Original Research

A Model for Branding in Iranian Medical Libraries and Information Centers According to the Aaker Model: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

A high volume of information can be provided to users regarding library services by branding Iranian medical libraries and information centers, and the position of libraries can be significantly improved. There is a minimal number of studies in this field in Iran. This study mainly aims to identify key branding components and create differentiation in the context of Iranian medical libraries and information centers (IMLICs). This study was conducted in two steps: (i) the literature on branding in libraries and information centers in reliable databases such as Scopus, Science Direct, Emerald, and Google Scholar was first reviewed, and finally, 33 studies were identified. Four components, such as librarians, services, building, and equipment, as well as technology, were found as important factors in the branding of public and academic libraries. (ii) A semi-structured interview was conducted with 14 managers and heads of libraries of Iranian medical sciences universities. The results showed the most important branding components in ILMIC as librarians, services, buildings and equipment, and technology. According to the results librarians' performance and personality characteristics, dynamization of specialized and general services, paying attention to the architecture of the library building and the installation and use of the equipment, and finally, the intelligent use of technologies and a strategic look at these components will lead to the formation of a positive mental image of Iranian medical libraries in the public mind, increase awareness of their services, and as a result, users' trust, loyalty, and satisfaction. Librarians play an important role in raising the users' awareness, trust, and loyalty toward library services and their branding. Hiring librarians with positive internal and external characteristics can have a positive image of libraries in the users' minds. Providing high-quality services required by users is essential in differentiating and branding libraries and building users' trust and loyalty. Providing virtual services in libraries is essential in

promoting branding goals. A unique look at the libraries' architecture helps to create a positive image of libraries and information centers. Well-designing the interior and exterior of library facilities will create a positive mental image among users. Applying the technological equipment alongside the expert staff creates a brand and raises the users' awareness, trust, and loyalty. Empowering librarians in using emerging technologies is an obligation in this era. IMLICs have branding capabilities in the four main components of the library regarding librarians, services, building and equipment, and technology. Development of human resources, services, building and equipment, and technology should be planned so that its output is users' awareness about the library brand and the creation of a positive mental image towards the library function. It keeps the users' trust and loyalty towards the library and finally makes users the ambassadors and missionaries to promote the library via word-of-mouth marketing following their satisfaction.

Introduction

Through a glance at some basic aspects of information technology and the change in social and economic structures to date, the fact can be realized that the fundamental change and transformation of the mission of libraries in the digital age is strongly required (Maidment-Otlet, 2021). Since the internet and online platforms for accessing information resources and e-books function as competitors of libraries and information centers (Malone, 2009, p.98) and library users are of great significance as customers in the competitive market (Sharma, Majumder & Uraon, 2017), it is required for libraries to employ all their efforts to attract users and establish their position and significance in today's competitive world. Libraries should also have a positive and lasting effect on their users' minds by modifying their function to ease access to information so that users also select the library as the first place to obtain their needed information. In summary, bookshelves were introduced among the key challenges of libraries in creating institutionalized images and perceptions in users' minds.

Although libraries in higher education institutions are not-for-profit, they have to compete with competitors and attract users by providing the best possible services. Customer-centricity and marketing are among the most beneficial programs in changing the perspective and position of any organization, and libraries need to pay more attention to branding to survive and succeed in today's competitive world. Branding involves endowing products and services with the power of a brand (Kotler, Burton, Deans, Brown & Armstrong, 2013), targeting success in library marketing. Branding contributes as a valuable tool to change the library's position from a "repository of books" to a "complex information environment" in the communities and users' minds (Khattab, 2018). Branding can also support innovation, marketing, and extensive services for libraries and, have a positive impact on the sustainability of libraries (Roughen & Swain, 2020), be a powerful tool for marketing library services, increase awareness, trust, and loyalty, and modify users' mental image towards the library. Therefore, branding is of great importance for libraries and information centers as a necessity to surpass competitors.

Problem Statement

Due to the expansion of information and communication technology, an increasing demand is observed for health information from the public and private sectors. As a result, more importance and value should be given to libraries providing medical and health care services as the custodians of providing users' information needs in the health system (Seo, Park, Ki, Park & Kim, 2008). On the other hand, technological advances have had a tremendous impact on the perspectives towards libraries (Khattab, 2018) and, at the same time, have created competitors for them, such as Google and websites that provide information. In this regard, libraries and information centers are encountering the challenge of low attendance of users in libraries (Twum, Yalley, Agyapong & Ofori, 2021), partly influenced by the physical closure of these organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this low attendance of users has resulted in a change in the contribution of libraries due to the increasing application of information and communication technologies in society. In addition, technological variations seem to require new management solutions (Zbiejczuk Suchá, Bartošová, Novotný, Bělehradová Svitáková, Štefek & Víchová, 2021), one of which is the application of branding approaches. The contradiction in the space in modern university libraries is that although these libraries attempt to employ new technologies to meet users' information needs, many of them are still organized in traditional information formats, and a major part of the library building spaces are dedicated to shelving books and printed materials. This issue has also created serious challenges for medical libraries and information centers dealing with health information. The biggest challenge facing health information practitioners seems to be the growing demand for new methods of providing health information through various electronic health services to support evidence-based medicine (Seo et al., 2008).

Additionally, firms and institutions have emerged in recent years whose main activity is the collection of scientific data, including papers and theses, and other information carriers satisfying users' and scholars' requirements. Attracting and retaining customers is the main objective of these firms, which have also conducted library users towards them; therefore, libraries should strive to win the competition with them; while keeping their users, they should direct their activities towards recognizing the requirements and maintaining their users. Some challenges medical libraries and information centers face in this regard include budget reduction, development of a user-centered approach, rapid growth of information resources, increase in costs, competition with database vendors, and complexity in information requirements (Safaei, Khosravi & Rajabali Beglou, 2021).

Accordingly, libraries must adopt logical approaches to synchronize the provision of services in line with technological advances and surpass competitors. Branding in libraries and information centers is one of these approaches. According to studies conducted by Hood and Henderson (2005) Kenneway (2006), Rowley (1995) dynamization of library services, user attraction, effectiveness, introducing the library at the community level, making money, and creating distinction with similar organizations in providing information services are among the most important applications of branding in libraries. Therefore, branding for medical libraries and information centers is necessary to overcome the current situation. Consequently, these information centers should identify the influential structures in branding while evaluating and monitoring the environment and provide distinctive services by planning to surpass the competitors, which will increase users' awareness, create a positive mental image, and ultimately trust and loyalty towards libraries.

