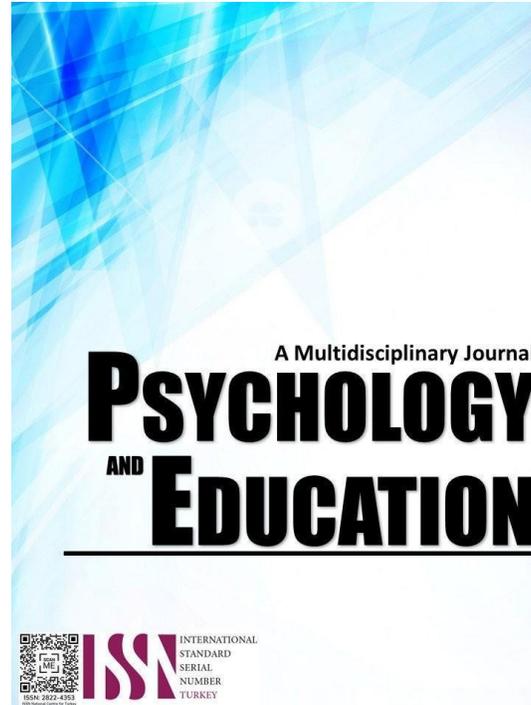


# STAKEHOLDERS' ASSESSMENT OF BRAND AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING AND INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION



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# Stakeholders' Assessment of Brand and Strategic Positioning and Internationalization in a Private Higher Educational Institution

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## Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between brand positioning, strategic positioning, and internationalization in a private higher educational institution in Jiangxi, China. Adopting a descriptive-correlational research design, data were collected through a validated questionnaire administered to 179 purposively selected internal and external stakeholders, including department heads, deans, and high-ranking alumni. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation analysis, were employed to examine the association among functional, symbolic, experiential, and competitive brand positioning dimensions; strategic positioning indicators such as national ranking and competitive advantage; and internationalization outcomes measured by collaboration and scope. Results reveal that stakeholders perceive the institution's brand and strategic positioning positively, with significant correlations found between all brand and strategic dimensions and internationalization indicators ( $p < .001$ ). Competitive and experiential positioning demonstrated the strongest associations with international collaboration and scope. The findings emphasize the importance of stakeholder-informed strategies to enhance institutional identity, global visibility, and engagement. This research contributes to the discourse on higher education competitiveness by integrating branding and internationalization through a stakeholder-based framework, offering practical implications for institutional leaders in non-Western academic contexts.

**Keywords:** *assessment, brand positioning, internationalization, stakeholders, strategic positioning*

## Introduction

In today's increasingly competitive higher education landscape, private institutions in China face mounting pressure to enhance visibility, legitimacy, and global competitiveness. This pressure is intensified by the growing prominence of global rankings such as QS and Shanghai Ranking, which influence institutional reputation, funding, and student recruitment (Kang & Mok, 2024). Despite their flexibility and responsiveness, private higher educational institutions often lack the strategic clarity required to navigate global expectations (Liu & Wang, 2020). Consequently, institutions are compelled to invest in brand and strategic positioning to differentiate themselves through quality education, innovation, and international engagement (Shukla et al., 2024; Al-Abdallah & Ababakr, 2025).

Numerous strategies have emerged to address these challenges, with brand positioning covering functional, symbolic, experiential, and competitive dimensions and strategic positioning focused on national ranking and competitive advantage gaining traction. Internationalization understood as the integration of global perspectives in teaching, research, and institutional practices, has been widely adopted as a solution to enhance institutional prestige (De Wit & Hunter, 2020; Rizaldi & Suprayogi, 2025). Yet, existing approaches often remain fragmented and lack coherence with stakeholder perceptions, risking superficial adoption and limited structural impact (Hung & Yen, 2022; O'Shea & Jungblut, 2024).

While branding and internationalization have been independently explored, few studies critically examine their interrelationship, especially from a stakeholder-based lens in the context of private institutions in non-Western settings. Most notably, current literature fails to integrate internal and external stakeholder assessments in evaluating strategic efforts (Li & Xue, 2022). As a result, there is a gap in understanding how institutional identity, competitiveness, and global aspirations are perceived and linked to tangible international outcomes.

This study aims to bridge that gap by evaluating how stakeholders such as department heads, deans, and alumni assess a private higher education institution's brand and strategic positioning, and how these perceptions relate to its internationalization outcomes. Incorporating stakeholder perspectives, the study seeks to guide evidence-based strategies that align institutional branding, competitive positioning, and international collaboration toward sustainable global engagement.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to explore the relationship between brand positioning, strategic positioning, and internationalization in a private higher educational institution in Jiangxi Province, China. The descriptive component provided a comprehensive profile of stakeholder perceptions, while the correlational approach enabled examination of the statistical associations between multiple variables without inferring causality. This methodology is suitable for studies aiming to identify patterns

and relationships among constructs within a defined population, as recommended by Bhandari (2023) and Dolmaz and Dolmaz (2024).

