

Investigating sustainable competitive advantage in higher educational institutions of Sri Lanka: A price moderation perspective

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ABSTRACT

Due to the increasing demand for education across the globe, higher education institutions (HEIs) have also faced intense competition in recent years which leads to uncertain sustainable competitive advantage. This has led most HEIs to develop marketing strategies to improve the likelihood of recruiting national and international students. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the role of marketing innovation, service quality and brand image in determining sustainable competitive advantage of HEIs in Sri Lanka with the moderating influence of pricing. This study distributed 250 questionnaires among working professionals from six HEIs in Sri Lanka. The structural equation modelling (SEM) approach was used to conduct the statistical analysis in this research. The postulated theoretical linkages were investigated using the RBV framework as a beginning point. It was found that service quality and brand image of HEIs are essential dimensions for sustainable competitive advantage. On the basis of the results, it is concluded that marketers and administrative personnel at HEIs must be fully informed about the elements that determine the long-term competitive advantage of HEIs in Sri Lanka. This study also provides a basis for HEIs to refine their business models to cater to the new demands of the industry. This study has also identified new prospects for the future by providing a base of factual and empirical data in relation to variables identified with this phenomenon. However, as far as the Sri Lankan context is concerned there was no evidence of a similar study done in the past especially directly relating to both public and private sector education. Therefore, the findings of this study will help in bridging the existing knowledge gap in the higher education industry that could be helpful for them to develop marketing strategies and in making marketing decision in near future.

Keywords: *Higher educational institutions (HEI), marketing innovation, service quality, brand image, sustainable competitive advantage*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In today's world, educational services are provided in an environment that is intensely competitive. Hence, it's necessary for higher education institutions (HEIs) to first identify their sources of competitive advantage before they can achieve success in the market and build a strong foundation to compete. This is especially crucial when considering the fact that multinational corporations are

emerging as relatively significant players with tremendous resources to carry out their own large-scale educational programmes and train specialist-practitioners at the highest level (Tarakanov et al., 2017; Kireeva et al., 2018).

A constant exchange of information occurs between the demand and supply of educational services offered by a variety of educational and non-educational entities in the educational services market. The responsibility of higher education is to provide social strategies that can enable a society to incorporate human, intellectual, and digital resources that can influence social processes (Horn Nord et al., 2014). The educational sector has been adversely influenced by the intense rivalry that exists in the global industry landscape. The growth in the number of products and services offered by various entities has influenced educational institutions that has harnessed the power of marketing communications to attract more customers from both private and public institutions. Higher education has developed in tandem with the "new economy" and deserves to be evaluated in the context of a competitive framework (Demiray et al., 2007).

Due to the increasing demand for education across the globe, HEIs have also faced intense rivalry in recent years. The increased rivalry and globalization among HEIs have led them to develop marketing strategies to improve the likelihood of recruiting both national and international students (Starck & Zadeh, 2013). Therefore, HEIs have realized that they must improve their decision-making processes to achieve a competitive edge by increasing their efficiency and effectiveness. HEIs in developing countries are seeking to attract students to expand their higher educational areas while maintaining their competitiveness in the existing marketplace (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017). Additionally, the idea of sustainable competitive advantage inside HEIs has been a widely discussed concept for decades, but it has not been realized as quickly as may have been anticipated owing to an inadequacy of knowledge of sustainability, particularly in the Sri Lankan context (De Silva, & Chittraranjan, 2018).

Historically in Sri Lanka, due to a limitation in vacancies, a stringent admission process was administered in the selection of qualified candidates for public universities. Therefore, a significant number of candidates are always denied admission (Jayasundara, 2014). As a result, a few who could afford went abroad and the rest had to join the labor market or technical colleges to pursue their technical education. Private sector entrepreneurs were quick to identify this as an opportunity and started entering the market with local and internationally franchised universities. State-run HEIs, who are facing a reduction in public financing, were forced to seek for ways to generate income. There has been an increasing marketization of higher education, not only at the national level but also at the worldwide level, as HEIs compete to attract both local and foreign students. Due to growing worldwide marketisation of higher education, several institutions have resorted to strategic marketing tactics to increase student enrolment (Naidoo & Wu, 2011).

