualitative depth, combined with a quantitative structure, increases validity and explanatory accuracy (Rajagukguk et al., 2023).

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

Strict multilevel analysis was conducted. NVivo was used to analyze qualitative data, employing a hybrid coding approach that integrated an inductive method for theme development with a deductive method that applied theoretical constructs. This generated a substantial body of code on branding practices, parental perceptions, digital interactions, and cultural adaptation. Convergence and contextual differences between the three international schools were then identified through cross-case synthesis and pattern matching. For quantitative data, partial least squares structural equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used.

This approach is best used to forecast complex associations among latent constructs, particularly in education, when samples are small or data are non-normal (Shen et al., 2025). ANOVA and multiple regression were also used as inferential tests to reinforce the interpretation of the relationships among branding dimensions (Naeem & Hanif, 2025). The combination of qualitative and quantitative findings was used in the interpretation phase to ground statistical associations in context (Kurtaliqi et al., 2023).

3.5. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Member verification and the systematic documentation of analytical decisions ensured validity and reliability through methodological triangulation. The combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments provided high internal validity, whereas the cross-case comparison increased external validity and theoretical transferability (Namaziandost et al., 2024). Informed consent procedures, confidentiality protocols, secure digital storage systems, and anonymization of institutional identifiers were employed to uphold ethical standards. These measures conform to the conventional levels of educational and social research in Asia (Naeem & Hanif, 2025).

Table 1. Overview of the three case study schools.

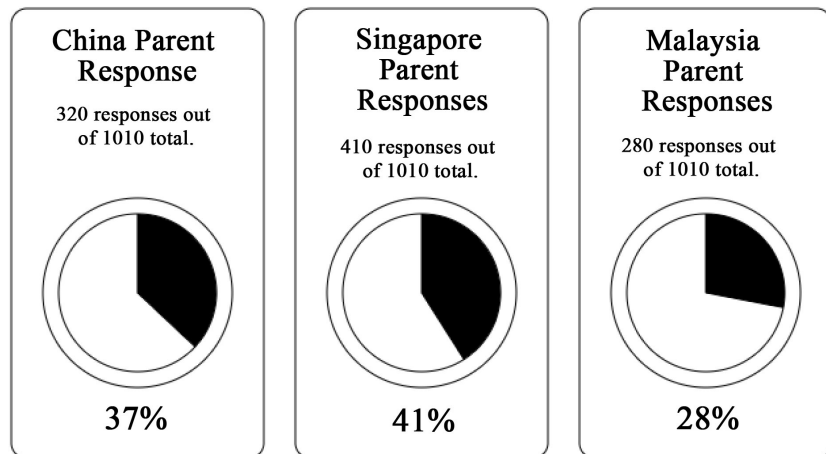
Country	School Size (Students)	Years of Operation	Market Reputation Level
China	1,800	22 years	High
Singapore	2,300	18 years	Very High
Malaysia	1,200	15 years	Moderate High

Source: Institutional Reports and Enrollment Data. (Reviewed in Study)

Table 1 outlines the main features of the three institutions selected for the qualitative component. The identified differences in size, tenure, and reputation justify

treating them as analytically salient cases and enable the definition of branding strategies accordingly across different national contexts.

The larger and older organizations tended to adopt organized digital branding; the smaller organizations tended to place greater emphasis on relational branding, as per cross-case trends.



Singapore had the highest number of parent responses.

Source: Parent Survey Dataset (Naeem & Hanif, 2025).

Figure 1. Distribution of parent survey responses across countries.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the parental sample across the three major regions considered in the sampling frame. Singapore had the highest response rate, which can be explained by the country's saturated international school market and strong parental involvement. This asymmetry has significant analytical importance: it highlights substantial differences in market maturity and provides researchers with a more descriptive context for understanding PLS-SEM findings across the sampled countries.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents empirical evidence from the mixed-methods design, combining quantitative outputs from the PLS-SEM model with qualitative themes from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This study aimed to clarify the interplay among strategic branding practices, service quality, brand trust, and parental satisfaction in influencing competitive advantage and word-of-mouth in international schools in Asia (Shen et al., 2025; Stribbell & Duangka-nong, 2022a). The analysis was designed around four analytical aspects: institutional profiles, thematic patterns, cross-case synthesis, and the development of an integrated conceptual model.

