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The influences of country brand authenticity in transnational higher education: student satisfaction at country-branded universities

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether a transnational education institution's perceived country brand authenticity influences students' judgements of service quality and their satisfaction with their programme and institution. The research also considers the institution's brand image. An online survey was used to obtain data from 915 higher education students studying at Chinese, German, and United States-affiliated universities located in Egypt, the Sultanate of Oman, and Bangladesh. It was found that an institution's perceived country brand authenticity is positively related to students' judgements of service quality and their overall satisfaction. Also, we found that perceived country brand authenticity is an antecedent of the institution's brand image, while student satisfaction may be an outcome of brand image. Thus, the results confirm the importance of an institution's country brand authenticity in influencing students' attitudes, as well as contributing to a strong institutional brand image. To our knowledge, this is the first study to consider the relationship between country brand authenticity and student satisfaction in higher education. The implications of our findings are discussed.

Introduction

Transnational education is generally associated with programmes and educational providers crossing national borders (Knight, 2016), but the term may also be used to

include domestic institutions that 'borrow' or transfer elements of one country's higher education system to another country (Wilkins & Huisman, 2025). Higher education institutions in transnational education may take several different forms, including international branch campuses, international study centres, and turnkey campuses (Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011). While international branch campuses and international study centres are owned, at least in part, by a foreign university, turnkey campuses are usually owned by the government or an individual/organisation in the host country. Turnkey universities are developed with the assistance of foreign universities, but once established, the local owners take control of operations. Most country-branded universities (CBUs) may be recognised as turnkey institutions.

CBUs are a common type of higher education institution found in many countries worldwide. They are usually independent institutions that operate in the private sector, and they follow, at least to some extent, the higher education system of a foreign country (Wilkins et al., 2025). CBUs are easily recognised, as they include a country in their name that is other than the country in which the campus is located. For example, *The British University in Egypt* is a private university that is located in Egypt and affiliated with the United Kingdom (UK). CBUs and international branch campuses/study centres may have different regulatory frameworks. For example, in Bangladesh, most CBUs are governed by the *Private University Act 2010*, while international branch campuses and study centres are governed by the *Cross-Border Higher Education Rules 2014*. The regulatory differences between the two are significant, ranging from governance, financial matters and faculty recruitment to degree awarding powers and approval of curricula and grading systems.

While most CBUs 'borrow' or transfer key elements of their affiliated country's higher education system, country affiliation may be used by some CBUs as predominantly a branding initiative, resulting in these CBUs lacking some of the common features and attributes of institutions in the affiliated country. Also, regulatory requirements in the host country may result in differences between a CBU and comparative institutions in the affiliated country. For example, The British University in Dubai uses a United States (US) rather than UK curriculum structure and grading system because these are required in order to award locally accredited degrees in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The fact that CBUs have different levels of country brand authenticity provides the rationale for investigating students' perceptions, as these perceptions may influence how students assess service delivery experiences and their overall satisfaction.

Students who choose to study at a CBU likely want and/or expect their overall student experience to be similar to that which would be received at a university in the affiliated country. Therefore, students may have certain expectations about the curriculum, programme content, teaching staff (e.g., that they are citizens or nationals of the affiliated country), teaching and learning styles, administrative and support services, extra-curricular activities, and the institution's culture and values. If students perceive that the institution and its programmes are sufficiently similar to corresponding institutions and programmes in the affiliated country, then the institution's country brand may be regarded as authentic (Wilkins & Huisman, 2025). The extent to which students' expectations are realised may be a factor that determines their levels of perceived service quality and, ultimately, satisfaction with their programme and institution.

An institution's country brand authenticity may be regarded as one dimension of the institution's overall brand. It is not yet known the extent to which perceived country-brand authenticity influences students' judgements of service quality and satisfaction with their programme and institution, which are the research gaps that this research fills. Thus, the study's central research question may be stated as *To what extent do students' perceptions of a CBU's country brand authenticity influence students' perceived service quality, the university's brand image, and student satisfaction?* Our conceptual model hypothesises that students' perceived service quality and the university's brand image act as mediating constructs in the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and student satisfaction. As this research adopted a cross-sectional research design, students' perceptions of their institution and corresponding institutions in the affiliated country were measured only at one point in time, and the questions of how and when individuals gained their perceptions of the corresponding institutions are not considered relevant in answering the study's central research question.

