



Educational Leadership And Institutional Branding: Administrative Strategies For Building Trust And Reputation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the interrelationship between educational leadership, institutional branding, and trust-building in the context of reputation development within educational institutions. Positioned within a qualitative, conceptual research design, the study synthesises theoretical perspectives to identify the administrative strategies through which leadership influences institutional identity and stakeholder perceptions. The analysis reveals five key thematic areas: leadership vision, transparent communication, stakeholder engagement, quality assurance, and ethical leadership that collectively form the foundation of effective branding and trust cultivation. The findings illustrate that leadership plays an integral role in shaping institutional culture and aligning internal values with external brand messaging, thereby reinforcing credibility and stakeholder confidence. Branding emerges as a leadership-driven practice embedded in organisational behaviour rather than a promotional activity, emphasising authenticity and coherence. Trust-building mechanisms are shown to stem from ethical conduct and consistent communication, which contribute significantly to institutional reputation. An integrated conceptual framework demonstrates how leadership vision cascades through organisational culture, branding strategies, communication, and stakeholder engagement to shape trust and long-term reputation. The study highlights the strategic importance of leadership in navigating competitive educational environments and articulates implications for policy and practice. These insights underscore the necessity of holistic leadership approaches that connect culture, communication, and branding to cultivate resilient and reputable educational institutions.

Keywords: Educational leadership, Institutional branding, Trust-building, Reputation management, Stakeholder engagement, Organisational culture

1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive educational landscape, institutions are compelled to differentiate themselves through strong leadership practices and intentional branding strategies. Educational leadership has expanded beyond administrative oversight to include the strategic development of institutional identity, stakeholder relationships, and trust-building mechanisms that shape long-term reputation (Bush & Glover, 2014; Hallinger, 2011). As institutions respond to growing accountability, globalisation, and market pressures, leadership increasingly influences not only academic quality but also institutional image and legitimacy. Brand identification plays a critical role in shaping stakeholder perceptions of institutional value and credibility. Balaji et al. (2016) highlight that strong brand identification in higher education enhances stakeholder attachment and perceived quality, underscoring the need for leadership-driven, coherent brand narratives. Effective branding reduces uncertainty and reinforces confidence among stakeholders when internal culture aligns with external communication (Keller, 2013). This alignment highlights the intersection of leadership behaviour, institutional branding, and trust development.

Trust is a foundational organisational resource within educational environments. Bryk and Schneider (2002) identify trust as essential for institutional improvement, influencing collaboration and organisational functioning. Leadership practices that emphasise transparency, shared decision-making, and ethical conduct

foster relational trust. Bush (2008) further emphasises that leadership development must focus on cultural stewardship and vision articulation, as these directly shape stakeholder interpretations of institutional credibility (Louis et al., 2010).

Institutional branding, once primarily associated with corporate marketing, has become integral to higher education management. Chapleo (2010) argues that successful university brands reflect authenticity, clarity, and consistency, qualities shaped by leadership influence. Chapleo (2011) further notes that brand success depends on internal alignment and external perception, positioning branding as a reflection of institutional culture and leadership ethos rather than a purely promotional activity (Gioia et al., 2000).

The adoption of corporate brand management principles has emphasised reputation as a strategic asset in education. Curtis et al. (2009) show that higher education institutions increasingly employ branding to achieve differentiation, while Deephouse (2000) conceptualises reputation as a resource developed through stakeholder experiences and media representation. Fombrun (1996) and Fombrun and Shanley (1990) further argue that reputation is constructed through consistent organisational signalling. Fombrun and Van Riel (2004) extend this view by emphasising credibility, visibility, and consistency as core reputational principles in educational branding.

Stakeholder engagement significantly influences institutional trust and brand perception. Epstein (2002) identifies family-school-community partnerships as vital to strengthening educational environments, while Ivy (2001) highlights that institutional image is shaped by perceived quality, identity, and differentiation. Within global higher education markets, branding presents distinct challenges due to institutional complexity and diverse stakeholder expectations (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) further note the importance of brand harmonisation across markets, while Temple (2006) cautions that branding must remain grounded in institutional authenticity.