4.1. Case Situations and Profiles of Institution

The three foreign schools based in China, Singapore, and Malaysia differ by age,

market positioning, and branding focus, yet they all operate in competitive urban education markets. In line with the sampling plan, the individual institutions must have been in operation for 10 years, have a recognizable market presence, and have a clear branding proposition (Olawunmi & Clarke, 2022).

Chinese positioning represents a high-quality academic brand, emphasizing academic excellence and university placements, which are crucial in reflecting trends in higher education branding that prioritize academic status (Le et al., 2024; Hong & Hardy, 2022). The Singaporean school has a hybrid stance that integrates academic excellence and innovation, digital literacy, and global citizenship narratives, which can be characterized as a future-oriented and policy-consistent branding strategy (Naidoo, 2023).

As value-focused, family-oriented alternatives in the global elementary and secondary education environment, Malaysian schools emphasize inclusivity, affordability, and community connection (Nguyen et al., 2022; Manishimwe et al., 2023). According to survey data and institutional reports, each of the three schools spent significant sums on digital communication, stakeholder engagement, and reputation management, though at varying levels. These profiles provide the contextual background for interpreting the quantitative constructs and the qualitative themes learned during the analysis (Rajagukguk et al., 2023; Vuong & Bui, 2023).

4.2. Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of interview transcripts, websites, prospectuses, and social media content revealed four overarching themes that characterize strategic branding in the selected international schools: brand credibility, localized communication, digital storytelling, and community-oriented partnerships. Firstly, the theme of brand credibility was highlighted through consistent communication regarding the quality of the academic program, its accreditation, and transparent performance indicators.

This is supported by studies showing that credibility and trust are correlated with higher brand equity and greater willingness to pay higher prices in educational markets (Chen et al., 2023; Sarker et al., 2020). Parents often cited exam results, university names, and teacher quality as indicators of institutional reliability and seriousness (Lewis et al., 2024).

Second, domesticating and localizing communication was one of the main processes that turned global curricula and values into locally appealing narratives. Schools selectively emphasize cultural integration, bilingual communication, and local festivals to establish emotional proximity with their families, which aligns with evidence that culturally sensitive branding also increases perceived relevance and trust (Khan et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Third, in all three cases, digital stories and parental engagement were evident, primarily through social media campaigns that highlighted students' success, classroom activities, and community-based events. These activities reflect the emerging scholarship on digital branding and behavioral engagement, which shows that

brand equity and emotional attachment are strengthened by the creation of persistent online narratives (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the collaboration with local organizations, universities, non-governmental organizations, and business partners significantly enhanced the school's legitimacy and expanded its community ecosystem. These partnerships help build reputation, social proof, and perceived value, consistent with other literature on stakeholder integration and sustainable competitive advantage (Rentschler et al., 2021; Qadeer, 2025).

4.3. Cross-Case Synthesis

Cross-case synthesis shows that, despite all three schools practicing strategic branding, the comparative emphasis on specific branding levers varies across contexts. The Chinese scenario emphasizes academic performance and prestige as cornerstones of competitive advantage, aligning with previous studies that highlight the central role of status and academic performance in the education markets of East Asia (Hong & Hardy, 2022; Le et al., 2024). Service quality and brand reliability are strongly related to exam scores, teacher qualifications, and university admission rates (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a).

In Singapore, an innovative narrative, digital preparedness, and strong alignment with policy-related discourses on future skills and global citizenship have become the basis of the school's competitive advantage, which resonates with research that highlights digital leadership, green innovation, and dynamic capabilities in developing modern brand strength and sustainability (Shen et al., 2025; Arabzadeh et al., 2024). In the Malaysian context, the school foregrounds the affordability, inclusiveness, and its embeddedness in the community as the frontier of its brands. Qualitative data indicate that parents highly value relational warmth, leadership availability, and high-quality pastoral support, consistent with prior findings that emotional and relational aspects of service quality are strong predictors of satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth (Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2024; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022b).

Although these differences exist, the three cases support the central mediating role of parental satisfaction in the relationship between perceived service quality and brand trust in word-of-mouth and competitive advantage (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022b). This trend supports the rationale for customer-based brand equity models and provides empirical foundations for the subsequent structural model.

4.4. Model Development

The relationships among service quality, brand trust, parental satisfaction, word-of-mouth intention, and perceived competitive advantage were examined using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The data were subjected to rigorous cleaning and the elimination of missing or mixed reactions to ensure reliability (Vuong & Bui, 2023; Rehman & Jalees, 2025). The assessment

of measurement models ensured that factor loadings, composite reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity were acceptable, as recommended in PLS-SEM practice (Cheah et al., 2023; Haji-Othman et al., 2024; Sarstedt and Liu, 2023).