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether the underlying education-related dimensions of an institution's country brand authenticity influence students' judgements of service quality and their overall satisfaction. The research also explores whether an institution's perceived country brand authenticity and students' judgements of service quality impact upon the institution's brand image. The findings of this research offer valuable insights for transnational education institutions, as perceived quality and student satisfaction that is attributed, at least in part, to aspects of the institution's foreignness represent positive outcomes that other domestic institutions may not be able to replicate.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, we provide an overview of CBUs. Then, we explain the concept of country brand authenticity in transnational education contexts, and hypothesise how country brand authenticity may influence students' perceptions of service quality and the institution's brand image, and then finally, students' overall satisfaction with their programme and institution. Following this, we present details of our method and then our findings. After this, we discuss the contributions and implications of our research. Finally, we conclude the paper by acknowledging the study's limitations and offering suggestions for future research.

Country-branded universities (CBUs)

There are more than 120 CBUs globally, and although at least 80 of these institutions are branded as American, CBUs are also branded as Australian, British, Canadian, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Russian (Wilkins & Huisman, 2024). CBUs may be established and operated by the government, an individual, or organisation in the country where the institution is located, or they may be the result of international collaborations between different national governments or organisations from both the host and affiliated countries. CBUs should be recognised as domestic institutions, since they have not crossed national borders (Juusola et al., 2023). Examples of such institutions, with their affiliated countries shown in italics, include the *American* International University – Bangladesh, The *British* University in Dubai, Egyptian *Chinese* University, *French* University in Armenia, *German* University of Technology in Oman, Kazakh-*Russian* International University, and Vietnam *Japan* University.

Some CBUs operate with substantial support from foreign governments, universities, and organisations, which may include funding, advice, guidance, programme accreditation, and undertaking quality assurance activities. Other CBUs operate with minimal foreign backing or support. When a CBU has few real ties with their affiliated country, it may be difficult to create and maintain an education and student experience that is comparable to what is typical in the affiliated country. However, in practice, students generally regard both international branch campuses and CBUs as providing an opportunity to 'study overseas without going abroad' (Cai et al., 2024), and most individuals are not aware of key differences between the different types of institutions. Nevertheless, many students are likely to have preconceived expectations of what a foreign education is like, and the extent to which their expectations are realised may impact upon their perceptions of quality and their satisfaction with their programme and institution.

Literature review and hypotheses

Country brand authenticity

Brand authenticity is a complex construct, but it is commonly associated with qualities such as originality, quality, integrity, continuity of heritage, and symbolic meaning (Akbar & Wymer, 2017). Perceived brand authenticity is important in higher education, as it may have a strong influence on students' brand attachment and supportive behaviours (Girardin et al., 2024). At the heart of a CBU's brand is its foreign country affiliation, so it is important that the country element of the institution's brand is perceived by stakeholders as authentic. An institution's country brand may be regarded as authentic if students (and other stakeholders) perceive that it corresponds with, or is true to, the referent, i.e., that to which the institution is being compared (Moulard et al., 2021).

While international branch campuses, which are at least partially owned by a foreign university, can claim indexical authenticity, CBUs are only able to claim iconic authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Indexical authenticity is based upon the recognition that a product is the original, genuine thing; in other words, the education and student experience at the overseas branch campus is identical or very similar to the provision at the main campus. At best, iconic authenticity implies that CBUs deliver an authentic reproduction of the affiliated country's higher education system, which provides students with an education and experience that is typical in the affiliated country.

Students' judgements of service quality

As transnational education institutions are private institutions that operate outside of the public/state sector, most of the students who study at these institutions pay tuition fees. The concept of value is likely to be important to such students, as they assess the worth or benefit they receive from their programme and institution compared to the costs they incurred. The post-consumption evaluation process that students are likely to undertake will include an assessment of service quality. Perceived service quality may be defined as the individual's judgement about a product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988). In higher education, students may assess service quality by evaluating the overall quality of their experiences with teaching and learning, supervision, administrative and

support services, extra-curricular activities, institutional leadership, and student life in general (Latif et al., 2019).

Students may also consider the credentials of the academic staff; student teacher ratios; the facilities, equipment and resources available at the campus; and word of mouth received from existing or past students as indicators of quality (de Silva, 2024; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). If students perceive that the educational and non-academic experiences received met or exceeded their needs, wants, and expectations, they may assess the institution's service quality as high. Research has found that the perceived quality of academic staff and study programmes is the most important factor in determining value for students (Lapina et al., 2016). As higher education institutions have increasingly recognised the importance of providing high service quality, several researchers have developed scales for measuring service quality in higher education (e.g., Asif et al., 2013; Latif et al., 2019; Senthilkumar & Arulraj, 2011; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016).