Additionally, how effective the strategic marketing programs employed by HEIs is questionable with respect to price moderation. Despite a growth in student inquiries, it is evident that private sector educational institutions have not been successful in securing adequate student enrolments and meeting their projected bottom line expectations with the pricing strategies deployed thus far. Inadequate and inconsistent research is being conducted inside HEIs, related to strategies developed for sustainable competitive advantage (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Starck & Zadeh, 2013). Similarly, the empirical research in the field of sustainable competitive advantage have been very limited (Ali et al., 2013; De Silva & Chittraranjan, 2018). Specifically, to the best

of the researcher's knowledge, there has not been any research conducted in the context of Sri Lanka to test and further explain this relationship. Therefore, proper guidance to help HEIs in attaining sustainable competitive advantage is critical in a country like Sri Lanka where the business is expanding while the competition, both domestically and internationally, is also growing at a fast pace.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability of an organization to create and maintain an edge over its rivals is known as the competitiveness of the organization (Dimitrova & Dimitrova, 2017). In the case of HEIs, competitiveness is created when the HEI is able to fulfil the requirements of both its internal and external stakeholders through a bundle of distinct attributes better than its competitors in a wide range of internal and external situations (Ashmarina, Khasaev, & Plaksina, 2015; Supe et al., 2018). HEIs need to have strategic management in place to ensure their long-term viability in the face of ever-changing market situations. Generally, competitive advantage is achieved by a company when gaps are created through a distinctive bundle of attributes that cannot be replicated and are not readily available with competitors. (Perera, Nayak & Nguyen, 2020).

2.1 Marketing innovation

Innovation is a strategy that businesses may use to create new possibilities based on insights by combining diverse types of information and knowledge of what would be technically required in a certain situation. The individuals who work in a company have a direct impact on the innovations that take place inside the business. In other words, the innovative behavior of the human resources determines how innovative a business is (Hartono et al., 2019). Marketing innovation is a function of using organizational resources to develop new products and enter new markets or penetrate current markets differently than rivals (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018).

In order to develop total solutions for the target customers, an effective marketing innovation process will need high level of partnerships developed among relevant stakeholders. It also should use latest marketing management tools such as marketing analytics to yield optimal marketing and business results and add value to a firm. Marketing innovation traditionally take two fundamental approaches. These two approaches can be categorized as market-driven and market driving (Tang et al., 2021). Organizations may use one of these or a combination strategy to compete in the marketplace depending on the situation. Marketing innovation often help organizations to achieve sustainable competitive advantage by introducing new products and/ or developing new markets in new ways (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018). In this context, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There is a positive and a significant relationship exist between marketing innovation and sustainable competitive advantage.

2.2 Brand image

Building the brand image of an organization is a critical success factor, when competing with competitors selling the same or similar products (Spry et al., 2020). It is considered that an institution has reached a high degree of brand equity when it has carefully planned out ways to enhance its brand image through a brand that already high in recall and recognition. Having a favorable brand image may help businesses differentiate themselves and get a competitive edge over its competitors. The sales records of companies with a favorable brand image are strong together with its market share. A positive brand image aids businesses to develop a loyal client base who has a good quality perception, and stronger brand loyalty (Panda et al., 2019).

The overall perception of a HEIs in the minds of target customers is comprised of visuals, emotions, experiences, and facts, that are referred to as its brand. A HEI's "brand" might be defined as the impression it creates in the minds of its stakeholders, especially its students. In other words, it is a physical representation of the institution's distinct characteristics, which differentiate it from the rest and reflect how well it can meet the needs of students, inspire confidence in its ability to deliver a specific type of higher education, and help potential recruits in making enrolment decisions (Nguyen & Melewar, 2016). Therefore, a positive brand image for an HEI should ideally elicit distinct and positive associations, emotions and images in the mind of the stakeholder, thus distinguishing it from other HEIs (Panda et al., 2019). Therefore, the above discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a positive and a significant relationship exist between brand image and sustainable competitive advantage.