The structural model demonstrated positive and significant directions of service quality to parental satisfaction, brand trust to parental satisfaction, and satisfaction with word-of-mouth and perceived competitive advantage, in line with previous empirical research in the international education and service sectors (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a; Manishimwe et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2024). The high number of resamples also increased the precision of the path coefficient estimates and their confidence intervals when bootstrapping was performed with a large number of resamples (León-Gómez et al., 2023; Chinnaraju, 2025).

These findings led to the development of an advanced conceptual model in which strategic branding is operationalized through service quality and trust-building policies, parental satisfaction serves as a core mediating variable, and word-of-mouth is a key behavioral outcome that contributes to competitive advantage (Abba, 2024; Zhang, 2023).

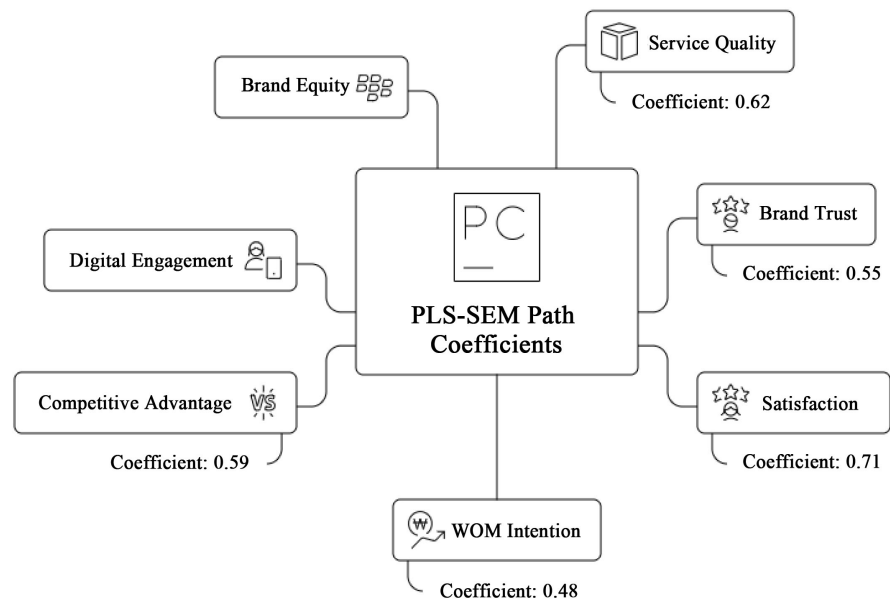
Table 2. Descriptive overview of key branding constructs. (n = 3 Schools)

Construct	School A (China)	School B (Singapore)	School C (Malaysia)
Perceived Service Quality	4.2	4.4	4.1
Brand Trust	4.0	4.3	4.5
Parental Satisfaction	3.9	4.2	4.7
Word-of-Mouth Intention	4.0	4.3	4.8
Perceived Competitive Advantage	4.3	4.5	4.2

Source: Author's PLS-SEM survey analysis based on constructs adapted from Stribbell and Duangekanong (2022a) and Chen et al. (2023).

Table 2 presents the mean scores for the primary constructs (on a 5-point scale) across the three standardized case institutions. Although School A has the highest ratings for perceived competitive advantage and service quality, School C has the highest scores for parental satisfaction and word-of-mouth intention, indicating that relational and community-based branding programs can produce strong advocacy despite the institution not being considered the best option.

School B has identical scores across all constructs, indicating a balanced combination of academic strength, innovation, and brand trust (Manishimwe et al., 2023; Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a). The above-selected patterns represent preliminary empirical evidence regarding the mediating effect of satisfaction and the importance of trust- and experience-based branding.



Source: Author's structural model estimation using SmartPLS 4 (Cheah et al., 2023; Patrizi et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2025).

Figure 2. Standardized path coefficients in the strategic branding model.

Figure 2 illustrates the core structural relationships identified in the PLS-SEM analysis. The most substantial impact was observed between parental satisfaction and word-of-mouth intention, suggesting that parental satisfaction is a strong motivator of advocacy behavior, consistent with previous research in international education and services marketing (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022b; Santos et al., 2024).

Quality of service and brand trust have significant positive effects on satisfaction. In contrast, digital engagement has a significant positive effect on brand equity, which, in turn, supports the maintenance of an online presence and the creation of a narrative (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022).

