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Identifying Effective Strategies for Enhancing Brand Equity in the Information and Communication Technology Industry

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify and explain the effective strategies for enhancing brand equity in the information and communication technology industry from the perspective of experts at the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company. This applied study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis. The study population consisted of experts in information technology, branding, digital services, stakeholder relations, and related organizational fields employed at the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved with 21 experts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. The interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and an initial conceptual framework and was reviewed by three marketing and branding specialists. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed in Microsoft Excel using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure, including familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme definition, and final interpretation. The analysis identified four overarching themes explaining effective brand-equity enhancement: strengthening traditional brand-equity dimensions, developing technology-enabled brand capabilities, reinforcing organizational and managerial capabilities, and ensuring cultural and environmental alignment. These themes comprised 13 subthemes and 28 basic categories. The findings indicated that brand equity was enhanced through the interaction of brand awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, stakeholder trust, digital experience, IT service quality, digital innovation, digital communication, infrastructure reliability, leadership commitment, employee capability, stakeholder relationship management, and adaptation to regulatory and cultural conditions. The final framework showed that organizational foundations support technological capabilities, which shape stakeholder experiences and are subsequently translated into stronger brand meaning and equity. Brand equity in technology-intensive environments is a multidimensional organizational outcome that depends on the coordinated development of branding, technological, managerial, human-resource, stakeholder, and environmental capabilities rather than isolated promotional activities.

Keywords: Brand Equity; Information and Communication Technology; Digital Experience; Digital Innovation; Organizational Capability; Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Brand equity has become one of the most important intangible assets for contemporary organizations because it reflects the accumulated value that a brand creates through awareness, perceived quality, associations, trust, loyalty, experience, reputation, and stakeholder relationships. In increasingly competitive markets, organizations are no longer evaluated solely according to

the functional characteristics of their products and services; rather, stakeholders assess them through a combination of economic, emotional, relational, technological, and symbolic criteria. Strong brand equity can therefore provide an organization with differentiation, credibility, resistance to competitive pressures, greater stakeholder commitment, and improved market performance. Recent studies have continued to demonstrate the strategic significance of brand equity in shaping consumer evaluations, behavioral intentions, and purchasing decisions, showing that brand equity can influence not only how customers perceive an organization but also whether they are willing to maintain, deepen, or financially support their relationship with the brand (Ahada et al., 2025). Similarly, evidence concerning the association between brand strength, profitability, and equity valuation indicates that brand-related assets have consequences that extend beyond marketing outcomes and may be reflected in broader organizational and financial performance (Desai & Mehta, 2025). Brand equity should consequently be understood as a multidimensional strategic resource whose development requires coordination among marketing, organizational, technological, and relational capabilities.

Classical approaches to brand equity have generally focused on dimensions such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. These dimensions remain fundamental, but the conditions under which they are created have changed considerably due to digital transformation, platform-based interaction, social media, automation, artificial intelligence, and the increasing dependence of organizations on information and communication technologies. Contemporary brand equity is increasingly produced through continuous interactions between customers or stakeholders and digital systems, communication channels, employees, service interfaces, and organizational practices. Research examining relationships between marketing variables and brand-equity dimensions has confirmed that brand equity does not emerge from a single communication activity; rather, it develops through the combined influence of different marketing and service-related elements that shape stakeholder perceptions over time (Shin et al., 2025). From this perspective, strengthening brand equity requires organizations to move beyond narrow promotional approaches and manage the entire system of experiences, capabilities, communications, and organizational behaviors through which the brand becomes meaningful.

The importance of such a broader perspective becomes particularly evident in the digital era. Digitalization has changed the points of contact between organizations and their stakeholders and has created new criteria through which brands are judged. Stakeholders increasingly expect rapid access to information, reliable digital services, personalized communication, transparent processes, secure information management, and consistent experiences across different channels. Accordingly, managing brand equity in digital environments requires a strategic approach that integrates traditional branding principles with digital infrastructures, data capabilities, digital communication, technological innovation, and customer or stakeholder experience management (Goradiya et al., 2025). The digital environment also creates new opportunities for brand differentiation because organizations can use advanced technologies to provide faster services, improve responsiveness, generate personalized interactions, and create new forms of value. However, the same environment increases reputational risk because technological failures, poor system usability, inadequate privacy protection, inconsistent communication, and weak digital service quality can rapidly damage perceptions of the brand.