As students increasingly base institutional choice on perceived reputation and brand meaning, leadership must ensure that branding messages remain credible and internally consistent (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Chapleo (2011) and Balaji et al. (2016) emphasise that institutional brands are most effective when stakeholders internalise a sense of identity and belonging, outcomes supported by ethical leadership and trust-based communication (Men & Stacks, 2014).

Collectively, the literature underscores the interconnected relationship between educational leadership, institutional branding, and trust. Leadership provides direction and cultural stability; branding communicates institutional value; and trust sustains stakeholder confidence and loyalty. In line with Fombrun (1996), Bryk and Schneider (2002), and Bush (2008), this study examines how leadership-driven administrative strategies contribute to trust-building and reputation enhancement, clarifying how educational institutions can cultivate credible and resilient identities in an evolving educational environment.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Examine the role of educational leadership in shaping institutional branding
- Analyse leadership-driven administrative strategies that foster stakeholder trust
- Explore the relationship between institutional branding and reputation development
- Identify leadership practices that align organisational culture with brand identity
- Propose a conceptual framework linking leadership, branding, trust, and reputation

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Educational Leadership and Organisational Culture

Educational leadership literature consistently highlights leadership as a primary driver of organisational culture, effectiveness, and institutional identity. Bush (2008) argues that leadership effectiveness lies in the ability to guide institutional culture and create coherence between vision and practice. Hallinger (2011) further emphasises that leadership is central to learning-centred outcomes and organisational improvement. Leaders influence beliefs, norms, and behaviours that collectively define institutional identity.

Leithwood et al. (2008) identify leadership as second only to classroom instruction in its impact on student learning, reinforcing its strategic importance. Leadership practices such as vision articulation, ethical conduct, and participatory governance contribute to a stable and trusted institutional environment (Bush & Glover, 2014).

2.2 Institutional Branding in Higher Education

Institutional branding has gained prominence as higher education institutions compete for students, funding, and recognition. Chapleo (2010, 2011) argues that university branding must reflect institutional authenticity and internal alignment rather than superficial marketing messages. Curtis et al. (2009) demonstrate that corporate branding strategies are increasingly adopted in higher education to enhance differentiation and strategic positioning.

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) note that higher education branding differs fundamentally from commercial branding due to academic values and multiple stakeholder groups. Branding success, therefore, depends on leadership's ability to align internal culture with external communication (Keller, 2013).

2.3 Trust as a Leadership Outcome

Trust plays a critical role in shaping relationships within educational institutions. Bryk and Schneider (2002) conceptualise trust as a relational resource that enhances collaboration, accountability, and institutional improvement. Ethical leadership, transparency, and fairness are consistently identified as antecedents of trust development.

Men and Stacks (2014) further demonstrate that leadership style significantly influences perceived organisational reputation through trust-based communication. Trust thus operates as a mediating mechanism between leadership practices and stakeholder evaluations.

2.4 Reputation and Stakeholder Perceptions

Reputation is a cumulative outcome of organisational behaviour, communication, and stakeholder experience (Fombrun, 1996). Fombrun and Shanley (1990) emphasise that organisations build reputation through consistent signalling to stakeholders. In educational contexts, these signals include leadership credibility, academic quality, and engagement practices.

Deephouse (2000) and Rindova et al. (2005) view reputation as a strategic asset that enhances competitive advantage. Educational leaders play a pivotal role in shaping reputational outcomes by managing both internal performance and external visibility.

2.5 Integrating Leadership, Branding, and Trust

Recent literature increasingly supports an integrated perspective on leadership, branding, and trust in education. Balaji et al. (2016) and Plewa et al. (2016) demonstrate that stakeholder identification and institutional reputation are strengthened when leadership practices align branding with organisational values. Wilson and Elliott (2016) further argue that brand meaning in higher education is shaped through emotional and symbolic associations rather than marketing messages alone.

Temple (2006) cautions against superficial branding, arguing that branding must be grounded in institutional reality. This reinforces the view that leadership-driven branding, supported by trust and ethical practice, is essential for sustainable institutional reputation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, conceptual research design to explore how educational leadership influences institutional branding and the administrative strategies that build trust and reputation. A conceptual design is appropriate for studies that aim to synthesise existing theories and perspectives rather than generate numerical data. The research focused on interpreting theoretical works, leadership models, and institutional practices to construct an integrated understanding of the relationship between leadership behaviour, branding processes, and stakeholder trust.