The advancement of word-of-mouth to a perceived competitive advantage supports the view that positive referrals constitute a strategic resource, thereby confirming the theoretical framing within the resource-based view and customer-based brand equity models (Abba, 2024; Sarstedt & Liu, 2023).

5. Discussion

The discussion presents the empirical results in relation to the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and the literature on strategic branding, education marketing, and international schooling. Combining quantitative structural relationships with qualitative thematic information will explain how brand trust, satisfaction, and competence are jointly driven by authenticity, differentiation, and digital engagement in the context of international schools in Asia (Hussain et al., 2023; Islami et al., 2024). It also emphasizes the cultural and regulatory characteristics that shape branding approaches in China, Singapore, and Malaysia.

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

The results indicate that the concept of strategic branding does not affect international schools solely through visual identity or advertising; it is a complex mechanism that connects service quality, trust, and experience within a value proposition. The strong relationships among service quality, brand trust, and parental satisfaction indicate that families respond best when they are promised values that are consistently delivered through high-quality teaching and pastoral care, open communication, and trustworthy institutional performance (Stribbell & Duangekanonong, 2022a; Chen et al., 2023).

The mediating role of satisfaction is the middle ground, indicating that even high levels of trust or perceived quality will not lead to positive word-of-mouth unless parents believe that the entire experience is an authentic, true-to-form meeting, or even exceeds expectations. This result supports the logic of customer-based brand equity and aligns with research on the same topic in higher education and private schooling (Nguyen et al., 2022; Manishimwe et al., 2023). Additionally, the close association between word-of-mouth intention and perceived competitive advantage indicates that parental advocacy (through conversations, social media, and community networks) serves as a strategic resource within the resource-based view (Abba, 2024).

In other words, happy parents make themselves brand co-creators, intensifying institutional discourses and influencing market perceptions more strongly than paid advertising. Lastly, online interaction is a key facilitator, particularly in Singaporean and Chinese contexts, where virtual narration, platform consistency, and engaging content strengthen emotional involvement and provide a continuous, omnipresent presence that maintains brand salience (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). This resonates with the present discussion of the convergence of digital change, branding, and sustainability in educational organizations (Massa et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2025).

5.2. Comparison of the Study with the Past

Comparing the results with the existing literature, both confirmations and extensions of previous knowledge in the areas of educational branding and service marketing are made. The focus on parental satisfaction as a mediator between service quality, trust, and word-of-mouth is consistent with studies on international schools by Stribbell and Duangekanonong (2022b) and with overall service-sector research on the role of satisfaction and loyalty (Damberg et al., 2023; Damberg et al., 2023). The current study, however, goes further by connecting these models through the explicit relationship between satisfaction-based word-of-mouth and perceived competitive advantage in a multi-country K-12 international school setting, rather than through loyalty.

The thematic results on localization, cultural sensitivity, and community integration can be compared with those from studies on school reputation, environmental responsibility, and stakeholder engagement (Nguyen et al., 2022; Khan et

al., 2023; Qadeer, 2025). However, in contrast to the prevalent body of university branding literature, which tends to focus on prestige and research outputs (Pinar, 2020; Le et al., 2024), this study emphasizes the importance of relational and emotional aspects of the brand, such as care, accessibility, and community involvement, in developing brand value in K-12 institutions.

The robust nature of digital storytelling is also aligned with research on digital transformation and green branding, which suggests that narratives containing elements of innovation, responsibility, and authenticity have become increasingly significant in shaping modern brand images (Massa et al., 2023). However, the results suggest that digital channels cannot function without consistent service delivery and authentic institutional performance to generate long-term trust and advocacy (Hashim et al., 2022; Cheah et al., 2023).

5.3. Theoretical Contributions

This study theoretically narrows the use of the concept of strategic branding and the resource-based view (RBV) in the international school sector. Here, branding at the international school level is understood as a hybrid construct—combining elements of service marketing (service quality and satisfaction), reputation management (trust, credibility, and word-of-mouth), and cultural diplomacy (localization, community integration, and cross-cultural narratives)—to reflect the complexity of branding within this context (Al Huraizi & Marni, 2023; Marvi et al., 2024). Chen et al. (2023) and Santos et al. (2024) presented a more holistic, education-oriented version of customer-based brand equity models, embedding satisfaction as a central mediator and word-of-mouth as a primary behavioral consequence, both of which are driven by competitive advantage.