Social media has become another major mechanism through which brand equity is formed and reinforced. Organizations can use social platforms not merely for promotional communication but also for engagement, relationship formation, feedback collection, community development, and the co-creation of brand meaning. Research has shown that social media marketing can affect purchasing behavior through mechanisms involving brand equity and brand trust, indicating that digital communications influence behavior partly by strengthening the perceived value and credibility of the brand (Angelica & Tj, 2025). Similarly, social media activities have been associated with brand loyalty through the mediating role of brand equity, suggesting that the effectiveness of digital engagement depends on whether communication ultimately strengthens stakeholders' overall cognitive and emotional assessment of the brand (Ekklesi & Sondakh, 2025). In the context of mobile electronic technologies, social media marketing activities have also been linked with willingness to pay a higher price and brand loyalty through brand equity, highlighting the strategic importance of digital interactions in technology-related markets (Pashazadeh & Abdi, 2025). These findings suggest that organizations operating in information- and technology-intensive settings must regard digital communication as an integral component of brand-equity management rather than as an auxiliary promotional activity.

The interactive nature of digital environments has also increased the importance of co-creation, electronic word of mouth, and dynamic brand experience. In contrast to traditional one-way communication models, contemporary stakeholders actively contribute to the creation and circulation of brand meanings through reviews, online discussions, shared experiences, recommendations, complaints, and collaborative interactions. Dynamic brand experiences created through co-creation and electronic word of mouth can influence consumer equity by increasing involvement and shaping how stakeholders interpret the brand across digital networks (Qadri, 2025). This development has particular implications for ICT-oriented organizations because technological services are often complex, experience-based, and continuously updated, meaning that stakeholder evaluations depend not only on formal organizational messages but also on accumulated experiences and peer-generated information. Therefore, effective brand-equity enhancement requires organizations to actively manage digital touchpoints, facilitate constructive stakeholder participation, and ensure consistency between what the brand communicates and what stakeholders actually experience.

Customer experience has similarly emerged as a major mechanism underlying brand-equity formation. Contemporary stakeholders evaluate brands across multiple interactions before, during, and after receiving a service, and each interaction can reinforce or weaken perceptions of value, trustworthiness, professionalism, and differentiation. Emotional branding research has demonstrated that customer experience can act as a mediating mechanism through which branding activities are translated into stronger brand equity (Taghipourian, 2026). This perspective is especially relevant for technology-enabled services because the quality of the experience is influenced by system usability, accessibility, response time, technical support, problem resolution, information transparency, and continuity of service. In other words, a brand in the ICT context is experienced not only through symbols, advertising, and reputation but also through digital interfaces, platforms, technological reliability, and the organization's ability to resolve stakeholder problems effectively.

At the same time, research increasingly recognizes that brand equity is created internally as well as externally. Employees are among the most important carriers of brand meaning because their knowledge, attitudes, behavior, communication, and service delivery determine whether organizational promises are translated into actual stakeholder experiences. Employee-based brand equity therefore represents a critical component of the broader brand-equity system. Knowledge dissemination within organizations can strengthen employee-based brand equity by improving employees' understanding of brand values, organizational priorities, and their own role in delivering the brand promise (Gulzar et al., 2025). Evidence also suggests that employee-based brand equity can influence customer satisfaction, demonstrating that internal branding outcomes can ultimately affect external stakeholder responses (Malcalm et al., 2025). Consequently, organizations seeking to enhance brand equity must invest not only in external communication but also in internal knowledge sharing, employee engagement, professional development, and mechanisms that align employee behavior with the desired brand identity.

Recent research has further emphasized the need to manage employees as integral brand assets rather than treating them merely as operational resources. Internal brand management can transform employees into an important source of brand equity when organizational systems successfully align employees' understanding, motivation, and behaviors with brand values (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2025). This finding is particularly important in organizations operating in technology-intensive industries, where employees frequently mediate between complex technological systems and stakeholders. Technical competence alone may not be sufficient if employees cannot communicate effectively, demonstrate responsiveness, build trust, or connect technological performance with the organization's broader brand promise. Therefore, human-resource capability, cross-functional collaboration, internal communication, and employee empowerment may all play significant roles in strengthening brand equity.

Leadership represents another internal mechanism that can shape employee-based brand outcomes. Brand-specific transformational leadership can influence employer branding and employee-based brand equity by creating alignment between organizational identity, leadership practices, and employee perceptions (Sousa & Ferreira, 2025). Leaders determine strategic priorities, allocate resources, support or constrain innovation, influence organizational culture, and signal the extent to which branding is considered a collective responsibility. In organizations undergoing digital transformation, leadership may be particularly important because the integration of branding and technological capabilities often requires coordination across departments and changes in routines, structures, and professional roles. Leadership commitment can therefore facilitate the

development of a culture in which digital innovation, stakeholder orientation, service quality, and brand values mutually reinforce one another.