The countries that CBUs are affiliated with – e.g., Germany, the UK, and the US – are developed nations that have successful and well-established higher education systems. These countries have positive country images. In comparing British and Indian institutions in Malaysia, Chee et al. (2016) found that many students used country image as a cue to infer the possible attributes and benefits of a particular institution or higher education system, i.e., students tended to assume that an institution from a developed country is likely to be of higher quality than one from a developing country. Also, a study of Chinese institutions in three different South East Asian countries found that students perceived the institutions as attractive partly because of the perceived high quality of China's education, science and technology, as well as the nation's cultural history and heritage (He & Wilkins, 2019). Thus, the perceived attractiveness of an affiliated country's image may have an influence on students' perceived service quality, as well as the institution's brand image, which is discussed further in the following section.

As all of the countries of affiliation used by CBUs are developed, wealthy countries, students may assume that their chosen CBU will be well-resourced with superior facilities and equipment, that it will have up-to-date syllabi and programme content, well-qualified academic staff who use modern teaching methods, and high-quality administrative and support services. The extra-curricular activities offered may reflect the sports, interests, and values that are popular in the affiliated country. Students may also expect to be able to undertake student exchange and/or internships in the affiliated country of their institution. The features of a CBU and the education and services it provides may be affected by the culture, values, and strengths of its affiliated country. For example, a US-affiliated institution may emphasise diversity, individuality, and freedom of expression, while a Chinese-affiliated institution may emphasise innovation, entrepreneurship, and the individual's contribution to society.

As CBUs have adopted elements of a higher education system that may be perceived to be high quality, we hypothesise that stronger country brand authenticity will have a stronger positive influence on students' perceived service quality. Thus,

H1: Students' perceptions of a CBU's country brand authenticity are positively related to students' judgements of service quality

University brand image

A university's brand image refers to how the institution is perceived by stakeholders based on their experiences and the information about the institution that they have received (Wymer, 2013). An institution's brand image helps differentiate it from other institutions and reflects the institution's ability to deliver a particular type and quality of education (Panda et al., 2019).

A brand's image may consist of tangible and intangible cues that include cognitive and emotive evaluations as well as affective responses. Therefore, an institution's brand image may be the sum of beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, ideas, and impressions that an individual holds (Andreasen et al., 2008). A university's image is most usually conceptualised as an organised whole that incorporates the individual's perceptions of the institution's programmes, academic staff, teaching, facilities, resources, and administrative and support services (Alves & Raposo, 2010).

In the business literature, previous research has found a positive relationship between brand authenticity and brand image (e.g., Lu et al., 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2022). Therefore,

H2: A CBU's perceived country brand authenticity is positively related to its brand image

Also in the business literature, research has concluded that perceived service quality may be an antecedent of brand image (Dam & Dam, 2021; Hsieh et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2011). Therefore,

H3: A CBU's perceived service quality is positively related to its brand image

Student satisfaction

Student satisfaction may be recognised as a multidimensional construct that represents a short-term attitude, which is related to the individual's subjective evaluations of the extent to which their expectations of received experiences have been met or exceeded (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Wong & Chapman, 2023). A student's overall satisfaction may incorporate satisfaction with academic aspects of their provision, social aspects, and the institution's facilities, resources, and services. A study undertaken by Ammigan and Jones (2018) confirmed that students' arrival, living, learning, and support service experiences all have an influence on students' overall satisfaction with their institution.

Student satisfaction is a concept that virtually no higher education institution now ignores, since student satisfaction may impact upon students' word of mouth, student recruitment, funding, and the institution's reputation. Satisfaction is important not only to the institution but also to the student. Research has found that student satisfaction may have an influence on the individual's motivation, academic achievement, and retention (Duque, 2014). However, it should be recognised that an individual's level of satisfaction may be based more on want than need; for example, a preference for assessments in which they can score high marks rather than assessments that thoroughly assess the learning and skills achieved (Wong & Chapman, 2023).