2.3 Service quality

Service quality refers to how well a service meets or surpasses a customer's needs. It is a fundamental requirement and determinant of competitiveness in the process of creating and maintaining satisfied client relationships (Siddiqi, 2011). The capacity to provide a high-quality service is a critical aspect in ensuring an organization's long-term viability (Santos, 2003). The competitive advantage of a company is influenced by the quality of its services. They are supposed to increase an organization's competitive advantage through price/cost management, speed to market, delivery reliability and product/ service innovation (Lakhal, 2009).

Service quality is one of the most significant aspects for gaining a competitive advantage. This was observed in an empirical investigation done in modest hotels in Croatia. It is stated that the hotels should maintain rigorous standards to safeguard the quality of services. Warraich et al., (2013) performed research involving 320 enterprises in the telecommunications market in South Asia and discovered that service quality is a source of competitive advantage. Similarly, according to the findings of a research performed by Wijetunge (2016) in SMEs in Sri Lanka, high-quality service delivery helps SMEs achieve a competitive edge, which in turn improves their overall business performance. Prior research has demonstrated that the various aspects of quality have an influence on the various dimensions of competitive advantage (Santos, 2003; Lakhal, 2009). Thus, the above discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: There is a positive and a significant relationship exist between service quality and sustainable competitive advantage.

2.4 Pricing as a moderator

In an integrated marketing mix Price is an essential element. Price often enable customers to differentiate the value of a product in currency among competing brands. Frequently, among other things the quality of the product/ service is connoted by price (Kwortnik et al., 2006). The monetary value of products and services offered to clients is reflected in the price quoted by the vender. Price-related circumstances include issues such as excessive costs, price rises, unfair and deceptive pricing, as well as general issues relating to the service's fees, charges, rates, and price offers. According to the findings of one study, the relationship between price and quality has not been thoroughly investigated (Kim et al., 2006, Toncar et al., 2010). However, one prior study has demonstrated that consumers' perceptions of high quality in products and services are associated with higher pricing. Toncar et al., (2010) discovered that the extent to which customers' pricing expectations are met has an impact on their view of the quality of the product or the service. As a result, it is thought that the price consumers are willing to pay will have an impact on their

expectations for the quality of the product or the service. A consumer's expected price is defined as the amount that he or she believes he or she will have to pay for a certain product or a service (Narteh, 2018).

When it comes to higher education, the institutional culture, reputation, and the faculty/ staff who work at the institution are often seen to moderate the perceived value of the price (Saleem et al., 2017). Competitive advantage is achieved when firms deploy their competitive resources/ assets in a way that will create gaps versus rivals in the marketplace. Kwornik et al., (2006) argue that price is frequently used as a measure of the value of the total offering, seen as a bundle of attributes by the customer in relation to a specific currency. Price, whether it is too high or low for the customer will be always subjective based on the perceived value of the offering vis-vis that of rivals. It is a key metric that enables customers to make a comparison across brands or product lines in a category. In light of the moderating influences of university culture, university reputation, and price, it is possible for higher education to reach a considerable degree of student satisfaction (Saleem et al., 2017). Price-quality relationship is a key metric in the higher education institution selection process by potential students.

On the other hand, discounts are found to have a minimum effect on the level of enrolments of students. The perceived value, price fairness, and service quality are found to positively and significantly affect loyalty of students towards the educational institutions. Further, price value equation and price fairness are found to have strong mediating power on the relationship between enrolment and loyalty of students (Jia-Haur Goh et al., 2017). However, any significant change to the price point of an offering can have either a positive or a negative impact on sales revenue. Price, while serving as a means of communicating value of offerings enables HEI s to capture value inside the organization (Saleem et al., 2017). Hence, based on the above discussion the following hypotheses can be formulated for this research;

- H4:** Price significantly moderates the relationship between marketing innovation and sustainable competitive advantage.
- H5:** Price significantly moderates the relationship between brand image and sustainable competitive advantage.
- H6:** Price significantly moderates the relationship between service quality and sustainable competitive advantage.