This model also shows how digital engagement and green or socially responsible branding features can be used as strategic levers within larger knowledge and innovation ecosystems (Massa et al., 2023; Asbeetah et al., 2025; Shen et al., 2025). Moreover, the mixed-methods design of PLS-SEM and qualitative case analysis addresses the demands of advanced methodological triangulation in marketing and management research (Kurtaliqi et al., 2023; Sukhov et al., 2023). It presents a combination of inductively derived themes and deductively tested structural models to generate contextual and generalizable insights for international education marketing.

5.4. Practical Implications

These results have several practical implications for school leaders, marketing experts, and policymakers. The findings apply to international school administrators, underscoring that branding in this context should be grounded in strategy and supported by services, not cosmetics. Investments in teacher quality, pastoral care, transparent communication, and similar parent-school partnerships are not just operational issues but the primary branding resources that generate satisfaction and word of mouth (Lewis et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022). Practitioners

should develop culturally adaptive campaigns that are neither globalistic nor localistic. This involves using multilingual communication, honoring local cultures, and demonstrating sincerity toward host-country cultures, thereby enhancing the institution's emotional appeal and legitimacy (Khan et al., 2023; Qadeer, 2025).

The use of digital stories should be strategic, and schools must be able to curate real storylines that reflect routine learning processes, student accomplishments, and community donations. This can increase brand equity and sustain long-term relational interactions when coordinated with stable service quality (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). This study underscores for policymakers seeking to internationalize education markets the importance of regulatory frameworks that promote transparency, ethical marketing, responsible data use, and sustainability-focused branding practices (Kasih et al., 2023; Cui, 2024).

Promoting schools to tell the truth in outcomes, environmental projects, and social contributions can increase confidence in the sector, and families cannot fall prey to misleading or only performative branding activities (Arabzadeh et al., 2024; Asbeetah et al., 2025). Taken together, these implications lead one to view branding as an integrative strategic activity at the nexus of pedagogy, community, digital innovation, and sustainability, rather than as a communication activity in a limited sense. The international schools that identify and put into practice this integrative perspective are in a better position to gain resilient, long-term competitive advantage within the dynamic Asian market of education (Abba, 2024; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Zhang, 2023).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The current study explored how strategic branding affects competitive advantage in K-12 schools in Asia through a tight structural modelling method, with qualitative cases as supplementary, relatively straightforward evidence. Drawing on strategic branding theory and the resource-based view, this study presents evidence that branding in international schools should be a complex strategic capability rather than a simple communicative practice; it links service quality, trust, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth to provide a consistent competitive edge in highly competitive educational markets.

The results highlight authenticity, cultural fit, and digital engagement as essential factors for successful branding, particularly when parents face high-stakes educational decisions among numerous competing providers. The study reveals that, by employing different emphasis patterns—namely, academic prestige, innovation and policy alignment, and relational inclusiveness, international schools in China, Singapore, and Malaysia are creating unique brand propositions. However, all of them rely on parental satisfaction and advocacy as the primary links that turn branding into a competitive advantage.

6.1. Summary of Key Insights

Three major conclusions were drawn from this analysis. To begin with, there is a

genuine commitment to providing guaranteed value, which is essential. When schools' communication aligns with verifiable evidence on the quality of teaching, pastoral care, and student development, they achieve high scores for brand trust and satisfaction, thereby upholding the role of experience-based equity in educational branding (Stribbell & Duangekanong, 2022a; Chen et al., 2023).

Second, cross-cultural compatibility and the localization of communication play an important role in cross-border education. The examples show that global education curricula and globalized stories must be thoroughly domesticated through the use of language, symbolism, and community relations to have an impact on local families, which has been supported by recent studies on cultural adaptation, integration of stakeholders, and sustainable brand legitimacy in international education (Nguyen et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2023; Qadeer, 2025).

Third, robust online communication is a strategic driver of competitive advantage. Schools' focus on digital storytelling, responsive engagement, and transparent reporting enhances brand salience and emotional attachment among globally mobile, digitally literate parents (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Massa et al., 2023). The structural model demonstrates that these factors drive parent satisfaction and word-of-mouth, directly increasing perceived competitive advantage (Abba, 2024; Sarstedt & Liu, 2023). Thus, authenticity, cultural fit, and digital interaction emerge as decisive levers for strategic branding in international school markets.