Nevertheless, Sultan and Wong's (2012) literature review revealed perceived quality as the most cited critical determinant of satisfaction. Specifically, in higher education contexts, Arrivabene et al. (2019), Faizan et al. (2016), Lapina et al. (2016) and Mucsi and

Malota (2025) each found a link between perceived service quality and student satisfaction. A further review by Santini et al. (2017) concluded that overall service quality had the strongest relationship with satisfaction compared to any other determinant of satisfaction, such as academic, professor, teaching, or support services quality. Thus,

> H4: A CBU's perceived service quality is positively related to student satisfaction

Previous research has found that a university's brand image is related to student satisfaction (Alves & Raposo, 2010; Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Heffernan et al., 2018; Schlesinger et al., 2023). Santini et al.'s (2017) review of earlier studies also concluded that institutional image has a strong relationship with student satisfaction. Kotler and Fox (1995) even claimed that an institution's image may be more important than service quality in delivering satisfaction to students. Therefore,

> H5: A CBU's brand image is positively related to student satisfaction

The conceptual model, presented in Figure 1, shows the relationships investigated in this study.

Method

Sample and data collection

The participants in this study were self-selected volunteer undergraduate students who were enrolled at one of three CBUs that have different country affiliations (China, Germany, and the US), and which are located in different countries (Egypt, the Sultanate of Oman, and Bangladesh). As it is generally difficult in transnational education settings for 'outsiders' to gain permission to undertake this type of research, the institutions used in the study are the institutions where the authors are employed. The data were collected in the second term/semester of the 2024–2025 academic year using an online questionnaire, which was completed by participants using Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed in lessons and via emails and class-based WhatsApp groups. Students were instructed to complete the questionnaire only once. It is not possible to provide an
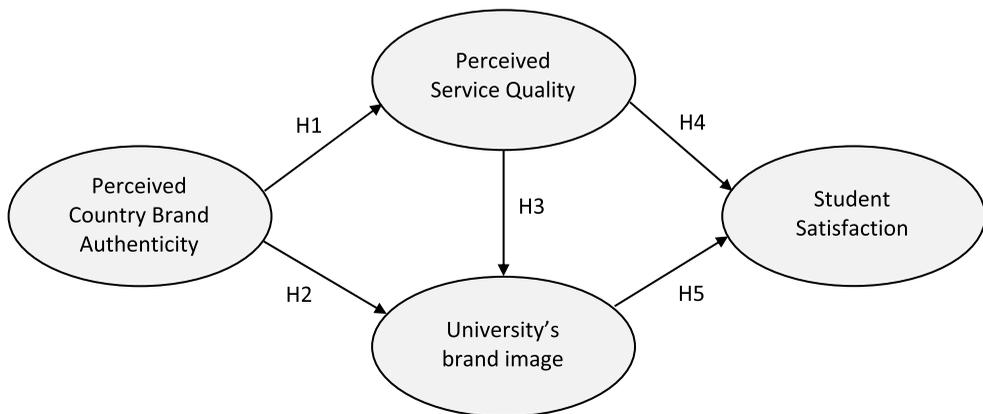

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.

accurate response rate, as the questionnaire may have been made available in multiple lessons in which student attendance was not recorded, and also, it is not known how many students received (read) our email and WhatsApp communications. An attempt was made to achieve broadly representative samples in each institution in terms of students' genders and nationalities. Ethics approval for the research was granted by the research ethics committee of the lead author's institution. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before completing the questionnaire.

A total of 915 responses were obtained, and as the questionnaire could not be submitted until all of the required questions were answered, there was no missing data. 27.0% of our research participants were studying at a university that is affiliated with China (which is located in Egypt), 40.2% with Germany (located in the Sultanate of Oman) and 32.8% with the US (located in Bangladesh). 50.1% of the participants classified themselves as male, 49.2% as female and 0.7% preferred not to say. 27.2% of the students were Egyptian nationals, 37.5% were Omani, 32.6% Bangladeshi, and 2.7% were from other countries, which included Canada, India, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia. In each institution, the vast majority of students (> 97%) were nationals of the host country. 42.6% of the participants studied a business subject, 37.5% computer science, 14.6% engineering, 4.8% pharmacy, and 0.4% a language. 30.6% were in their first year of study, 33.1% in year 2, 24.0% in year 3, 11.5% in year 4 and 0.8% in year 5.