As mentioned earlier, this study mainly aims to identify key branding components and create differentiation in the context of Iranian medical libraries and information centers (IMLICs). Accordingly, this study strives to answer the following question:

● *What are the most important components of branding in IMLICs, and what is the branding model of these libraries?*

Literature Review

Branding is essential for libraries and information centers, which was focused on by various studies. It is worth mentioning that most of these studies addressed branding in the context of the public (Hariff & Rowley 2011; Hood & Henderson 2005) and academic libraries (Brantz & Sadowski, 2010; Singh & Trinchet, 2020). In addition, some studies emphasized that branding can create a dynamic and positive environment among libraries raise the quality of services and, as a result, improve the educational and commercial activities of universities (Brantz & Sadowski, 2010; Hepburn & Lewis, 2008; Holt, 2003; Singh & Ovsak, 2013; Singh & Trinchetta, 2020; Wynne, Dixon, Donohue & Rowlands, 2016). These types of studies involve those that focus on reasons for branding and factors influencing branding in libraries. Among these, the studies that addressed the reasons for branding for libraries also mentioned the factors affecting branding.

Walton (2008) discussed why there is a need for brands and how to create and develop them in a review aimed at investigating branding in the marketing and promotion of libraries. According to this work, libraries are modifying rapidly, indicating they can benefit from effective branding. Similarly, Rahmad et al. (2020), suggested that admission of the concept of marketing and branding in libraries is required to deal with competitors, and branding strategy can differentiate and replace products or services in the stakeholders' minds. Sahli, Alidousti & Naghshineh (2023), in a review on the necessity of branding, pointed out that if libraries can manage their brand and move towards creating their brand according to the new information environment, they can survive in today's competitive world and create real value concerning users, which of course seems to be true for all organizations. One key area of research has been on the importance of brand identity and how it can be developed and communicated effectively. Taylor and Joudrey (2019) note that brand identity should reflect the library's mission, vision, and values, as well as its user needs and expectations. Another important area of research has been on the challenges and opportunities of branding in the digital age. With the rise of digital technologies, libraries face new challenges and opportunities in building and maintaining their brands. Thompson argues that libraries need to embrace digital channels such as social media and mobile apps to engage with users and communicate their brand message effectively (Thompson, 2018). Other areas of research have focused on the role of brand culture and internal branding in libraries, as well as the relationship between branding and fundraising. Safaei, et al. (2021) in a qualitative study, recently described the services provided by IMLICs in two main concepts of specialized services (including information services, research and scientometrics, and education) and public services (including welfare services, public health, support, and culture) in line with branding. They believe that providing modern and high-quality specialized services needed by today's users causes the view of the community and users towards the library to change and these stakeholders to have a stronger perception of MLICs.

Some studies on the effective factors in library branding have mentioned the role of librarians and their relationship with users' trust and loyalty. For example, according to Gall

(2012), the librarian can increase users' knowledge of the librarian's professional capabilities and increase users' trust and loyalty to the library by establishing effective communication with users and "distance education librarians". The findings of Kalbande (2019) also indicated that librarians' branding management and presence in the digital world could help create librarians' professional image and raise their status. The consideration of library architecture and environment is another influential factor in library branding (ibid). In this regard, Tomcik (2015) reviewed the related literature on library branding and marketing and surveyed the users of Buswell Library in Wheaton College, the USA, aiming for library branding. Their results demonstrated that a quiet environment, several resources, and an environment that supports users are effective factors in developing a library brand. Another study on the impact of building and space on research library branding in the African continent was conducted by Mwanzu and Wendo (2017). This investigation indicated that the library building as a comfortable and beautiful space based on international standards is an important branding factor.

Providing library services to its users is another effective component of library branding. Twum et al. (2021) believe that libraries are recently facing challenges, including users' application of other options such as mega-bookstores, e-learning systems, multimedia products, online information providers, document service providers, and other competitive sources of information; they should operationalize branding their services by raising the level of service quality in line with users' requirement to deal with such challenges. According to Khattab (2018), libraries have to provide user requirement-based services in virtual media and user surveys following the availability of information contained on the web and users' access to it, and branding is a necessity for libraries to eliminate recession caused by the emergence of competitors such as the Internet. Patil and Pradhan (2014) believe that librarians should realize the importance and perception of the service marketing process, theory, and its applications in practice. New technologies such as YouTube, blogs, and Wikis provide opportunities for libraries to use them to innovate their services, attract users, and brand themselves. In addition, several studies on the application of technology in providing library services and promoting branding objectives have referred to the pivotal role of the library website and social media in the differentiation and branding of the library (AL Awadhi & Al-Daihani, 2019; Roughen, 2016; Singh & Ovsak, 2013; Tomcik, 2015).

According to the literature review, library branding was primarily developed in the context of non-medical public and academic libraries. They mainly focused on the concept and necessity of branding in libraries, theoretical issues, and manuscript reviews. None of the studies created practical knowledge and have not implemented branding in the context of libraries from librarians' or library users' perspectives. In addition, it seems that library branding has not become librarians' native knowledge through their lived experience. As mentioned, multiple studies have been conducted on branding and the necessity of branding in libraries and information centers, and branding in Iranian libraries and information centers has been implemented in non-medical libraries (Sahli et al., 2023). However, no coherent investigation has been used as a practical resource for branding libraries of medical universities in Iran for brainstorming and application. Therefore, this study mainly aims to analyze and explain the components of the branding model in IMLICs, in which they can compete with organizations and their competitors, and provide serious plans to improve the library's position in addition to attracting users. Moreover, the present work addressed the branding model approach in these libraries.

Materials and Methods

Research Design and Data Collection

Literature Search

The directed qualitative content analysis method conducted this study in two steps. In cases where there is a theory or previous research about a phenomenon that is incomplete and more descriptions should be made regarding it, the qualitative researcher employs the content analysis method with a directional approach. This method is considered an approach of theory-based comparative use, and its differences from other methods are based on the role of theory in them. The directed content analysis aims to validate and expand the conceptual, theoretical framework, or the theory itself (Baghmirani, Esmaili Givi, Hassanzadeh & Noruzi, 2017). The library method was used in the first step, i.e., exploring resources and extracting the required components in the branding of libraries and information centers. Available studies and their data analysis were applied to collect data, compare, and interpret the data to provide a conceptual model while reviewing the literature based on the library method with the content analysis approach, and the desired variables were extracted, and in addition to identifying the required components and matching them with branding components (conceptual model), the initial proposed model was finally extracted. A search was conducted to identify relevant studies on branding models and components in libraries in various international databases, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ISI, Emerald, and ScienceDirect, with keywords including *'branding,' 'brand,' 'branding models,' 'brand and library,' 'branding in the library,' 'library and branding,' 'library image,' 'library awareness', 'library loyalty,' 'library brand association,'* and *'library promotion'* and Iranian databases such as Noormags[1], Magiran[2], and SID[3] with Persian keywords including *'branding and library,' 'library branding,' 'library brand,' 'library brand image,' 'brand loyalty in the library,' 'brand association in the library,'* and *'branding in the medical science library*.' The study steps are indicated in Figure 1.