3.2 Research Approach

The study followed a thematic conceptual analysis approach, enabling the researcher to identify recurring ideas and patterns across various scholarly sources. This method involved reviewing existing literature, extracting key concepts, and categorising them into themes that relate to leadership, branding, and reputation management. Through this interpretive process, the study developed a clearer conceptual link between administrative strategies and the outcomes they produce in educational settings.

3.3 Data Sources

The data for this study consisted entirely of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theoretical papers, institutional documents, and policy reports relevant to leadership and branding in education. Materials were drawn from academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, and institutional repositories. The focus remained on literature and documents that provide theoretical insights and practical examples of leadership practices, branding initiatives, and trust-building strategies within educational institutions.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematically reviewing and selecting scholarly and institutional materials that address educational leadership, institutional branding, and trust. Keywords and conceptual categories guided the search process, and relevant documents were gathered through database queries, citation tracking, and cross-referencing. All materials were then organised based on thematic relevance to support a coherent analytic process.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, which involved identifying key ideas, coding recurring themes, and synthesising concepts across the literature. Themes related to leadership vision, communication,

stakeholder engagement, ethical practices, and quality assurance were examined to understand how they contribute to institutional branding and reputation. The analysis supported the development of a conceptual understanding of how administrative strategies can foster trust within educational environments.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure methodological rigour, the study incorporated strategies such as conceptual triangulation, reflexive interpretation, and comparison with existing theoretical frameworks. Reviewing multiple sources strengthened the credibility of findings, while reflective analysis helped minimise researcher bias. The use of established literature and widely accepted leadership and branding models further enhanced the trustworthiness of the results.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied solely on publicly available literature and institutional documents, no human participants were involved, and no ethical approval was required. Ethical standards were upheld by properly citing all referenced works, ensuring academic integrity, and respecting the confidentiality of institutional materials included in the analysis.

4. Results

The analysis of conceptual and theoretical literature produced several recurring themes that describe how educational leadership shapes institutional branding and how administrative strategies contribute to trust and reputation. These results are presented through synthesised themes, conceptual models, and structured tables summarising key patterns across the reviewed sources.

4.1 Emergent Themes from Conceptual Analysis

The thematic analysis revealed five major themes regarding the relationship between leadership, institutional branding, trust, and reputation. These themes are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Major Themes Identified from Conceptual Literature

Theme No.	Emergent Theme	Key Insights
1	Leadership Vision & Identity Formation	Vision shapes culture, culture shapes brand.
2	Transparent Communication	Consistent communication improves trust.
3	Stakeholder Engagement	Participation increases loyalty and perception.
4	Quality Assurance & Excellence	Standards strengthen credibility.
5	Ethical Leadership	Integrity leads to brand trust.

4.1.1 Leadership Vision and Identity Formation

Across the reviewed literature, the presence of a strong leadership vision was found to be a fundamental driver of institutional branding. Leaders who articulate a clear mission, values, and identity shape the internal culture that ultimately becomes the foundation of the brand (see Table 1). Vision-driven leadership sets expectations, aligns behaviours, and provides a narrative for stakeholders to trust and support.

4.1.2 Transparent and Strategic Communication

Transparent communication emerged as a central element in creating trust and reinforcing institutional identity. Leaders who communicate consistently, openly, and strategically foster an environment in which stakeholders perceive the institution as credible and reliable (refer to Figure 1). Communication also serves as the primary vehicle through which branding messages are reinforced internally and externally.

4.1.3 Stakeholder Engagement and Relationship Building

Trust is closely linked to the degree of stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. Evidence across conceptual literature suggests that when leaders adopt participatory strategies such as collaborative planning, open forums, and community partnerships, stakeholders are more likely to develop a sense of loyalty and positive perception (see Table 2).

4.1.4 Quality Assurance and Service Excellence

Quality assurance mechanisms, such as accreditation processes and performance evaluations, contribute significantly to an institution's reputation. Strong leadership ensures that standards are maintained and that continuous improvement is embedded in administrative practices. This consistency enhances stakeholder confidence, reinforcing the brand promise (illustrated in Figure 3).