Measures

This study explored the extent to which a university's perceived country brand authenticity is related to students' judgements of service quality and the university's brand image, and the extent to which perceived service quality and brand image are related to student satisfaction. As we assume that an institution's country affiliation is a dominant and central feature of the institution's identity, we hypothesise that country brand authenticity is related to both perceived service quality and the university's brand image. All of the study's measurement scales were adopted from the literature, and each scale has previously demonstrated satisfactory internal reliability. The participants used a seven-point Likert scale for all items, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

The institution's perceived country brand authenticity was measured using a 28-item scale developed by Wilkins et al. (2025). The 28 items measuring perceived country brand authenticity were divided into four sub-categories that each represented a dimension of country brand authenticity, i.e., affiliated country connections; teaching and learning; human resources; and student experience and development. The items are concerned with things such as institution and programme accreditation, international partnerships, curriculum structure, programme content, teaching and learning methods, extracurricular activities, nationalities of academic staff, and the institution's culture and values. Examples of items include 'The university and/or its programmes are accredited in the affiliated country', 'The university's curriculum structure is the same as in the affiliated country, e.g., programme length and semester structure' and 'Some academic staff are nationals or citizens of the affiliated country'.

Perceived service quality was measured using a unidimensional scale adapted from Latif et al. (2019). The scale captures the six components of service quality in higher

education, namely (1) teachers and teaching, (2) administrative and support services, (3) knowledge transmission, (4) extracurricular activities, (5) institutional improvement, and (6) leaders' responsiveness to students' needs. The items include 'The teachers and teaching are high quality in this university', 'Administrative and support services are high quality in this university' and 'Knowledge is effectively developed and imparted in this university'.

Brand image is measured using a six-item scale provided by Sultan and Wong (2019). The items are designed to measure the individual's holistic impression/brand associations related to their institution. Examples of items include 'This university is serious about education', 'This university is innovative', and 'Overall, the business practices of this university are good'.

Finally, to measure student satisfaction, a seven-item scale developed by Heffernan et al. (2018) was used. The items covered the participant's satisfaction with their programme (e.g., 'So far, my degree programme has met all of my expectations') and their institution (e.g., 'My choice of university was a wise decision'), as well as their behaviours (e.g., 'I am very satisfied with my degree programme and would definitely choose it again', and 'I would recommend my university to friends').

Results

Measurement model

First, to examine the model's structure and construct dimensions, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was undertaken, using SPSS software version 29. KMO = 0.967, and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < .001$). Second, an examination of the pattern matrix revealed that the loadings of items TLG4, SDE7, SDE10 and SDE11 were below the threshold of 0.45, as recommended by Hair et al. (2014). The revised pattern matrix that followed the deletion of the problematic items consists of seven components, including the four dimensions of country brand authenticity, perceived service quality, the university's brand image, and student satisfaction. The results of reliability tests revealed that the Cronbach's alpha values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.7 for all the measurement scales (Hair et al., 2014) (see Table 1).

Possible common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor method. The highest variance accounted for by a single factor was 39.08%. Also, the highest variance inflation factor (VIF) value was below the threshold of 3.3, providing additional support that common method bias is unlikely to be a problem in this study (Kock, 2015). Finally, an unmeasured latent factor was introduced, reflected by all the measured indicators of the original measurement model. Then, the standardised loadings were compared when no common latent factor was present in the measurement model. The difference between the two sets of standardised loadings was lower than the cut criterion of < .20 (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Following the EFA, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to investigate how well the measured variables represent the research constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The measurement model was estimated using maximum likelihood estimation (see Table 1) and the covariance matrix in AMOS software version 29. The results indicate that the data has a good fit with the model: $\chi^2 = 2355.79$ ($df = 756$, $p < 0.01$); $\chi^2/df =$

Table 1. Results of the confirmatory factor analysis.