Finding articles

Articles retrieved in international databases, e.g., Scopus: 883; Web of Science: 336; PubMed: 690; Science Direct: 75; Google Scholar: 968; and Emerald: 161 and Persian databases, e.g., SID: 3, Magiran: 39; and Noormags: 2

Number of excluded records: 3023

Screening

Number of records after removing duplicates: 134

Excluded irrelevant articles: 46

Access to related articles

Selected articles for reading the full text: 88

Removal of resources based on full text analysis: 33

Selected articles for quality analysis: 33

Articles related to the study on non-library branding: 20
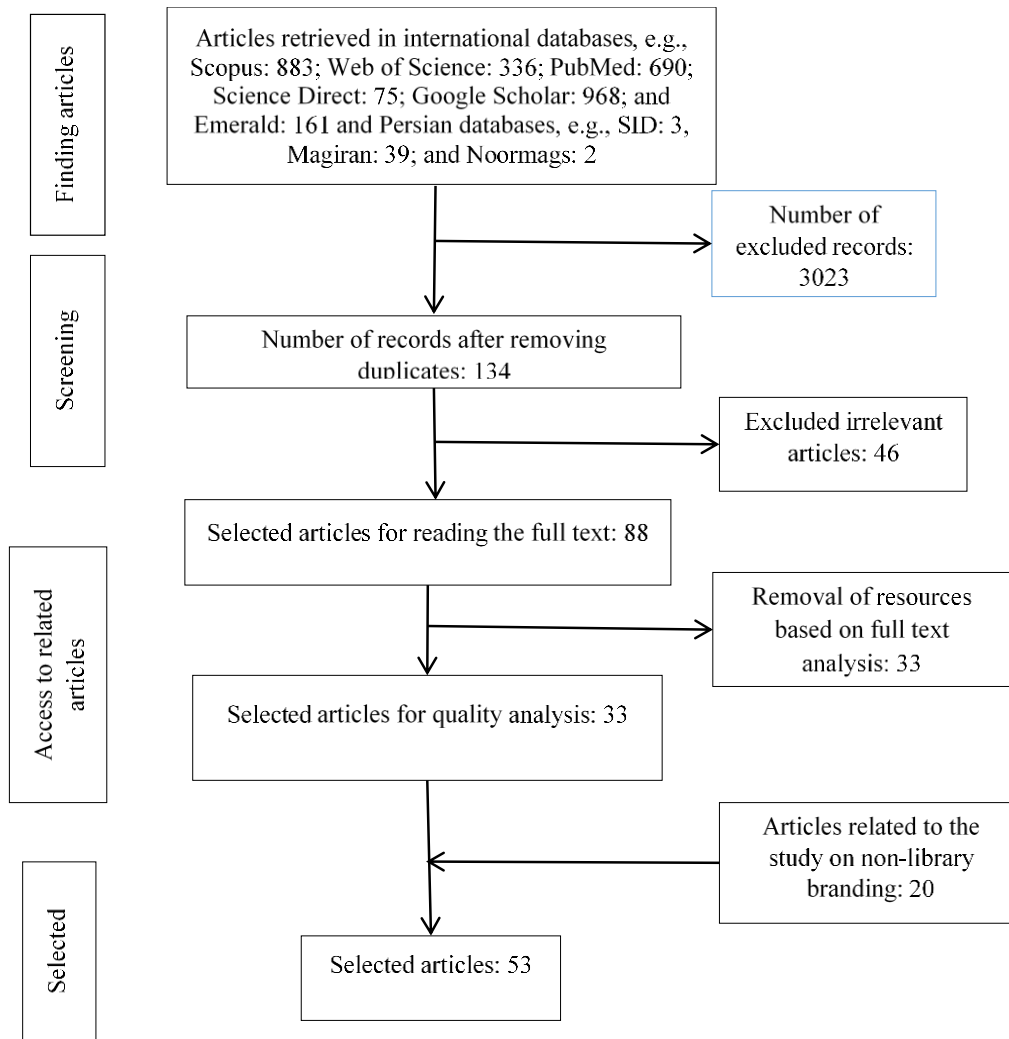
Selected

Selected articles: 53

Figure 1: Steps for retrieving articles related to the study

As mentioned in the literature review section, library branding methods and activities were extracted from these studies and were categorized based on their focus areas in four main areas, i.e., librarians, library services, library building and equipment, and technology in the library. Since branding is a marketing tool in the management discipline and the literature review in this field was necessary for the advancement of this research, the "Aaker" branding model was identified as one of the most frequently used models in this field. Then the effective branding components in libraries were identified based on the components of this model (awareness, association, loyalty, and trust) designed as the conceptual model of the research (Safaei et al., 2021). The activities of these four areas were categorized separately based on Aaker's branding model (brand awareness, brand image, loyalty, and brand promotion) to explain how libraries are branded in each of these areas, and designing interview questions was based on the findings from the literature.

Interview Structures

In the second step, qualitative data were collected and analyzed for this study by interviewing experts in the field of libraries and branding. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview. The participants in this study including 14 managers and heads of libraries

of Iranian medical sciences universities were purposefully selected among current and former information managers and heads of libraries of medical universities in Iran with excellent backgrounds and experience in managing the library. The interview questions were set based on the primary research objective, the theoretical framework, and the literature review. The inclusion criteria for this study were managers of Medical Libraries and Information Centers (MLICs) with at least two years of managerial experience and the interest and expertise of library managers in branding. Two pilot interviews were conducted to begin the study, and the intended questions were confirmed with a slight change for the main interview. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner (at the workplace of the interviewees) or by phone, with prior coordination and appointment. Background information about branding and the necessity of research was sent to participants via email before the interview. Each interview was implemented in writing after recording, and the interviews continued until data saturation; i.e., the data collection process continued until there were no new codes from the content of the interviews. Moreover, duplication was observed in the new codes from the 10th interview onwards, and data saturation continued until the 14th interview.

Data Analysis

As mentioned previously, the text of the interviews was analyzed using the comparative qualitative content analysis method; i.e., the interviews were coded based on the theoretical framework in the literature review. Afterward, similar codes at a higher level of abstraction formed sub-components with more generality than the initial codes. Furthermore, sub-components with similar themes were combined and formed components with a higher level of abstraction; these steps were performed using MaxQDA 2018 version software. The research validity is also measured based on Guba and Lincoln's (1994) criteria, including reliability, transferability, and verifiability using approaches of a long engagement, researcher triangulation, member checking, and analysis by peer debriefing. Moreover, appropriate communication was established with the participants to achieve acceptability (validity and reliability of the data). In addition, the researcher improved the validity of the data through long-term involvement and complete immersion in the data during the research process. Another way to validate the findings was to evaluate the results with the participants. For this purpose, the interview text, partially or totally along with the initially extracted codes, was provided to the participants so that they could comment on whether these codes were representative of their real perspective and were consistent with their real purpose of expressing the sentences or not. If the interviewees had revised comments, their suggestions were considered.