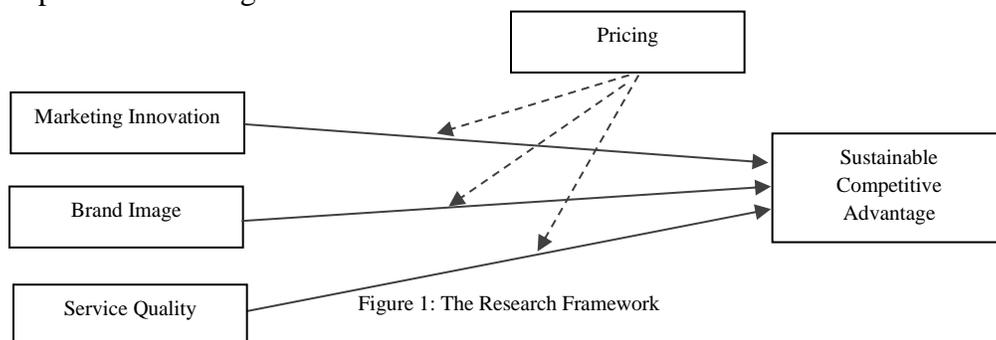


Figure 1: The Research Framework

2.5 Underpinning theory/model - Resource Based View Theory (RBV)

The Resource Based View Theory (RBV) is generally regarded as a theory that explains the foundations of competitive advantage and provides guidance to managers on how to discover

sources of competitive advantage. These will be resources held by the company that are precious, uncommon, one-of-a-kind, and cannot be easily copied by others. Over the last 20 years, a great deal has been published regarding the identification of resources that possess these characteristics (McWilliams & Siegel, 2011). Research on company performance differentials (RBV) has been conducted among marketing academics as a prominent framework for proposing performance differentials among businesses. It encourages businesses to investigate their resources since a diversified set of resources is the foundation for distinct and superior competitive advantages in the marketplace (Barney, 1991). For Barney (1991), a resource is defined as a combination of talent, traits, and assets that include organization procedures as well as information and knowledge.

Those who study RBV believe that a corporation will receive and possess a varied range of resources and different degrees of capability. Firms gain competitive advantages via the development of new resources, the facilitation of capability platforms, and the development of unique capabilities. Not all resources, on the other hand, are seen as being equally vital in the creation of competitive advantage. Advantage-generating resources are those that have the combined characteristics of allowing the supply of competitively excellent value to customers, which cannot be easily duplicated by rivals, and whose value can be tailored by the organization to meet its needs (Collis & Montgomery, 1995; Dierickx & Cool, 1989). Despite the undeniable strength of resources and performance differentials, there have been divergent views on the best way to organize resources in order to achieve significant and competitive outcomes for a business.

The use of the RBV framework to analyze organizational performance has been encouraged, and a thorough understanding of the relationship between marketing and other functional capabilities, as well as the impact of these capabilities on outcomes, has been investigated (Lee & Yoo, 2021). A wide range of resources, which serve as the foundation for marketing efforts, contribute to the creation of substantial competitiveness. Several distinguishing characteristics may be found in the typical aspects, which include brand image, customer connection, and marketing orientation. Their formation is often difficult and time-consuming, they depend on tacit knowledge and abilities to function, and they are socially complicated.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The measurements used in this study were adopted from the previous studies of Lee and Yoo, (2021), Sultan and Wong, (2019), Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, (2012) and Naidoo, (2010), and a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree” has been employed. This research was correlational in nature since it looks at the links between the factors. The questionnaire of this study was developed to obtain relevant data on sustainable competitive advantage of HEIs in Sri Lanka. The questionnaire had two sections comprising of: **Section A:** containing demographic questions comprising of gender, age group, marital status, higher level of educational level while, **Section B:** containing questions on 3 independent variables i.e., marketing innovation, brand image, service quality, price as moderating variable and the sustainable competitive advantage as dependent variable.