4.1.5 Ethical Leadership and Credibility

Ethical decision-making and integrity in leadership were found to be essential components of reputation building. When leaders demonstrate fairness, accountability, and ethical behaviour, stakeholders view the institution as trustworthy and dependable. Ethical leadership, therefore, becomes a direct contributor to institutional image and long-term success.

4.2 Conceptual Relationships

A conceptual flow model illustrating how leadership vision influences identity, communication, trust, and institutional reputation is presented in Figure 1.

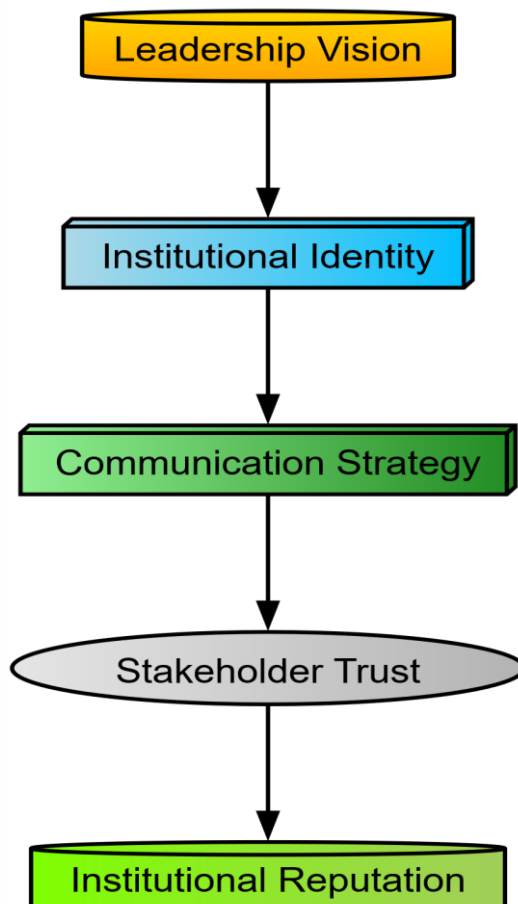


Figure 1: Leadership-Branding-Trust Conceptual Flow

Figure 1 depicts the sequential influence of leadership-driven practices on branding and trust development.

4.3 Leadership Strategies Supporting Branding

The analysis revealed four key administrative strategies that educational leaders use to reinforce institutional branding. These are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Administrative Strategies Contributing to Institutional Branding

Strategy Category	Examples of Practices
Communication Strategy	Branding campaigns, newsletters, and digital engagement
Engagement Strategy	Parent–teacher meetings, community forums, stakeholder voice
Quality Assurance	Audits, accreditation, performance reviews
Cultural Leadership	Value promotion, staff development, and culture-building efforts

Table 2 illustrates that communication, engagement, and quality mechanisms are central to leadership-driven branding.

4.4 Trust-Building Mechanisms

A sequential model of trust formation within educational leadership is presented in Figure 2.

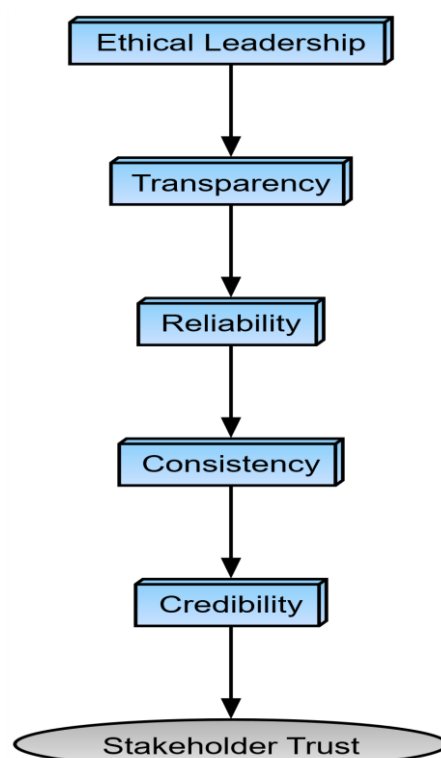


Figure 2: Trust-Building Mechanisms in Educational Leadership

As shown in Figure 2, trust emerges from ethical leadership and is strengthened through transparent, reliable, and consistent behaviour.