Construct	Item	Loading	T value	α	CR	AVE
Affiliated country connections[a]	ACC1	0.736	19.612	0.83	0.84	0.512
	ACC2	0.744	19.804			
	ACC3	0.748	19.811			
	ACC4	0.665	17.942			
	ACC5	0.683	–			
Teaching and learning[a]	TLG1	0.692	20.198	0.88	0.83	0.501
	TLG2	0.712	20.788			
	TLG7	0.714	20.842			
	TLG8	0.697	20.344			
	TLG9	0.725	–			
Human resources[a]	HRS1	0.694	19.256	0.80	0.80	0.507
	HRS2	0.694	19.266			
	HRS3	0.725	20.078			
	HRS4	0.734	–			
Student experience and development[a]	SED1	0.705	19.742	0.91	0.90	0.535
	SED2	0.690	19.365			
	SED3	0.749	20.919			
	SED4	0.782	21.739			
	SED5	0.781	21.631			
	SED6	0.744	20.769			
	SED8	0.707	18.847			
	SED9	0.692	–			
Perceived service quality	PSQ1	0.782	–	0.90	0.90	0.609
	PSQ2	0.836	27.284			
	PSQ3	0.808	26.158			
	PSQ4	0.721	22.784			
	PSQ5	0.788	25.368			
	PSQ6	0.743	23.645			
University's brand image	IMG1	0.811	–	0.93	0.93	0.685
	IMG2	0.844	34.096			
	IMG3	0.851	29.874			
	IMG4	0.851	29.864			
	IMG5	0.828	28.623			
	IMG6	0.779	26.273			
Student satisfaction	SAT1	0.784	–	0.93	0.94	0.683
	SAT2	0.875	30.165			
	SAT3	0.854	29.166			
	SAT4	0.888	30.746			
	SAT5	0.735	24.035			
	SAT6	0.864	29.661			
	SAT7	0.770	25.480			

[a]Dimensions of perceived country brand authenticity.

3.11; RMSEA = .048; CFI = .937, and SRMR = .037, and the values of the standardised factor loading estimates are higher than 0.7 with statistical significance of $p < 0.05$, with the exception of items TLG3, TLG5 and TLG6 that loaded significantly below 0.7 and were removed from the model. The results of the measurement model (Table 1) indicate that all the constructs achieved values above the minimum cut criteria of > .70 for composite reliability (CR) and > .50 for average variance extracted (AVE), thus establishing convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Discriminant validity is achieved if the value of the square root of AVE of perceived country brand authenticity, perceived service quality, university's brand image, and student satisfaction constructs is higher than their highest correlations with other constructs in the model. Table 2 shows that the square root of AVE of the study constructs, in the diagonal, is greater than their correlations below the diagonal line (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, discriminant validity is achieved.

Table 2. Convergent and discriminant validity results.

	CR	AVE	X1	X2	X3	X4
X1 Country brand authenticity	.940	.797	*.893*			
X2 Perceived service quality	.903	.609	.561***	*.781*		
X3 University's brand image	.929	.685	.622***	.544***	*.828*	
X4 Student satisfaction	.937	.683	.615***	.692***	.570***	*.826*

CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; Figures in italics on the diagonal are the square roots of the average variance extracted.

*** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed).

Hypothesis testing

The full structural model was run to test the research hypotheses. Perceived country brand authenticity was treated as a second-order latent factor construct that consists of four first-order latent factors. The results of the structural model indicate that the data have a good fit with the proposed model: χ^2 (764) = 2316.31, $p < .001$; χ^2/df = 3.03; RMSEA = .047; CFI = .940, and SRMR = .049. The estimates of squared multiple correlations (R^2) explain 32.2% of the variance in perceived service quality, 45.1% in the university's brand image and 54.4% of the variance in student satisfaction. Table 3 presents the results of the coefficient, standard error, and critical ratio related to each hypothesis tested.

As shown in Table 3, the relationships predicted in our theoretical model are significant at $p < .001$, supporting all of the hypotheses. The findings of path analysis indicate that perceived country brand authenticity relates positively and significantly to students' judgements of service quality ($\beta = .567$, $p < .001$) and the university's brand image ($\beta = .478$, $p < .001$), supporting H1 and H2. The results show that perceived service quality relates positively and significantly to the university's brand image ($\beta = .273$, $p < .001$), supporting H3. Finally, the relationships between perceived service quality and student satisfaction ($\beta = .277$, $p < .001$) and between the university's brand image and student satisfaction ($\beta = .549$, $p < .001$) indicate significant and positive loading paths, supporting H4 and H5.

Post-hoc analysis

After the hypothesis testing, further data analysis was undertaken to discover whether the relationships in our conceptual model are moderated by the institution's country of affiliation. To test for moderation, we used Hayes' Process macro 3.5 model 1, with

Table 3. Hypothesis test results.