The questionnaire was utilized for data collection, which was delivered individually at six HEIs and distributed in an equal number of employees from each institution. The target population for this research consists of individuals who work at higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka. This study was conducted following the rule of thumb created by Roscoe (1975), suggesting that a good sample size for research projects should be at least 30 for a less than 500 population (Sekaran &

Bougie, 2003). As a result, the sample size for this study was determined to be 250 participants. Therefore, the questionnaire was distributed among 250 participants working in six higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka. However, the total number of returned questionnaires were 182 which were taken forward for further analysis.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research employed SPSS version 21.0 and PLS-SEM for the evaluation of both structural and measurement models to perform a preliminary analysis on a sampling population (Hair et al., 2016). Furthermore, path modelling and bootstrapping were employed in the study (Wong, 2013). A total of 5,000 resamples were utilized to get the t-values and standard error of estimation (Chin, et al., 2003). Due to its capacity to provide exact estimates of mediator effects while compensating for error, PLS has the potential to enhance the validation of theories while simultaneously decreasing the estimated connections (Helm, Eggert, & Gamefeld, 2010). The Structural Equational Modelling (SEM) approach was used to conduct the statistical analysis in this research. As previously stated, the SEM approach was chosen since it deals with the notion of identification and validation of correlations among variables (Bollen, 1989).

The first stage was to evaluate the measurement model for its reliability and validity in terms of the constructs that are being measured. In the second stage, the structural model was tested for the predicted structural relationships among constructs that were postulated in the previous step (Hair et al., 2014). A validity test, i.e., CFA, was undertaken for validation of the measurement model (outer model) by a detailed study of the link between indicators/ items and their underlying constructs, was carried out using PLS-SEM by employing software, i.e., Smart PLS version 3.2.8.

4.1 The measurement model

To ensure the validity and reliability of the model, the suggestions of Vinzi et al., (2010) was followed, who stressed that the outer loadings of the individual items and the AVE value should both be more than 0.5 to be valid and reliable. Therefore, items with lower loading were excluded from the data set to improve the overall data quality (Hair et al., 2013). The dependability of each individual item is determined by the presence of, and the outer loadings of, each latent construct (Hair, et al., 2012). When the requirements of each item's factor loading are met, convergent validity can be achieved by ensuring that no single loading from any other construct is greater than the construct being assessed (Hair et., 2014). All the items above 0.6 are considered as meeting the criteria of convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010), showing the factor loading between 0.638 and 0.856. (Hair et al., 2014). Furthermore, a critical value larger than 0.70 was regarded sufficient to ensure composite reliability and the acceptable value of AVE should be at least 0.5, respectively.