The expansion of brand-equity research has also drawn attention to corporate social responsibility and responsible organizational practices. Stakeholders increasingly evaluate organizations not only according to commercial performance but also according to their perceived ethical, social, environmental, and institutional conduct. Research has shown that corporate social responsibility can influence consumer trust, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity, indicating that responsible organizational behavior can function as an important source of reputational and relational value (Jerab, 2025). Similarly, perceived corporate social responsibility can strengthen brand equity through brand image and consumer trust, showing that responsibility affects brand outcomes through both cognitive and relational pathways (Lee & Kim, 2025). From an internal perspective, social responsibility has also been associated with employees' perceptions of brand equity through the mediating role of brand reputation (Haji Babaei & Ghamari, 2025). These findings indicate that brand equity is increasingly linked to the broader legitimacy of organizational practices and to stakeholders' beliefs about whether an organization behaves responsibly.

In digital contexts, the concept of responsibility extends to technological practices. Corporate digital responsibility, responsible marketing, green technology, and related responsible organizational practices can contribute to brand equity by strengthening perceptions of ethical competence, sustainability, and trustworthiness (Chaudhary et al., 2025). Digital responsibility is particularly relevant for ICT-related organizations because these organizations frequently manage sensitive data, digital infrastructure, automated decision-making systems, cybersecurity risks, and technology-dependent stakeholder interactions. Poor management of privacy, data security, algorithmic transparency, or digital accessibility can therefore directly affect the brand. Conversely, responsible technology governance can become a source of credibility and differentiation. Similar evidence from the banking sector indicates that digitalizing environmental, social, and governance practices may affect both brand equity and organizational efficiency, reinforcing the idea that digital transformation and institutional responsibility are increasingly interconnected (Pham et al., 2025).

Sustainability-related concerns have likewise become important for contemporary brand management. Research examining environmental, social, and governance performance has demonstrated relationships among ESG-related performance, brand equity, brand love, and brand respect, suggesting that stakeholders can incorporate broader evaluations of organizational responsibility into their emotional and cognitive relationships with brands (Zhou & Zhang, 2024). This observation expands the concept of brand equity beyond market recognition and preference to include legitimacy, respect, identification, and value alignment. In sectors characterized by large-scale infrastructure, energy-related activities, technological systems, and public or institutional stakeholders, these considerations may be especially important because organizations are evaluated by multiple groups whose expectations extend beyond immediate consumer satisfaction.

At the same time, specific managerial practices can strengthen or undermine brand equity. Pricing and promotional decisions, for instance, may alter perceptions of quality, exclusivity, fairness, and value. Research concerning discount strategies has shown that such strategies can influence brand equity from the customer's perspective, demonstrating that seemingly tactical commercial decisions may have longer-term implications for how a brand is perceived (Pakdel et al., 2025). Likewise, studies of brand equity and customers' attitudinal approaches indicate that stronger brand equity is associated with favorable customer attitudes, reinforcing the need to understand brand equity as both an outcome and a determinant of stakeholder behavior (Mohammadpour, 2025). In market-expansion contexts, brand equity has also been investigated as a strategic tool for strengthening market position and extending organizational reach (Gurupriya & Joyce, 2025). These studies collectively indicate that brand-equity enhancement requires coherence between short-term actions and long-term strategic positioning.

A growing body of qualitative research also supports the need to identify context-specific drivers of brand equity instead of assuming that a universal set of factors applies equally across industries. Qualitative model development has been used to identify mechanisms of brand-equity creation in specialized service contexts, demonstrating the importance of capturing sector-specific experiences and organizational conditions (Farzan Moghaddam et al., 2025). Such context sensitivity is especially necessary in ICT-related settings because technological complexity, rapid innovation, system interdependence, cybersecurity

requirements, digital service quality, and stakeholder heterogeneity may introduce dimensions that are less prominent in conventional consumer markets. The ICT environment also requires organizations to continuously adapt to technological change, making innovation capacity itself an important source of perceived competence and brand differentiation.

The need for context-sensitive frameworks is further supported by research showing that brand equity can assume different forms depending on the object and level of analysis. Work on personal brand equity, for example, has identified a continuing need for standardized frameworks and clearer measurement approaches, illustrating the broader conceptual challenge of defining and operationalizing brand equity across different contexts (Szántó et al., 2025). This conceptual diversity suggests that organizations should not automatically adopt generic brand-equity models without considering the mechanisms through which value is actually created in their specific institutional and technological environment. For an ICT-oriented organization, the brand may depend substantially on infrastructure reliability, digital integration, information security, technological competence, employee expertise, service innovation, and stakeholder communication in addition to conventional dimensions such as awareness and loyalty.