Peer-debrief was another method to ensure the research's acceptability, in which the interviews along with the extracted codes, were presented to several supervisors (two experts from the library and information field who did not participate in the interview). If there is a difference of opinion between researchers and supervisors, the data were analyzed again, conceptualized by the researcher, and returned to the supervisors until it was approved. The data were assessed several times after collection in the present study, and the key points and related codes were determined. In general, the codes (labels) were extracted from the collected data and converted into 739 primary codes through qualitative coding logic, which was placed in a category after categorizing and coding similar categories. Since the coding approach was analogical, the main components of the model were clear from the beginning, which were

finally reduced to 185 subcategories after implementation and several rounds of coding and checking the codes. The experiences of the researcher (due to the scientific and practical involvement of the researcher in the research topic) and the terms extracted from the theoretical and specialized literature were used for categorization. Table 1 shows the number of codes extracted from the interviews by the main components of library branding. Finally, following the completion of categorization and coding, all the categories along with the codes extracted from the interviews were sent to the fourteen directors of libraries and information centers of the selected universities participating in the interview as a panel of experts and were confirmed by them in the first step. In the following, the mentioned items will be explained in detail.

Results

According to the methodology section, branding models in other organizations similar to the library with activity and approach of providing services to customers were assessed to explain the conceptual research model (Appendix 1), which finally identified four components of brand awareness, brand image, brand trust, and loyalty, as well as brand promotion that were among the most used components of the branding model. In addition, according to the results, the components that can be branded in Iranian libraries and information centers of the medical universities include librarians, services, buildings and equipment, and technology. No new influential component was added to the components after analyzing the interviews. Ultimately, it was determined what actions and suggestions the libraries of medical universities have taken or offered for branding in each of these components in line with the four branding components (i.e., brand awareness, brand image, brand trust and loyalty, and brand promotion). Therefore, it is then required to respond to the research question.

Responding to the research question

What are the most important components of branding in IMLICs, and what is the branding model of these libraries?

As mentioned in the methodology section, following coding and categorizing the interviews based on Aaker's branding model, it was determined which codes are important in increasing the level of brand awareness, brand image, trust, and loyalty to the brand and, ultimately, library brand promotion. The codes mentioned more in the interviews were related to subject expertise, scientific communication and interaction, customer-centricity, and librarians' media presence in line with library branding. To clarify the work steps, examples of coding in each of the branding components (brand awareness, brand image, brand trust and loyalty, and brand promotion) related to librarians are provided.

Participant #14: "... *I'm now the Endnote brand at university... anyone who has a problem with referencing reminds me that I'm in the library...*" (Code: subject expertise; Component: brand awareness).

Participant #12: "... *the librarian is not just sitting at the desk and lending books; the librarian can help provide information to users and even teach them how to use software...*" (Sub-code: scientific communication and interaction; Component: brand image).

Participant #1: "... *the services provided in the library must be of high quality and in line with the users' requirements, and user-centricity should be the top priority of the library...*" (Sub-code: customer-centricity; Component: user's loyalty).

Participant #10: "*... the presence of librarians in the Salamat TV Network and the presentation of a report on the actions and services of health information in the library... brought influence and promotion for the university and library collection...*" (Code: presence in the media; Component: brand promotion).

As mentioned, the subject expertise increases the awareness of the library brand because when a user encounters the problem of searching and retrieving scientific articles, citing, etc., which is in the subject expertise of the librarians, it is reminded in his/her mind that he/she should refer to the library and this knowledge is considered the library brand. Moreover, when the librarian interacts and communicates scientifically with the user, a positive image is created in the user's mind. Further, users' trust and loyalty towards the library are created by providing high-quality services and excellent and proactive behavior, and finally, librarians' presence in conferences and mass media promotes the library brand. As can be understood from the participants' statements, all these branding components based on Aaker's model revolve around the librarian, and more sub-codes can be followed in connection with these components. According to what was mentioned previously, the sub-codes and main components of branding (based on Aaker's model) can be seen in the framework of the following table in each of the four components effective in branding Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities (Table 1).

Table 1

Main and sub-codes components of the library branding model (according to the Aaker model)

Branding Component	Main Category	Sub-codes
Brand awareness	Librarians	Thematic expertise
Brand image	Building and equipment	User-centricity design
Advertising and promotion	Technology	Employing media and virtual tools
Brand loyalty and trust	Services	Electronic information services

As in the following, the branding model of libraries in medical universities can be observed in the framework indicated in Figure 2.
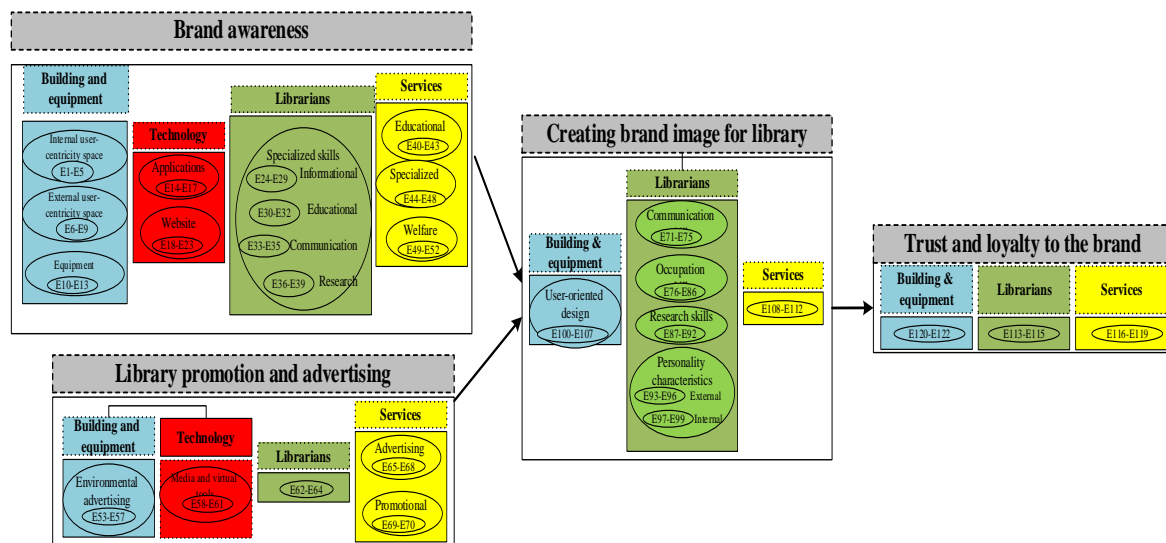