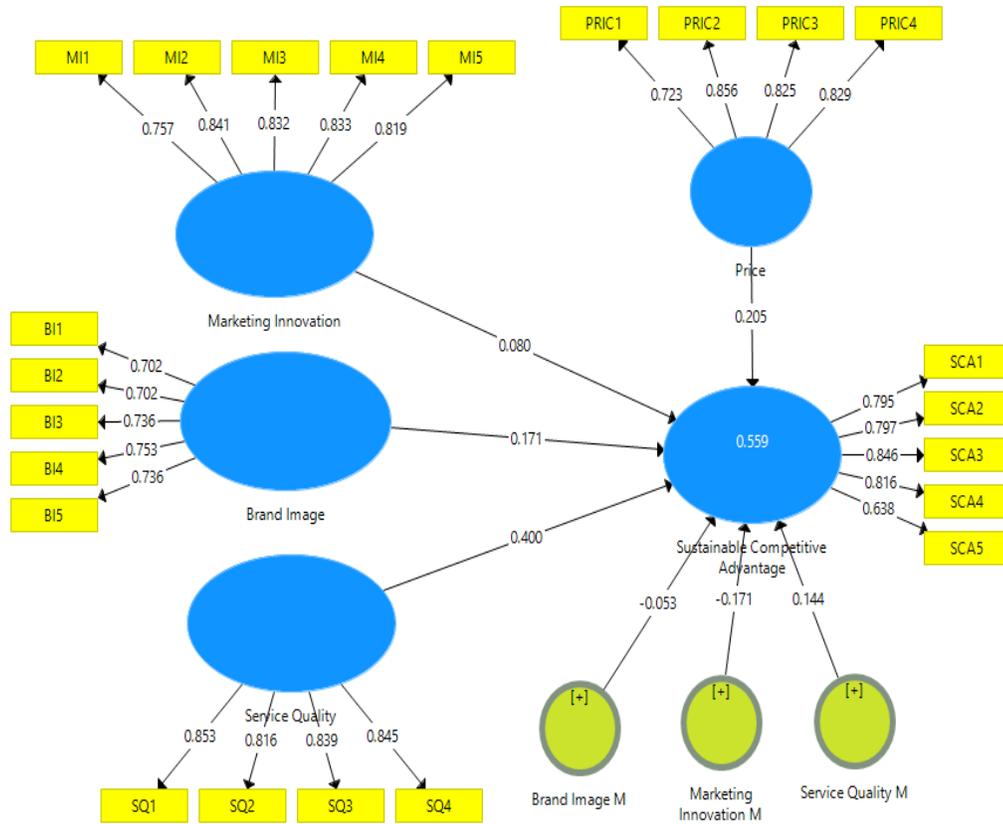


Figure 2: The Measurement Model

Table 1: Results of measurement model, Cronbach’s Alpha, CR and AVE

| Constructs | Item | Loadings | Cronbach’s Alpha | rho-A | Composite Reliability | AVE |
|-----------------------------------|------|----------|------------------|-------|-----------------------|-------|
| Marketing innovation | MI1 | 0.757 | 0.875 | 0.880 | 0.909 | 0.667 |
| | MI2 | 0.841 | | | | |
| | MI3 | 0.832 | | | | |
| | MI4 | 0.833 | | | | |
| | MI5 | 0.819 | | | | |
| Brand Image | BI1 | 0.702 | 0.776 | 0.777 | 0.848 | 0.527 |
| | BI2 | 0.702 | | | | |
| | BI3 | 0.736 | | | | |
| | BI4 | 0.753 | | | | |
| | BI5 | 0.736 | | | | |
| Service Quality | SQ1 | 0.853 | 0.859 | 0.864 | 0.904 | 0.703 |
| | SQ2 | 0.816 | | | | |
| | SQ3 | 0.839 | | | | |
| | SQ4 | 0.845 | | | | |
| Price | PR1 | 0.723 | 0.824 | 0.836 | 0.884 | 0.656 |
| | PR2 | 0.856 | | | | |
| | PR3 | 0.825 | | | | |
| | PR4 | 0.829 | | | | |
| Sustainable Competitive Advantage | SCA1 | 0.795 | 0.839 | 0.854 | 0.886 | 0.611 |
| | SCA2 | 0.797 | | | | |
| | SCA3 | 0.846 | | | | |
| | SCA4 | 0.816 | | | | |
| | SCA5 | 0.638 | | | | |

Note: MI: Marketing Innovation, BI: Brand Image, SQ: Service Quality, PR: Price, SCA: Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Table 2: Discriminant Validity Matrix- Fornell & Larcker Criterion

| | BI | MI | P | SQ | SCA |
|-----|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| BI | 0.726 | | | | |
| MI | 0.595 | 0.817 | | | |
| P | 0.570 | 0.664 | 0.810 | | |
| SQ | 0.536 | 0.569 | 0.518 | 0.838 | |
| SCA | 0.581 | 0.585 | 0.605 | 0.627 | 0.782 |

Note: Entries shown in boldface represent the square root of the AVE

BI – Brand Image; MI – Marketing Innovation; P – Price; SQ – Service Quality; SCA – Sustainable Competitive Advantage

4.2 The Structural Model

Having established the validity of the path model, the hypotheses are examined. The PLS-SEM approach (PLS algorithm combined with bootstrapping) was used to test the structural model (Chin, 2010). The coefficient of determination (also known as the R^2 value) is a statistically significant benchmark for the evaluation of structural models in PLS-SEM (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2012). Table 4.8 illustrates the R^2 of endogenous latent variable, where R^2 of the sustainable competitive advantage was 0.559.