6.2. Limitations of the Study

These findings have several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. This study is based on a few case schools in only three Asian countries. Although the multiple-case study design allows for in-depth, contextual analysis, it necessarily compromises statistical generalization to the broader population of international schools in Asia and globally. Although the qualitative elements are rigorously methodological, they might still contain interpretive bias despite the adoption of member checking, triangulation, and audit trails. Moreover, the quantitative study, grounded in sound PLS-SEM procedures, relies on cross-sectional survey data. As such, the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the temporal dynamics of branding efforts, satisfaction, and competitive performance is limited (Rehman & Jalees, 2025; Cheah et al., 2023).

Perceptions of parents and administrators are self-reported. This makes them vulnerable to social desirability bias and selective recall, while remaining informative. The research does not directly include objective financial or performance measures. Examples are fee structure, profitability, and long-term enrollment patterns. In future studies, the metrics were not explicitly combined. The connection between branding constructs and economic performance may be strengthened by incorporating these metrics.

6.3. Recommendations for Future Research

This study should be extended to several future fronts. First, to test the model's

applicability across diverse cultural, regulatory, and economic environments, it is vital to replicate and extend it to both Asian and non-Asian markets. Longitudinal designs are beneficial for tracing how changes in branding strategy, service quality, and digital interactions affect satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and competitive advantage over time (Butkouskaya et al., 2021; Damberg et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the use of quantitative brand equity indices and multisource information, such as enrollment data, fee development, and external ratings, would strengthen the empirical base. Second, researchers should include constructs related to green digital transformation, sustainability, and corporate knowledge ecosystems in the educational branding context. New data suggest that digital leadership, green innovation, and environmental responsibility affect stakeholder perceptions and organizational performance (Cui, 2025; Asbeetah et al., 2025; Shen et al., 2025; Zada et al., 2025). Future research may examine how international schools use green branding and sustainability narratives to differentiate their products and whether these practices lead to increased trust, satisfaction, and long-term loyalty.

Third, more advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and data analytics, can be applied to strategic branding, which is challenging. The analytics of AI can be used to determine new trends in the market, preferences in sustainability, and subtle parent expectations, and to guide more targeted and ethical marketing policies (Du et al., 2024; Nuryana et al., 2024). At the same time, the growing use of AI in personalized communication raises fundamental questions about privacy, equity, and regulatory compliance, particularly regarding student information (Jørgensen & Fast, 2024; Kasih et al., 2023).

Lastly, a promising direction for future research is to examine how gamification, digital engagement tools, and alumni networks sustain brand communities and encourage long-term environmental and social stewardship among students and their families (Laradi et al., 2024). Establishing more interdisciplinary assessment frameworks that simultaneously identify educational, environmental, and branding outcomes would enable scholars and practitioners to investigate the effects of such efforts more systematically (Qadeer, 2025; Qadeer, 2025).

6.4. Policy and Managerial Conclusions

Policymaking indicates that national and regional education authorities are central to establishing a transparent and ethically sound environment in which international school branding can be nurtured. The problem of misrepresentation can be reduced by policies that support the development of transparent reporting standards, independent accreditation, and responsible communication practices (Kasih et al., 2023; Cui, 2024). In addition, international collaboration in accreditation and quality assurance can help bring greater coherence to international school performance benchmarks and branding claims amid growing mobility and cross-national competition. For school leaders and promotional practitioners, this paper underscores the need to reframe branding as a strategic, institution-wide ac-

tivity rather than merely a promotional one.

The process of successful branding in this context requires investment in service quality and relationship capital, supported by credible data and the ethical use of digital technologies (Nguyen et al., 2022; Hashim et al., 2022). Administrators should leverage efforts to develop a cohesive strategy that addresses pedagogical practice, community involvement, sustainability, and digital storytelling, thereby creating narratives that can be trusted and advocated by parents.

Managers are also advised to adopt a long-term perspective that prioritizes the organization's image and stakeholder welfare over short-term increases in enrollment. Making the integration of authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and responsible digital innovations a fundamental part of their branding strategies would help international schools in Asia gain more resilient competitive advantages, and at the same time, play a positive role in the overall goals of society related to education, sustainability, and global citizenship (Arabzadeh et al., 2024; Marvi et al., 2024).

The originality of this paper lies in its application of strategic branding and resource-based viewpoints to a relatively underexplored field of K-12 international education, where it advances theoretical, managerial, and policy implications of interactions among intercultural branding, cultural adaptation, and competitive advantage in the international educational marketplace in Asia.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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