Figure 2: Branding components in ILMICs

Brand Awareness of Iranian Medical Libraries and Information Centers

The results revealed that librarians, services, building and equipment, and technology as four important components of library branding, play a pivotal role in raising users' awareness of the library brand, which is further expressed in the results from the interviews based on the four important structures in library branding:

As observed in Figure 2, the specialized skills of librarians are among the components that can raise users' awareness of the library brand effectively by providing professional services, including informational (E24-E29), educational (E30-E32), communicational (E33-E35) and research (E36-E39) services. In this regard, according to Participant #3: "*... in the library, we set up an "Ask the Librarian" desk for information services. The library is not only for book and library advice, but students used to come to this desk for information advice and, in general, for thesis writing, essay writing, resource searching, access to databases, etc., and this itself was a brand for our library that we have a librarian that provides information and research services...*"

Regarding educational skills, Participant #6 stated: "*... In my opinion, in the discussion of information literacy, this is one of the duties of the information field, which should train its audience about the resources they have and their knowledge of resources and access to those resources....*" Moreover, regarding communication skills, Participant #2 stated: "*... a librarian should have a high percentage of social intelligence and be able to make lectures and workshops interesting instead of boringly saying what is it and what its definition is? And ... well, the other party gets bored. Particularly our audience, who is a busy individual and doesn't have enough patience to sit and listen a lot....*" Regarding the research skills of librarians in raising the awareness of the library brand, Participant #12 said: "*... by participating in scientific and research centers, attending scientific circles, reviewing scientific articles, presenting research projects, etc., the librarian has contributed to his branding and is known to be effective in differentiating the library from other libraries….*"

According to Figure 2, in the component related to library services, providing services such as educational services (E40-E43), specialized services (E44-E48), and welfare services (E49-E52) plays a key role in raising users' awareness of the library brand. Regarding the educational services in raising users' awareness, Participant #12 stated: "*... providing specialized services to researchers, such as advising in research, retrieving articles and searching for a systematic review of medical information, makes the user depend on the library and differentiates the library as well....*" In respect of the specialized services, Participant #5 said: "*... currently, it is very required for users to learn the clinical key, BMJ, Scopus databases, how to build scientific profiles, and bibliographic software, and learning how to use these databases from the library is very important in raising the awareness of library users….*"

Participant #10 stated regarding welfare services: "*... the library should provide services for its users' welfare and have facilities and equipment that make users feel satisfied and comfortable. These welfare services include buffets and water cooler vendors, book cafes, holding exhibitions and book stores, internet network management, and Idea Cafe….*"

Among other findings on building and equipment, the internal (E1-E5) and external (E6-E9) user-centricity space design and updating of library equipment (E9-E13) were identified to raise users' awareness in line with the branding of Iranian libraries of medical universities.

In addition, Participant #4 stated: "*... the existence of an educational hall in the library with computer systems connected to the Internet, video projectors, along with application software*

for teaching electronic information resources, online classes and even as a classroom for some courses that require computers and the Internet are effective in distinguishing and branding the library...."

In addition, Participant #4 said: "*... on the library building, when it follows the architecture of a particular school, it is a brand itself. I saw a clear example of that during my recent trip to Germany, the architecture of state libraries used an architectural school called Bauhaus (house of Architecture). This school is ancient and has been branded in libraries; the state libraries of the whole of Germany are in this style, which was a graphic style and optimal use of space....*"

Both the use of practical applications (E14-E17) and the design and completion of the content of library websites (E18-E23) in the field of technology are other effective areas in branding libraries of medical universities, which were identified to raise awareness of the library brand. The sub-components obtained from the interviews are shown in Appendix 2.

Moreover, Participant #5 stated: *"... we teach practical software such as Excel, Word, etc., in the library and hold virtual conferences and classes. We also upload many educational files with the library's name in the Aparat[4] media and many such cases, which effectively increase users' satisfaction and awareness towards the library services."*

Advertising and Promoting the Brand of Iranian Medical Libraries and Information Centers

Advertising and promoting the activities and services of libraries in four areas were the other main components of the branding model. The results suggested that promotional and environmental tools on building and equipment (E53-E57) are among the essential items in library promotion. According to the results, libraries should use items to encourage and attract their users because humans have a spirit of seeking beauty. Encouraging and attractive environment, library architecture, pleasant public space, and adequate and standard space are among the cases mentioned in the library branding from an environmental perspective, in which compliance with the referred items will have a significant effect on creating the library brand. Participant #10 stated in this case: "*... sometimes, the number of visitors to the library lobby is more than other floors; it is because of that prosperity, freedom and the beautiful and pleasant atmosphere that has been established in the library lobby*...."

According to the interview results and Figure 5, the libraries of medical universities employ various technological methods and tools to inform and promote their services, which makes the user aware of their existence and advantages. The use of media and virtual tools in technology (E58-E61) plays a significant role in promoting the library. Participant #2 states: "*... most of our advertising has been through social networks, which has led to an increase in our customers or audience. These ads included posting videos on the Telegram network and on the Ethical Publishing and Scientific Sources channel, a well-known channel that was an excellent advertisement for us*...."

According to Figure 5, the interview results demonstrated that librarians are self-advertisers so the characteristics and performance of librarians working in libraries (E62-E64) and librarians' good dealings with users lead to encouraging users to have a pleasant presence in the library. In this respect, Participant #13 stated: "*... two librarians with thematic expertise went to Radio Salamat and TV channel to give a speech and present the performance and services of the library, and they had an outstanding impact on both the university and the library*...."

As shown in Figure 5, the libraries of medical universities provide advertising services (E65-E68) and promotional services (E69-E70) for their brand promotion, which were identified as effective and required factors of the promotion and advertising components in line with the library branding of medical universities. According to Participant #3: "*Popular users who have been visiting the library and have been studying in a place of the library can be effective factors in the library branding; e.g., the presence of a famous physician, writer, thinker, artist, and actor will attract audiences who are fans of these characters*."

Brand Image of Iranian Medical Libraries and Information Centers

Another component was the brand image of IMLICs; the participants found the role of the three components of the building, librarians, and services to be effective in creating a positive image of the library.