Table 3: R^2 of Endogenous Latent Constructs

| Construct | R square | Result |
|-----------|----------|-------------|
| SCA | 0.559 | Substantial |

Note: SCA – Sustainable competitive advantage;

In research, the bootstrapping approach was used with a resample of 500 to get the t-value, which was then used to determine whether or not direct correlations did exist before the mediating effect was examined in the structural model (Hair et al., 2014). Significant results are defined as a t-value of 1.645 or greater for one-tailed tests and a t-value of 1.967 or greater for two-tailed tests (Hair et al., 2014). With the structural model, the primary objective of this research was to evaluate the direct links between the dependent variable (SCA) and each of the predicted linkages among the components. In this study a total of three direct correlations with (dependent variable) were investigated, and two of the total hypotheses were found to be significant.

Table 4: Results of hypothesis testing: direct relationship with SCA

| Hypotheses | Relationship | Beta | SE | t-value | P-value | Decision |
|------------|--------------|-------|-------|---------|---------|---------------|
| H1 | MI -> SCA | 0.080 | 0.094 | 0.846 | 0.199 | Not Supported |
| H2 | BI-> SCA | 0.171 | 0.083 | 2.055 | 0.020 | Supported |
| H3 | SQ-> SCA | 0.400 | 0.094 | 4.248 | 0.000 | Supported |

These results have shown that there is an insignificant relationship between Marketing Innovation and Sustainable Competitive Advantage ($\beta = 0.080$, $t = 0.846$, p value = 0.199) which explains that marketing innovation of HEIs operating in Sri Lanka has no direct influence Sustainable Competitive Advantage. Hence, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. However, a significant relationship between Brand Image and Sustainable Competitive Advantage was found ($\beta = 0.171$, $t = 2.055$, p value = 0.020) which explains that brand image of HEIs operating in Sri Lanka influences Sustainable Competitive Advantage Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported. On the basis of PLS algorithm and bootstrapping output results, there is a significant relationship between Service Quality and Sustainable Competitive Advantage as the ($\beta = 0.400$, $t = 4.248$, p value =

0.000) which explains that service quality of HEIs operating in Sri Lanka directly influence Sustainable Competitive Advantage Hence, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Moreover, this study employed the product indicator approach and PLS-SEM to study, assess, and determine the extent to which Price had a moderating impact on the correlation between Marketing Innovation, Brand Image, and Service Quality with Sustainable Competitive Advantage (Henseler & Chin, 2010). To employ the product indicator approach in testing the moderating effect of price on relationships between Marketing Innovation, Brand Image, and Service Quality with Sustainable Competitive Advantage, it is necessary to construct product terms between the indicators of the latent independent variables and latent moderators; these product terms are then used as indicators of interaction terms in the structural model (Kenny & Judd, 1984). When the moderating variable Price, was examined, the t-value was 2.024, which was more than the cut-off value of 1.645, indicating that the result was statistically significant. This resulted in the confirmation of the moderating influence of Price on the relationship between Marketing Innovation and Sustainable Competitive Advantage ($\beta = -0.171$, $t = 2.024$, $p = 0.022$). Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported. However, the moderating impact of Price on the relationship between Brand Image and Sustainable Competitive Advantage has shown no influence when Price (the moderating variable) was tested. The findings showed a t-value of 0.729, that was less than the cut-off value of 1.645, suggesting that the outcome was statistically insignificant. Thus, the result showed no evidence of the moderating effect of Price on the relationship between Brand Image and Sustainable Competitive Advantage ($\beta = -0.053$, $t = 0.679$, $p = 0.249$). Therefore, hypothesis 5 was not supported. When the moderating variable, Price, was examined, the t-value was 1.988, which was more than the cut-off value of 1.645, indicating that the result was statistically significant. Finally, the moderating impact of Price on the connection between Service Quality and Sustainable Competitive Advantage was showing a significant result ($\beta = 0.144$, $t = 1.693$, $p = 0.046$). Therefore, hypothesis 6 was supported.