	Association	Standardised estimate	Standard error	Critical ratio	Result
H1	Perceived country brand authenticity to perceived service quality	.567	.045	13.282***	Supported
H2	Perceived country brand authenticity to the university's brand image	.478	.055	11.094***	Supported
H3	Perceived service quality to the university's brand image	.273	.045	7.362***	Supported
H4	Perceived service quality to student satisfaction	.277	.046	8.286***	Supported
H5	University's brand image to student satisfaction	.549	.042	14.827***	Supported

*** $p < 0.001$.

5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval (Hayes, 2017). Of the five relationships in our model, the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and perceived service quality, and the relationship between perceived service quality and the university's brand image are significantly moderated by the institution's country of affiliation.

For the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and perceived service quality, the overall model was significant ($F = 69.57$, $p < .001$). The interaction effects of brand authenticity with the institution's country of affiliation on perceived service quality are significant for the US-affiliated institution ($\beta = .16$, $t = 2.70$, $p = .006$), but not significant for the German-affiliated institution ($\beta = -.002$, $t = -0.045$, $p = .964$) in comparison to the Chinese-affiliated institution. The effect of country brand authenticity on perceived service quality is higher for the US-affiliated institution ($\beta = .579$, $p < .001$) than for the Chinese ($\beta = .415$, $p < .001$) and German-affiliated institutions ($\beta = .412$, $p < .001$).

For the relationship between perceived service quality and the university's brand image, the overall model was also significant ($F = 62.63$, $p < .001$). The interaction effects of perceived service quality with the institution's country of affiliation on the university's brand image are not significant for the US-affiliated institution ($\beta = -0.17$, $t = -1.95$, $p = .051$), but significant for the German-affiliated institution ($\beta = -0.23$, $t = -2.41$, $p = .015$) in comparison to the Chinese-affiliated university. The effect of perceived service quality on the university's brand image is higher for the Chinese-affiliated institution ($\beta = .767$, $p < .001$) than for the German ($\beta = .535$, $p < .001$) and US-affiliated institutions ($\beta = .595$, $p < .001$).

Finally, the possible mediation effects of perceived service quality and the university's brand image on the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and student satisfaction were tested. The SEM bootstrap method in AMOS was used to test for mediation effects (Cheung & Lau, 2007). The direct relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and student satisfaction is significant ($\beta = .228$, $p = .007$), and the indirect relationship is also significant ($\beta = .388$, $p < .012$). Thus, students' judgements of service quality and the university's brand image partially mediate the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and student satisfaction.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate whether the underlying dimensions of a CBU's country brand authenticity influence students' judgements of service quality and their overall satisfaction, as well as whether the institution's perceived country brand authenticity and students' judgements of service quality impact the institution's brand image. To answer the study's central research question, the results indicate that a CBU's country brand authenticity positively influences students' perceptions of service quality and the university's brand image, as well as student satisfaction, with perceived service quality and the university's brand image acting as mediating influences.

The results of this research confirm the importance of an institution's country brand authenticity in influencing students' perceived service quality and the institution's favourable brand image. The support for H1, on the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and perceived service quality, supports the findings of

Chen et al. (2020) and Lu et al. (2015). However, this study was, to our knowledge, the first undertaken in a higher education setting, whereas Chen et al.'s (2020) and Lu et al.'s (2015) studies were undertaken in the hospitality sector.

The US higher education system may be considered quite distinctive, with its features better-known among students, compared to other foreign countries, which may explain the results of our moderation analysis that found a higher effect of country brand authenticity on perceived service quality for the US-affiliated institution compared to the Chinese- and German-affiliated institutions.

The product of a university is considerably more complex than that of a restaurant, so higher education institutions need to carefully analyse each component of their service offering (e.g., syllabi, programme content, academic staff, teaching and assessment methods, extra-curricular activities, facilities and resources, and administrative/support services) to ensure that authenticity is consistently achieved across each component. Our results provided support for H3 and H4, that perceived service quality is related to the university's brand image and student satisfaction.

Anglophone and Western European countries are well-known for having developed higher education systems and institutions that feature in global rankings. While it is likely that a high proportion of transnational education students could name two or three elite universities from countries such as the UK or the US, they may be unable to do so for China or Japan. Thus, it is likely that more students would identify with a US- or European-affiliated institution compared to a Chinese-affiliated institution. As students who identify with an institution are more likely to forgive or ignore service transgressions (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), these institutions may be associated with stronger brand images regardless of actual quality. This fact may explain why our moderation analysis revealed a higher effect of perceived service quality on the university's brand image for the Chinese-affiliated institution, compared to the German and US-affiliated institutions.