### Respondents

A total of 179 stakeholders were purposively selected, comprising 105 internal stakeholders (department heads and deans) and 74 external stakeholders (alumni in senior leadership roles). These participants were identified based on their strategic involvement in institutional governance and internationalization efforts. The inclusion criteria emphasized direct exposure to and experience with institutional branding and global engagement activities.

### Instrument

The primary data collection tool was a researcher-developed questionnaire validated by five academic experts three from the Philippines and two from China. The instrument measured three core constructs: brand positioning (functional, symbolic, experiential, and competitive dimensions), strategic positioning (national ranking and competitive advantage), and internationalization (collaboration and scope). All items were structured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Cronbach’s alpha values indicated strong internal consistency across all subscales.

### Procedure

Data were collected over a 10-month period from March 2024 to January 2025. Questionnaires were distributed in both digital and paper formats, depending on stakeholder accessibility and preference. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality assurances, were observed throughout the data-gathering process.

### Data Analysis

Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS statistical software (version 25). Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to describe the stakeholder profile and levels of the main constructs. Pearson’s *r* correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and significance of relationships among the dimensions of brand positioning, strategic positioning, and internationalization. All inferential analyses were tested at a 0.05 significance level.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1. *Strategic Positioning of the Private Higher Educational Institution*

| <i>Dimension</i>      | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard Deviation</i> | <i>Interpretation</i> |
|-----------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| National Ranking      | 3.43        | 0.98                      | High                  |
| Competitive Advantage | 3.63        | 1.00                      | High                  |

Stakeholders rated both national ranking and competitive advantage at high levels. The perception of strategic positioning was strongest among internal key officials and those affiliated with the institution for more than 31 years. These findings indicate that senior and long-term stakeholders perceive the institution as strategically visible and competitively positioned within the higher education landscape.

Table 2. *Internationalization of the Private Higher Educational Institution*

| <i>Dimension</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Standard Deviation</i> | <i>Interpretation</i> |
|------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Collaboration    | 3.42        | 1.01                      | High                  |
| Scope            | 3.38        | 1.00                      | Moderate              |

Results showed a high level of stakeholder-perceived international collaboration, while the scope of internationalization remained moderate. Department heads reported the highest levels of collaboration, suggesting that administrative actors are more directly involved in institutional international partnerships. The moderate scope score suggests opportunities for expanding the institution’s international presence across more disciplines or regions.

Table 3. *Relationship between Brand Positioning and Internationalization*

| <i>Brand Positioning Dimension</i> | <i>Collaboration (r)</i> | <i>Scope (r)</i> | <i>Significance (p)</i> |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| Functional Positioning             | .443                     | .327             | < .001                  |
| Symbolic Positioning               | .466                     | .329             | < .001                  |
| Experiential Positioning           | .500                     | .336             | < .001                  |

|                         |      |      |        |
|-------------------------|------|------|--------|
| Competitive Positioning | .518 | .352 | < .001 |
|-------------------------|------|------|--------|

Pearson correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships between all brand positioning dimensions and internationalization indicators. Competitive positioning showed the strongest correlation with collaboration ( $r = .518$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that stakeholders associate the institution's global partnerships with its ability to compete in academic quality and innovation. Experiential and symbolic aspects were also strongly linked to international scope, emphasizing the role of institutional identity and experience in shaping global engagement.

With respect to the research objectives, the following are the findings of the study:

1. Majority of the stakeholders are internal key officials, are working in the university, belong in the alumni category, have at least 21 years of service, and are minimally- or moderately involved.
2. Stakeholders of a private higher educational institution have moderate level of brand positioning in terms of functional positioning, symbolic positioning, and competitive positioning; while they have high level in terms of experiential positioning.
3. Stakeholders of a private higher educational institution have high level of strategic positioning in terms of national ranking and competitive advantage.
4. Stakeholders of a private higher educational institution have high level of internationalization in terms of collaboration and a moderate level in terms of scope.
5. Brand positioning in terms of functional positioning, symbolic positioning, experiential positioning, and competitive positioning have positive and significant relationships with internationalization in terms of collaboration and scope.
6. Strategic positioning in terms of national ranking and competitive advantage have positive and significant relationships with internationalization in terms of collaboration and scope.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides empirical evidence that brand positioning and strategic positioning are significantly correlated with internationalization outcomes in a private higher educational institution in China. These findings affirm the central hypothesis that institutional identity, as perceived by internal and external stakeholders, plays a critical role in fostering global engagement. Notably, the strongest correlations were found between competitive and experiential brand positioning and the dimensions of international collaboration and scope ( $r = 0.518$  and  $r = 0.500$ , respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results reinforce the premise that stakeholders are not merely passive observers but active evaluators of institutional relevance and global readiness.