Table 5: Summary of result for moderating effect

| Hypothesis | Relationship | Beta | SE | t-value | p-value | Result |
|------------|---------------|--------|-------|---------|---------|---------------|
| H4 | MI * P -> SCA | -0.171 | 0.083 | 2.024 | 0.022 | Supported |
| H5 | BI * P -> SCA | -0.053 | 0.077 | 0.679 | 0.249 | Not Supported |
| H6 | SQ * P -> SCA | 0.144 | 0.085 | 1.693 | 0.046 | Supported |

Note. * $p < 0.05$ ($t = 1.645$)

5.0 CONCLUSION

In Sri Lanka, the degree of rivalry in the higher education industry is intensifying as the institutions are continuously adopting various strategies to thrive in the marketplace. Price is a significant driver of the marketing mix that is used by many higher education institutions to win in this battle. Institutions also resort to the introduction of new products and the development of new markets with the expectation of being sustainable. However, none of the above strategies have resulted in delivering noteworthy bottom-line results as expected by the shareholders. Therefore, this study was designed with the objective of investigating the degree of moderation of Price on the relationship among Marketing Innovation, Service Quality and Sustainable Competitive Advantage of the higher education institutions operating in Sri Lanka. The study outcomes will be made available so that they could be generalized to the entire HEIs population to be helpful in the

development marketing strategies and in making marketing decisions. It will also provide support to fill the existing knowledge gap, especially in a Sri Lanka context.

This research explored the link between Marketing Innovation, Brand Image (BI), Service Quality, and Sustainable Competitive Advantage at six institutions in Sri Lanka. This research also looked at the moderating influence of pricing on the relationship between Marketing Innovation, Brand Image, Service Quality, and Sustainable Competitive Advantage. The postulated theoretical linkages were investigated using the RBV framework as a starting point. Four of the six study hypotheses were shown to be significant, providing substantial empirical support for the research model. On the basis of the results, it is concluded that marketers and administrative personnel at HEIs must be fully informed about the elements that determine the long-term competitive advantage of HEIs in Sri Lanka.

This study will help to identify the critical success factors in the higher educational industry as well as serving as a benchmark for industry knowledge specific to Sri Lanka. The study will contribute in literature by examining the moderating role of Price among Marketing Innovation, Brand Image, Service Quality and Sustainable Competitive Advantage, which has not sufficiently been examined in the context of HEIs. Furthermore, the study will serve as a catalyst for scholars to conduct additional research in the same and related industries with a broader scope building on its findings. Moreover, to the best of researcher's knowledge this integrative framework has not yet been examined in previous studies conducted in the context of HEIs specifically in a developing country like Sri Lanka. This study has also identified new prospects for the future by providing a base of factual and empirical data related to variables entailed in this phenomenon. However, there was no evidence of a similar study done in the past related to the Sri Lankan context, especially directly relating to both public and private sector education. Therefore, the findings of this study will pave the way to bridge the existing knowledge gap in the higher education industry.

Additionally, the study findings will hopefully be useful for professionals working as marketing managers, brand managers, and policymakers at HEIs operating in Sri Lanka to plan their marketing efforts more effectively to deliver a higher return on marketing investment. Moreover, this study will help the strategic management executives to use these findings to enhance high quality and better service provision in their respective fields. The study will also provide a basis for HEIs to refine their business models to cater to the new demands of the industry. This study could help marketing managers and e-retailers as well in designing strategies by focusing on the significance of factors specifically the role of brand image and service quality in attaining a Sustainable Competitive Advantage. Based on this the HEI's marketers could better design strategies to achieve competitive advantage compared to other organizations.

However, this research also has several research limitations: Firstly, the sampling procedure used was non-probabilistic convenient sampling, which was not statistically significant. It should not be assumed that a sample of this kind conclusively represents an accurate representative of the whole staff population at Sri Lankan universities. The results of this study are confined to the Sri Lankan context, and care should be taken when interpreting them for their generalizability outside of Sri Lanka. Increasing the sample size in a future study is recommended to integrate more responses into the findings. Secondly, due to limited resources available for conducting this investigation, this study employed a cross-sectional study design, and the approach employed was quantitative while in future this limitation could be considered when choosing a research design

among the longitudinal or a mixed method strategy, to get more in-depth opinions. Moreover, to gain a better understanding of sustainable competitive advantage of Sri Lanka's HEIs, future studies could incorporate additional constructs, particularly culture and trust, as well as the moderating effects of demographic characteristics. All in all, a future study should employ a probabilistic sampling technique, a mixed method for data collection, and a longitudinal research design.

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