As indicated in Figure 5, in the component of the building and equipment, considering the category of user-centricity design (E100-E107) of the library is emphasized in creating the image of the library brand. According to the interview results, communicational skills (E71-E75), occupational skills (E76-E86), research skills (E87-E92), external characteristics (E93-E96), and internal characteristics (E97-E99) of librarians plays a pivotal role in changing the mental image of users of IMLICs to create a positive mental image of the library. As Participant #5 stated: "*... an active, good-natured, and fanatical librarian means a person who works well in his profession and work, has self-confidence and has a good attitude and professional interaction with the user, this librarian makes everything out of nothing. The essence of the story is the librarian, a human force that creates prosperity and creativity using logical thinking, and I emphasize a lot on librarians themselves and their behavior [in creating a brand and changing the mental image of users] ....*"

According to Figure 4.4, since the public's mental image of the library is only a place full of bookshelves and a location to study only, providing access to an extensive range of information in printed and electronic form and services that creates a positive image of the library and an excellent feeling in the user's mind will be effective in branding the library. According to the results, the provision of educational and general services (E108-E112) was among the services that created a positive image of the library, which was identified to develop the brand image of Iranian libraries and information centers in medical universities. According to Participant #10, "*... the 'Health Accelerator' station, which is now in the 'L' collection of the university library, has become an advantage for us; as students can turn their idea into a real product because of the presence of that collection which has a new style; they can go there easily to talk to people who are investors, their visits to the library will increase and lead to an increase in the number of visits to the library collection, which is what has made us a brand….*"

Trust and Loyalty to the Brand of Iranian Medical Libraries and Information Centers

Building users' trust and loyalty to the library brand is another study that results in the direction of branding in these libraries. According to Figure 5 and to create users' trust in the library and a sense of satisfaction, the interviewees emphasized three components: (i) Building and equipment (E120-E122), (ii) Librarians (E112-E115), and (iii) Services (E116-E119) that play a pivotal role in creating users' trust and loyalty to the brand of Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities. It is noteworthy that this model displays a summary

of the obtained components due to the extensive range of sub-components (Refer to Appendix 1 to see the details of these components).

In terms of the service quality provided by the librarian and gaining the trust and loyalty of the user, Participant #12 confirms: "... *if I enter a library and realize that I am viewed as a customer whose satisfaction is important, one hundred percent (100%) I look at that organization differently. In libraries, we consider the user as a customer, and his satisfaction is our main objective, which makes him trust us and remain loyal [to become a brand, the librarian should seek to provide quality services] ....*"

Regarding library equipment, Participant #3 stated: "... *the existence of a resting place is important in the loyalty and return of the user to the library....*" According to Participant #4: "... *we call it compliance with ergonomic principles. When it comes to equipment, the story of ergonomics comes up, i.e., to achieve the user's trust, observe the ergonomics of the environment and equipment....*"

In addition, according to the results, the libraries of medical universities identified service provision (E116-E119) such as the educational, general, and welfare services as important factors for the user's trust, satisfaction, and loyalty in the context of the library, i.e., the user will return to the library due to satisfaction and trust. According to Participant #5, "... *users use the library collection and databases and virtual reference through access off campus the university, and these types of virtual reference services will be effective in improving trust and loyalty to the library....*"

Discussion

Currently, MLICs are in a particular situation due to the importance of accessing health information and attracting users. On the other hand, the development of technologies has provided an appropriate platform for the dissemination of health information by various groups and tools, which has many attractions for users. In addition, since health information deals with human lives, it is important to reach the right users through the right platform at the right time through MLICs. Therefore, MLICs should consider measures to maintain dynamics in this field to maintain their users using novel approaches while maintaining dynamics and providing information services using modern technologies. While building the users' trust, the provision of the desired services helps attract more of them. One of the current approaches in this field is the use of brand development and branding.

According to the results, Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities have branding capabilities in the four main components of the library (librarians, services, building and equipment, and technology). In other words, the development of human resources, services, building and equipment, and technology should be planned so that its output is users' awareness about the library brand and the creation of a positive mental image towards the library function. It keeps the users' trust and loyalty towards the library and finally makes users the ambassadors and missionaries to promote the library via word-of-mouth marketing following their satisfaction. As demonstrated in the results, librarians are the first and perhaps the most important element that plays a significant role in creating the library brand in the user's mind, the behavior of the librarians, and the passion and interest they show when meeting the user's needs. For service organizations such as libraries, the different interactions between librarians and users are significant. The fact that librarians and library directors have a substantial impact on creating a library brand is found in most studies, including Walton (2008)

and Singh (2013). It has been confirmed that librarians can introduce themselves as a brand using virtual media, having a scientific profile, or a different and special type of behavior, and their branding also plays an important role in creating a library brand. In other words, if IMLICs want to plan for branding, selecting expert and experienced librarians with both high potential and a positive attitude toward branding in the library is particularly important. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the recognition and promotion of their required skills, indicating that librarians have sufficient knowledge of the brand and its significance and acquire the required skills. The differences between the results of the present study and the above-mentioned studies (Walton, 2008; Singh, 2013) show that there are some contextual elements and sub-elements presented by participants in this research differentiate research results in detail; Expertise subject matter in medical terminology, the ability to organize medical and general information, the ability to establish the appropriate relationship between the user's needs and information resources, and skills such as information literacy and consultation, scientific communication, research methods, etc. and other motivational and educational programs.

The next component for branding IMLICs is to provide services tailored to the users' demands, as branding does not occur unless creative and motivated librarians provide services with a sufficient understanding of the value of branding. The results also revealed that the service branding process in the library should be implemented through service prominence, such as providing specific and different services required by library users in different conditions, including the provision of online reference services, holding training classes for users, or providing free and different services. The provision of particular services, such as holding reinforcement courses and holding a conference, has been mentioned by Brantz and Sadowski (2010) on branding. Providing high-quality and particular services as a branding component has been mentioned and confirmed by Rowley (1995), Holt (2003) and Twum et al., (2021). Moreover, providing public services, including welfare services, e.g., restaurants, parking lots, book cafes, etc., cultural services (e.g., holding book fairs, book review sessions, etc.), support services, and public health education services is considerably important in branding IMLICs; Salhi, et al. (2023) mentioned these items as well but, the Classical grounded theory method hired and different context (university libraries) in the mentioned research to somehow make differences in the findings and the application of results in IMLICs. However, it is required for directors and planners to have the necessary revision and planning concerning the removal of serious branding obstacles and strengthening branding facilities, which are mostly related to the budget and organization because the provision of appropriate services requires strengthening the infrastructure and funds.

The provision of diverse services demanded by today's users will change the perception that the library only lends books. Generally, it is worth noting that other services which should be provided by Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities must focus more on health information consulting, research advising, educational services, and other information needs of users. Moreover, the provision of high-quality services will modify the society's and users' perspective towards the library; they can find a better perception of Iranian libraries and information centers in medical universities. It creates a positive mental image in users and makes users maintain their loyalty to the library. Finally, following the satisfaction by expressing the type of services, they will be appropriate missionaries and ambassadors to attract other users to the library.