The observed alignment between stakeholder perceptions and internationalization efforts corroborates earlier work by Jorge (2024), who emphasized the importance of cohesive brand identity in catalyzing transnational academic partnerships. Moreover, the high correlation between experiential positioning and international scope suggests that lived experiences within the institution such as faculty-student interactions, pedagogical innovation, and service quality translate into reputational assets that bolster international outreach. This echoes Jeon's (2024) findings, wherein symbolic and experiential branding were shown to foster institutional loyalty and perceived trustworthiness among academic stakeholders.

However, this study also engages with critical counterpoints in the literature. O'Shea and Jungblut (2024) argued that overreliance on branding, especially when aligned too closely with university rankings, risks producing image-driven strategies that lack substantive academic or structural backing. While the current results do reveal a positive stakeholder perception of national rankings and competitive advantage (mean = 3.43 and 3.63, respectively), caution is warranted. Quantitative significance does not necessarily equate to qualitative transformation. As Taylor (2024) warns, symbolic positioning may inflate institutional perception without corresponding improvements in academic delivery or research capacity. This suggests that institutions must balance image cultivation with evidence-based quality assurance.

The consistency of these results with those of Pinias et al. (2024), who highlighted the role of national visibility and governance in advancing international partnerships, reinforces the idea that strategic positioning is not merely about external rankings but also about internal coherence and execution. Nevertheless, the moderate score in the scope of internationalization (mean = 3.38) compared to collaboration (mean = 3.42) suggests room for improvement. This divergence indicates that while the institution is perceived as active in forming global partnerships, it may lack breadth in the diversity of its international initiatives whether in terms of academic disciplines, geographic reach, or policy integration.

The present study also contributes to stakeholder theory in the context of higher education, supporting the propositions of Dimitrova (2023), Sabzalieva (2020), and Gacel-Ávila & Vázquez-Niño (2022), who advocate for participatory approaches in shaping global strategies. The methodological decision to involve long-serving internal leaders and accomplished alumni provides a grounded understanding of institutional trajectories and their alignment with global trends. Nevertheless, the reliance on perceptions rather than longitudinal outcomes constitutes a limitation. The findings reflect stakeholder sentiments at a specific point in time, and future research should incorporate time-series analysis or case comparisons across institutions to validate these patterns.

One unexpected insight concerns the relatively high stakeholder ratings of experiential positioning (mean = 3.68), suggesting that qualitative aspects of the institutional environment may serve as a more reliable basis for internationalization than symbolic metrics or promotional campaigns. This finding invites a reassessment of conventional branding strategies that focus primarily on visual identity and marketing communication, encouraging a deeper investment in faculty development, student services, and research infrastructure instead.

In conclusion, the study confirms that stakeholder-informed assessments provide a robust lens for evaluating institutional readiness for internationalization. It challenges institutions to integrate brand identity and strategic initiatives not only as external narratives but as internally consistent practices grounded in experience and purpose. Moving forward, further research should explore how multi-stakeholder alignment influences policy implementation and global academic performance across diverse regional contexts.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on higher education competitiveness by empirically establishing the critical role of brand and strategic positioning in enhancing internationalization outcomes within private academic institutions. Integrating stakeholder perspectives, it offers a novel, evidence-based framework that connects functional, symbolic, experiential, and competitive branding as well as strategic constructs like national ranking and competitive advantage with measurable international collaboration and scope.

Unlike previous studies that treat branding and internationalization as isolated phenomena, this research advances the field by demonstrating their interdependence and the mediating influence of stakeholder assessment. The strong correlations found between experiential and competitive positioning and global engagement suggest that institutional quality, as experienced internally, may serve as a more reliable predictor of international success than surface-level promotional efforts or ranking metrics alone. This insight supports a shift from image-driven strategies to experience-centered branding and mission-aligned strategic planning.

Practically, the findings underscore the importance of designing integrated internationalization strategies that are grounded in institutional identity and shaped by stakeholder engagement. Institutions aiming to expand their global footprint particularly those in non-Western or emerging higher education systems must view branding not as a marketing exercise, but as a reflection of authentic academic value and internal coherence.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to explore how stakeholder perceptions evolve in relation to policy implementation and global shifts in higher education. Expanding the participant base to include students, industry partners, and international collaborators would also provide a more holistic understanding of how brand equity and strategic alignment affect institutional reputation and sustainability on a global scale. This research advances a stakeholder-driven paradigm for institutional internationalization, offering both theoretical enrichment and practical direction for private higher education institutions navigating global competitiveness.

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