Although there is plenty of literature that supports the link between authentic products and customer satisfaction (Santini et al., 2017; Sultan & Wong, 2012), this is, to our knowledge, the first to consider the relationship between perceived country brand authenticity and student satisfaction in higher education. Students' assessments of service quality may be critical in determining their levels of satisfaction with their programme and institution because of the high financial outlay they incur, and because the service is received over an extended time period, and the outcomes (e.g., knowledge and skills gained, and degree classification) may have life-changing implications (e.g., career opportunities). In the neoliberal higher education systems that now dominate globally, it is essential for institutions to achieve student satisfaction to benefit from students' word of mouth and derive positive outcomes with regard to student recruitment, funding, and reputation.

The results of this research also supported the link between perceived country brand authenticity and the university's brand image (H2). The foreign country affiliation of a CBU is usually one of the most distinctive aspects of the institution's identity, and the extent to which stakeholders perceive its country brand as authentic will impact the strength of the institution's brand image. An institution's brand image is important because it builds perceived credibility, fosters loyalty, and differentiates the institution in a competitive market. A strong and distinctive brand may increase recognition of

the institution among students, and brands perceived as attractive may lead to positive student behaviours, such as choice decisions and spreading positive word of mouth. The support for H5, the link between the university's brand image and student satisfaction, may be explained by the fact that students are more likely to identify with an institution with which they want to be associated, as they enjoy the admiration from others for studying at a successful or high quality institution, and individuals may perceive that an attractive brand image will be advantageous to them in the labour market after graduating.

This research offers an original contribution to the international higher education literature, as it adds a new strand to existing research on higher education branding in transnational higher education. First, the results of the study offer validation of Wilkins et al.'s (2025) country brand authenticity scale. Second, the results indicate the importance of transnational education institutions achieving country brand authenticity, as doing so will help foster positive attitudes among students and strengthen the institution's brand image. The findings suggest that institutions would benefit from developing and implementing a strategy that promotes the foreign country aspects of their identities. Institution branding that is based on generic quality perceptions may be less effective nowadays, because in highly competitive markets, the institutions are increasingly perceived as similar (Juusola et al., 2023). A strategy development process would involve measuring authenticity and setting performance standards. By using Wilkins et al.'s (2025) country brand authenticity scale, institutions may map their existing performance against the key indicators, set clear targets, and assess improvements in authenticity performance. It is essential that institutions emphasise their unique attributes in marketing communications to differentiate themselves from competitors (Juusola et al., 2023).

This research has confirmed the importance of country brand authenticity to transnational education institutions. For practitioners in transnational education, the findings offer valuable insights. However, the research is not without limitations. There are several different types of transnational education institutions, and this research used data from only private, country-branded universities. Further, the data were drawn from only three institutions in three countries and relied on students' self-reported data. The research assumed that students have appropriate knowledge and understanding about their institution and institutions (and the higher education system) in the institution's affiliated country, but there were likely exceptions. Nevertheless, the large overall sample size would have limited the effects of such exceptions.

Future research could be undertaken with other types of providers, such as international branch campuses and institutions offering franchised programmes. Also, future research could examine each component of an institution's service offering – such as syllabi, programme content, academic staff, teaching and assessment methods, and extra-curricular activities – to assess the extent to which the institution's country brand authenticity is consistently achieved across each component. Further, it would also be interesting to measure, through a longitudinal study, the alignment between students' expectations and initial perceptions, and those that are realised through their participation in the country-branded institutions.

Previous research has found that students from different regions around the globe have different expectations and rate satisfaction differently (Ammigan et al., 2021).

Differences in the attitudes of our participants were attributed to the institution's country of affiliation, but the institution's location could also be a factor that explains some differences. For example, students in different countries may have different attitudes towards particular foreign countries, and students may need or want different things to be satisfied. Also, students in different countries may have different levels of knowledge about higher education in different countries, and this may affect their perceptions and beliefs. For example, would the perceptions of Japan and Japanese higher education be the same among students located in Vietnam (another Asian country) and Egypt (an Arab country in Africa)? To assess the role of an institution's country brand authenticity versus its location, it would be necessary in future research to have several institutions in each country sample and then to analyse the differences by location.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics approval

Ethics approval for the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of The British University in Dubai on 9th January 2024 (Approval number: BUS047B). All participants in the research provided informed written consent as part of the online survey process.

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