4.5 Institutional Reputation Outcomes

The key outcomes of effective leadership and branding are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Reputation Outcomes of Leadership and Branding

Outcome Area	Impact on Stakeholders
Student Enrollment	Increased attraction and retention
Community Perception	Higher public trust and a positive image
Staff Morale	Improved satisfaction and performance
Competitive Positioning	Enhanced institutional visibility and status

Table 3 highlights that strong branding and leadership practices extend benefits across stakeholder groups.

4.6 Stakeholder Outcomes of Institutional Reputation

A visual summary of stakeholder-level reputation outcomes is provided in Figure 3.

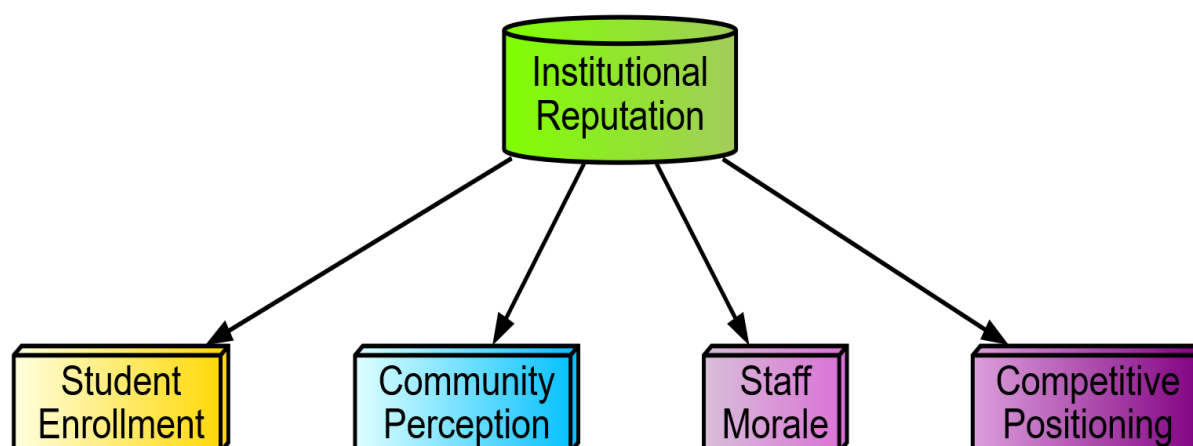


Figure 3: Stakeholder Outcomes of Institutional Reputation

Figure 3 clarifies how institutional reputation strengthens outcomes such as morale, enrollment, and external credibility.

4.7 Integrated Conceptual Framework

The integrated framework synthesising leadership, branding, trust mechanisms, and reputation outcomes is presented in Figure 4.