Another component with branding potential in Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities is the library building and equipment that should be considered. The results suggested that the architecture of IMLICs, focusing on the user-centered and user-friendly appearance and location of the building, the equipment, and the amenities of the library are among the key factors that play an influential role in branding the library. Tomcik, 2015; Mwanzu and Wendo, 2017; and Singh, 2013, have pointed out items such as the environment color and furniture of the library, architecture, coffee shops, chat rooms, exhibition halls, etc. that can be effective in creating a library brand in terms of building and equipment component but there are some more specific elements regarding environmental ergonomics, public environment space, and atmosphere, facilities, and appliances.

The design of the library building according to the climatic conditions, pleasantness, and the use of nature and its factors gives the users a pleasant feeling towards the building. Furthermore, establishing a library building following the standards leaves a positive image in users' minds and makes them loyal to the library. On the other hand, preparing comfort facilities considering different groups of rehabilitated people, researchers, and other users causes them to express their memories of the beauty and attractions of the library's building, equipment, and architecture, through word-of-mouth advertising to introduce the library. In addition, paying particular attention to library equipment based on specific ergonomics and standards gives Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities the capability to be branded in this area.

Another component with branding potential is the utilization of technologies in Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities. The employment of technology in libraries is another factor that has a significant impact on the branding of libraries, as innovation and branding are two inseparable components, and technology paves the way to create innovations and fundamentally changes the library potential in the information market (Walton, 2008). The application of technologies such as websites, social networks, digitization of resources, etc., in providing library services can play a role in branding libraries, which Patil and Pradhan (2014), Kalbande (2019) and Gall (2012) have also mentioned as one of the main factors in creating the library brand. As mentioned, competition with other information service providers on the Internet is among the major challenges of Iranian libraries and information centers of medical universities. Therefore, the application of emerging technologies is a branding component based on the present results. Managers of IMLICs should have the required planning to use these tools intelligently and know that just having smart technologies cannot help their branding. Intelligent use of technologies and providing the right information at the right time will always create a positive mental image of the library in users' minds. Accordingly, libraries can differentiate themselves from other competitors with this approach. Moreover, the intelligent use of social networks to provide particularly attractive services to users is also one of the branding programs focusing on technology that users always refer to libraries to meet their information needs and are suitable agents for them.

In the present study, the methods of branding libraries that related studies for each of the four steps of branding (i.e., brand awareness, creating a mental image (association) of the brand, loyalty, and trust in the brand, and promotion) in the four areas of branding libraries, i.e., librarians, services, technology, and building and equipment, were extracted to explain and design the conceptual model of library branding, which is indicated in the form of a conceptual model in Figure 3. As mentioned, the components and capabilities of branding in libraries were

identified in the form of four main components. Libraries and information centers should change the functionality of all or some of these components based on the library context to increase users' knowledge and awareness of the library and change their mental image of the library according to the effective components in branding to exploit these components in their information services.

Conclusion

Nowadays, Iranian medical libraries and information centers generally require modifications and apply new approaches for their survival and development to maintain their dynamism. Branding is one of the current approaches in this field. Branding refers to the development of the mental structure of the user, which causes a distinct mental image of the library to be created in his/her mind. However, the branding of MLICs has many applications. The dynamism of library services, attracting more users, increasing effectiveness, introducing the library at the community level, making money, and creating distinction with peer organizations in providing information services are considered to be the most important applications of branding in libraries. In addition, the branding of library services improves users' awareness, trust, loyalty, and association modifications towards the library. Therefore, branding for IMLICs is necessary to overcome the current situation. Iranian libraries are encountering serious obstacles in this area; it is thus suggested that each of these libraries individually and exclusively include each of the components in their strategic and operational plan and employ the final model of the present study as a guideline. The contribution of librarians as a human resource factor is considerably prominent, and we can hope for the successful branding of these organizations by eliminating attitudinal and skill barriers. The provision of up-to-date and diverse services in libraries as a component requires infrastructure, comprehensive management, and an independent budget. Since the diverse services demanded by users can increase users' awareness, positive image, and loyalty to these centers, the availability of welfare facilities based on technological, ergonomic, and emerging requirements becomes very significant.

Finally, some suggestions can be presented to take advantage of the application of branding in IMLICs. It seems that IMLICs are facing serious obstacles and barriers in terms of branding in Iran; therefore, it is suggested that these libraries, to get out of the current state, put each of the structures that have the potential in their work agenda and use this model as their road map. Since branding in IMLICs takes place in the long term and with proper planning, it is suggested that libraries pay close attention to the issue of branding in their strategic and operational plans to realize it. Since branding in libraries is a spontaneous activity that should start with librarians, and on the other hand, librarians as human resources agents play an effective role in changing the performance of any organization, it is suggested that the organizational structure and recruitment of human resources should be appropriate to the needs of branding in libraries and centers. Iran's medical information should be revised. Since the provision of diverse services required by users can play an important role in increasing the awareness and positive image and loyalty of users to the IMLICs, it is suggested that they provide special services such as providing services to special users such as researchers, facilitators at different levels of education and providing welfare facilities and different from other equal organizations should help branding IMLICs.

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Endnotes

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Appendices- Supplementary data

Appendix 1

The main and secondary components of branding in libraries and medical information centers in Iran

Branding structures	Main components	Subcomponents	Subcomponents
1- Brand awareness	Building and equipment	Indoor user-friendly space	A special space for individuals, groups, women, researchers, etc.
			A hall equipped to produce multimedia content
			Study halls, conference halls and electronic education equipped with internet
			VIP room for study
			Interior decoration and coloring unique to each section
		User-oriented environment	green garden space
			Attractive coloring of enclosed walls
			Special climate architecture
			Visibility of the location of the library
		Equipment	Advanced online printers
			Free internet access

Branding structures	Main components	Subcomponents		Subcomponents
				Multiplicity of computer devices
				Group discussion equipment, video conference, participation in virtual scientific seminars
	Technology	Applications		Specialized and distance education applications
				Systems such as the full text of theses, digital resources, and the system for delivering documents
				Web awareness tools
				Publish educational short films in the environment of cameras and social networks
		Website Content		Infographics, introduction and service process and library performance report
				Introduction of employees
				Comments and suggestions
				Request information resources through the website
				valuation of library performance, educational videos
	librarians	special skills	Informational	Subject matter expertise and understanding of medical terminology
				Ability to organize medical and general information
				Knowledge and skill in searching, retrieving, interpreting and analyzing information
				The ability to establish the appropriate relationship between the user's needs and information sources.
				Clinical librarian skills
				Knowledge and skill in using information technology
			educational	Knowledge and skill in teaching information literacy to users
				Informational, research and educational consulting skills to users
				The ability to establish appropriate communication with the user
				Communication with educational groups
				Conducting motivational and educational programs
			research	Knowledge and skills of research types
				The skill of retrieving articles related to different scientific fields
				Cooperation with research teams
				Knowledge and skill of statistical analysis
	services	Training services		Providing research report writing training services
				Dissertation structure training services
				Holding specialized training workshops
				Education services taught by expert professors
		Specialized services		Preparation of educational packages (including CDs, books, guides, brochures, etc.)
				Informational and research consulting
				Scientific services
				Selective services of information and document delivery
				Virtual reference services
		welfare Services		Exhibition and book store
				Holding storytelling sessions
				Establishment of university internet management
				Book cafe, buffet and vending machines