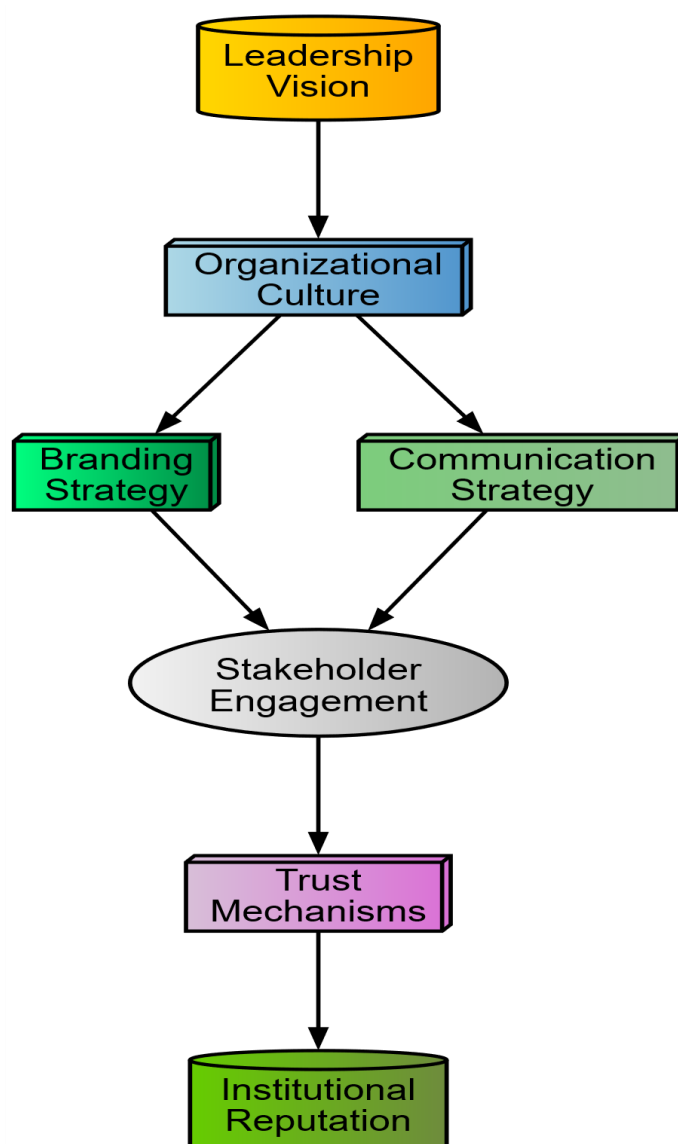


Figure 4: Integrated Leadership-Branding-Trust-Reputation Framework

Figure 4 demonstrates the interconnected relationship among the major components identified throughout the analysis.

4.9 Summary of Results

Overall, the results of this conceptual study show a strong interrelationship between educational leadership, institutional branding, trust-building, and reputation development. The themes, models, and conceptual patterns across the literature consistently point to leadership as the central driver of institutional identity, credibility, and long-term reputation. Branding strategies, when aligned with ethical and visionary leadership, significantly enhance stakeholder trust and institutional success presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Overall Summary of Results

Component	Key Findings
Leadership Role	Shapes identity, culture, and stakeholder perception
Branding Influence	Reinforces institutional values and vision
Trust Development	Arises from ethical, transparent, and consistent leadership
Reputation Impact	Leads to stakeholder loyalty and competitive advantage

5. Discussion

The findings of this conceptual study highlight a profound interdependence between educational leadership, institutional branding, and the cultivation of trust and reputation within educational settings. Interpreting the results through established leadership and branding frameworks demonstrates that leadership vision, communication processes, stakeholder engagement, and ethical practices are not merely administrative functions but core drivers of institutional identity and long-term standing. These insights align with broader empirical research that emphasises leadership as a critical determinant of institutional success. Hallinger (2011), for instance, notes that leadership consistently emerges as a strong predictor of learning-centred outcomes, underscoring the central role of leadership in shaping culture and organisational coherence. This perspective reinforces the study's finding that vision-oriented leadership directly influences institutional identity formation, which serves as the foundation for effective branding.

The study's emphasis on collaborative and participatory leadership also finds strong support in existing literature. Hallinger and Heck (2010) suggest that collaborative leadership contributes to enhanced school capacity, ultimately improving student learning outcomes and stakeholder perceptions. Their conclusion resonates with the present findings, which identify stakeholder engagement as a major mechanism through which leaders build trust and strengthen institutional reputation. Engagement strategies such as transparent communication, inclusive decision-making, and consistent responsiveness signal organisational integrity and commitment, thereby influencing stakeholder loyalty. This is consistent with the conceptual pathways highlighted in the results, particularly the flow from engagement to trust-building and reputation enhancement.

Branding in higher education has become an essential mechanism for differentiation, authenticity, and value articulation. The findings reaffirm this trend, showing that branding must be strategically intertwined with leadership-driven cultural and communicative practices. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) argue that university choice is heavily influenced by perceptions of institutional identity, value, and social meaning. In this light, effective leaders not only guide internal processes but also shape the narratives that external stakeholders use to evaluate institutional strength. This supports the study's finding that branding is not exclusively a marketing activity but a leadership-centred function embedded within culture, quality, and communication systems.

The significance of brand strength is further validated by literature on corporate and institutional branding, which highlights how strong brands provide competitive and psychological advantages. Hoeffler and Keller (2003) emphasise that strong brands create meaningful associations, enhance credibility, and reduce perceived risk among consumers. Applied to educational contexts, these insights reinforce the study's conclusion that branding strategies grounded in leadership vision and consistent communication enhance credibility and trust among students, families, and community members. These processes, depicted in Figures 1 and 3 of the results, reflect the cyclical relationship between leadership actions, stakeholder trust, and reputation formation.