Branding structures	Main components	Subcomponents	Subcomponents
2- Publicity and promotion of the library	Building and equipment	Environmental advertising tools	Attractive, beautiful and peaceful environment
			Architecture or a fine art style
			Interior decoration
			Environmental advertising
	Technology	Media and virtual tools	Dedicated website
			Digital displays and virtual tour of the library
			Introduction of services through electronic correspondence
			Using new tools and social networks
	Librarian		Providing quality services
			Effective communication with different levels of users
			Presence in social media
	services	Advertising services	Effective training in the library based on the needs of users
			Specific logo design
			Advertising in the city of the library
			Designing posters and electronic bulletin boards
		Promotional services	Holding public visits to the library
			Officials and influential people visit the library
3- Creating the library's brand image	Librarian	communication skill	Good behavior with users
			Scientific interaction with users
			High social intelligence
			The ability to recognize users
			Organizational behavior skills
		Job skills	Information literacy of librarians
			Diagnosing the information needs of users
			Understanding the information-seeking behavior of users
			Computer literacy
			Communication literacy
			Providing services outside the library environment
			Self-empowerment with technology
			English proficiency
			Content marketing skills
			Knowledge enhancement with librarians
			Establishment of knowledge management
	Librarian	Research skills	Editing skills
			Knowledge of scientific judgment of articles
			The ability to formulate research plans
			Communication with the industry communication unit
			Establishing translation of knowledge in research outputs
		Personality characteristics — external	Appearance cover and identifiable introduction label
			Attending conferences and scientific lectures
			Work discipline
			Appropriate professional ethics
		Personality characteristics — internal	Creativity in service delivery
			Responsible character
			Transferring experiences to colleagues
	Building and equipment	User-oriented design	Environmental ergonomics according to university library standards
			Transportation facilities
			Beautiful architecture to attract users

Branding structures	Main components	Subcomponents	Subcomponents
			Pleasant public environment
			The center of the library building
			Standard library space
			Amenities such as buffet, rest area, etc.
			Motivational pictures and sentences
	Services		Creating content for education
			Teaching emerging technologies and application software
			Special continuous services for researchers
			Receive articles related to user needs
			Public services to promote public health
4- Trust and loyalty to the library brand	librarians		Customer Orientation
			Accountability and responsiveness to users
			Gaining trust and honoring the presence of the user
	Services		Electronic information services
			Up-to-date specialized and general printed resources
			Allocation of space for eating
			Specialized information search and retrieval services
	Equipment		Providing technology equipment
			Providing security equipment
			Standard equipment and furniture

Appendix 2
Branding research in different industries

row	researcher	Approach	industry	Effective components in branding
1	Zeithaml… et all (1996)	Branding services and products	Services	Perceived quality and consumer judgment about the overall superiority of a product is done after experiencing the brand, which will lead to trust in the brand.
2	Yin and Merrilees (2007)	Branding in international marketing	commercial companies	Brand performance, financial performance, brand orientation and brand restructuring have significant effects on international marketing strategy, which in turn affects company performance.
3	Sahin, A., Zehir, C., & Kitapçı, H(2011)	Branding of global communications	Global brands	By inventing his model, he has shown that brand trust is related to brand loyalty.
4	Chengxiao Hou and Chengxiao Hou (2013)	Branding of computer and antivirus software companies	software	This model showed that there is a significant relationship between brand awareness, trust and loyalty.
5	Salehnia…et all(2014)	Branding based on word-of-mouth advertising	Iranian banks	In this model, it was shown that word-of-mouth advertising has a direct effect on customer loyalty, mental image, and trust.
6	Bose… et all (2018)	Branding based on customer brand equity value (CBPBE).	Place brand	The salience of brands and dimensions of perceived quality affect the positioning of a place's brand and brand loyalty in terms of investment.
7	Tasci, Asli (2018)	Branding based on Keller's Customer-Based Brand Value (CBBE) model	destination brand	Brand awareness and image are the two most prominent components that have a positive effect on brand loyalty.
8	Kotsi, Filareti & Pike, Steven & Gottlieb, Udo (2018)	Branding based on Aker brand equity model	International destinations	Brand awareness, image, and value of the destination brand are related to brand loyalty.
9	Coelho, Rita, & Santos (2018)	Branding based on the Acker model	Competitive markets	In mass markets, consumers who have brand awareness have positive attitudes towards the brand, such as trust and loyalty.
10	Foroudi (2018)	Branding based on the Acker model	Hotel industry	The brand mark includes the publication of its dimensions, which include: 1- brand attitude with two components (brand association and brand trust); 2- Brand awareness includes familiarity with the brand and brand identification, which are effective in stabilizing the reputation and promoting the performance of the hotel brand.
11	Figueiredo & Castro (2019)	Branding based on brand elements	Airport	Some brand elements such as (logos, slogans, etc.) affect the experience and awareness of passengers.
12	Alhoseini Almodaressi and Zia'i Bideh (2016)	Branding based on "word of mouth" advertising.	Mobile phone operators	Word-of-mouth advertising, as the most important means of controlled brand communication, indirectly causes the loyalty of subscribers by mediating the mental image of subscribers and brand credibility.

row	researcher	Approach	industry	Effective components in branding
13	Karimian, Meshbaki Khodadahsini and Esfahani, (2015)	Branding drivers of brand equity on "brand congruence".	University brand	University brand consistency is affected by factors such as brand association, emotional response, brand superiority and awareness of the university with branding.
14	Aiti Mehr, Mohammadi and Raisi (2017)	Branding of services based on the special value dimensions of the "Aker" brand.	Chain stores	The dimensions of brand equity (perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness and brand association) and service marketing mix (price, product, location, advertising, physical evidence, processes and people) play a role in chain store branding.
15	Bonyadi Naeini, Ali (2017)	Internet branding	Communication company	The components of trust, satisfaction, brand credibility, brand evaluation, brand personality (honesty), customer care, responsiveness, and individual feeling towards the brand, respectively, have been the most effective components of internet brand loyalty.
16	Shekari (2017)	Structural model of university brand ambivalence effect	Payam Noor university	According to the model of this research, the performance of the brand affects the image of the brand and the image of the brand also affects the commitment and loyalty of students.
17	Hosseinnjad, Nazimi and Rahimnia (2018)	The effect of exploratory and refining strategies on brand image and customer commitment	Higher Education	Brand performance is effective on trust and brand image.