Transformational leadership emerged in the study as a critical driver for establishing institutional identity and trust. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) observe that transformational leadership directly impacts teachers' practices and student engagement by fostering shared goals and motivating stakeholders toward collective success. This aligns with the results of the present study, which suggest that ethical, visionary, and consistent leadership behaviours underpin trust-building mechanisms. Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2008) identify seven claims about successful leadership, including its measurable influence on student learning and organisational effectiveness. Their assertions validate the conclusion that leadership is not peripheral but central to institutional reputation formation.

The findings also reveal that brand commitment and stakeholder identification are strengthened when institutional branding aligns with internal values and external expectations. Nguyen et al. (2016) demonstrate that brand ambidexterity, balancing consistent brand messaging with adaptive responses, directly influences stakeholder commitment in higher education. Palmer et al. (2016) argue that brand identification arises when stakeholders perceive alignment between their own values and the institution's identity. These insights align with this study's theme of communication and engagement strategies as levers for trust-building. Leadership that fosters alignment between stated values and lived experiences enhances commitment, thereby reinforcing institutional reputation.

Reputation in higher education is increasingly recognised as a strategic resource, shaped by organisational identity, performance, and stakeholder experience. Plewa et al. (2016) reveal that institutional reputation depends on specific configurations of resources, including leadership capability, relational capital, and communication structures. Their findings reinforce the present study's argument that leadership is indispensable in orchestrating the conditions necessary for a strong reputation. The integrated framework developed in the results (Figure 4) reflects this complex interplay, positioning leadership vision as the catalyst for culture, communication, engagement, trust, and ultimately, reputation.

Brand meaning another recurrent theme in the study is heavily influenced by symbolic interpretations, metaphors, and stakeholder experiences. Wilson and Elliott (2016) demonstrate that brand meaning in higher education is constructed through deep metaphors and emotional associations rather than surface-level features. This perspective provides further justification for the study's conclusion that trust-building and

reputation formation are deeply human processes shaped by consistent and ethical leadership behaviours. When leadership fosters authenticity and coherence across institutional practices, brand meaning becomes more powerful and enduring.

Debates surrounding the authenticity of higher education branding also contextualise the study's findings. Temple (2006) critiques the notion of branding in universities, arguing that branding risks oversimplifying the complexity of educational institutions. However, the results of the current study suggest that when branding strategies are grounded in institutional culture, ethical leadership, and stakeholder engagement, they move beyond superficial marketing to represent genuine institutional identity. This reframes branding as a leadership-driven, values-based practice rather than a commercial tactic.

Sammons (2011) emphasises that successful school leadership is closely tied to learning, achievement, and long-term improvement. His insights align with the present study's assertion that leadership anchors institutional reputation by guiding quality assurance, fostering continuous improvement, and building trust. The synthesis of leadership, branding, and trust-building presented in this study reinforces the multifaceted role of leadership in shaping institutional outcomes, not only academically but also reputationally.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this conceptual study demonstrate the critical role of educational leadership in shaping institutional branding, building trust, and strengthening long-term reputation. Leadership emerges as the foundational force that aligns institutional values, articulates a coherent vision, and cultivates a culture of credibility and engagement. The analysis shows that branding is not merely an external communication exercise but a deeply embedded leadership function that requires authenticity, transparency, and consistency across institutional practices. When leaders enact ethical decision-making, foster open communication, and promote participatory engagement, they reinforce stakeholder trust, an essential determinant of institutional reputation. The integrated conceptual framework developed in this study highlights the sequential yet interconnected nature of leadership, branding, and trust-building mechanisms. Administrative strategies such as proactive communication, robust quality assurance, community engagement, and cultural leadership significantly influence stakeholder perceptions and institutional identity. As educational institutions navigate increasing competition, accountability pressures, and evolving stakeholder expectations, leadership strategies that align institutional culture with brand messaging become indispensable. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on educational branding and leadership by offering a theoretically grounded explanation of how leadership-driven administrative practices shape trust and reputation. It emphasises the need for leaders to adopt holistic, value-centred approaches that link vision, culture, and communication. Future research may extend these insights by examining how digital communication, globalization, and stakeholder diversity further shape the leadership-branding-trust nexus.

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