Furthermore, contemporary brand management increasingly depends on the interaction between brand equity and trust. Trust becomes particularly significant when stakeholders face uncertainty, information asymmetry, or technological complexity. Studies of responsible organizational behavior, social media communication, customer experience, and employee behavior repeatedly indicate that trust functions as a mechanism connecting organizational actions to brand outcomes (Angelica & Tj, 2025; Jerab, 2025; Lee & Kim, 2025). In technology-intensive environments, stakeholders may be unable to fully evaluate the technical characteristics of systems and services; consequently, they rely on signals such as reliability, responsiveness, professional competence, transparency, organizational reputation, and prior experience. Building brand equity in such settings therefore involves reducing perceived risk and creating confidence that the organization possesses the capability and integrity required to fulfill its promises.

Despite the substantial expansion of research on brand equity, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature investigates brand equity in consumer products, hospitality, banking, sports, retail, social media, or specific service markets (Chaudhary et al., 2025; Farzan Moghaddam et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2025). While these studies offer important theoretical insights, their findings cannot automatically be transferred to organizational contexts in which branding is closely intertwined with information systems, digital infrastructure, technical services, internal expertise, public-sector relationships, and institutional constraints. Moreover, existing research often isolates individual antecedents such as social media activities, corporate social responsibility, employee-based brand equity, customer experience, pricing, or digital responsibility rather than examining how technological, organizational, cultural, and traditional branding factors interact within a single integrated framework. The result is a fragmented understanding of brand-equity enhancement in environments where digital capabilities and organizational characteristics are deeply interconnected.

This gap is particularly relevant to organizations such as the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company, where information technology and communication capabilities support complex organizational processes, internal and external interactions, digital services, stakeholder relationships, and perceptions of professional competence. In such an environment, brand equity is unlikely to be determined solely by external marketing communication. Instead, it may depend on the reliability of technological infrastructures, quality of digital services, organizational innovation, leadership commitment, human-resource capability, stakeholder experience, communication effectiveness, regulatory conditions, sanctions-related constraints, and cultural expectations. A qualitative approach is therefore valuable because it enables the identification of strategies grounded in the experiences of experts who directly encounter these organizational and technological realities.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to identify and explain the effective strategies for enhancing brand equity in the information and communication technology industry from the perspective of experts at the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company.

2. Methods and Materials

This study was applied in terms of purpose and employed a qualitative research design in terms of its nature and implementation approach. The qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to identify and provide an in-depth explanation of the experiences, perceptions, professional judgments, and beliefs of organizational experts regarding brand

equity and the strategies that can enhance it within the information and communication technology industry. Brand equity in technology-oriented organizational environments is a complex, context-dependent, and partly perceptual phenomenon that is shaped not only by traditional branding dimensions, but also by digital service quality, technological capabilities, organizational conditions, stakeholder interactions, and environmental factors. Accordingly, a qualitative design was considered appropriate for obtaining a detailed understanding of how these dimensions are perceived and interpreted by individuals who are directly involved in information technology, branding, digital services, and organizational decision-making. The study population consisted of experts employed at the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company in Tehran who had relevant professional experience in information technology, branding, digital services, stakeholder relations, or related organizational functions. These participants were considered suitable informants because their direct familiarity with organizational structures, technological processes, service delivery mechanisms, internal culture, branding activities, and stakeholder expectations enabled them to provide information-rich perspectives on the factors and strategies affecting brand equity in an ICT-related context.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling strategy was consistent with the qualitative nature of the study because the objective was not statistical representativeness, but rather the deliberate recruitment of individuals with substantial knowledge and experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Eligibility therefore depended on participants' professional familiarity with areas such as branding, information technology, digital services, organizational policymaking, stakeholder communication, customer experience, or related managerial and specialist functions. Data collection continued according to the principle of theoretical and data saturation, meaning that interviews were conducted until additional interviews no longer generated substantively new codes, concepts, or themes. Although the initial expected sample size was approximately 15 to 30 experts, saturation was achieved with the twenty-first participant, and the final sample therefore consisted of 21 experts. The participants represented different organizational positions, including managers, heads of units, senior experts, and experts. Five participants held doctoral degrees, 15 held master's degrees, and one held a bachelor's degree. Most participants had more than 10 years of professional experience, while one participant had between 5 and 10 years of experience. The sample also included both male and female experts, thereby incorporating perspectives from participants occupying different organizational and professional positions. To preserve confidentiality, each participant was assigned an identification code ranging from A1 to A21, and these codes were used throughout the qualitative analysis and reporting of interview excerpts instead of personal identifiers.

The primary instrument for field data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided sufficient consistency across participants while simultaneously allowing the interviewer to explore emerging ideas, request clarification, and obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences and perceptions. The interview guide was developed through an extensive review of the theoretical and empirical literature on brand equity, branding, information technology, digital services, digital transformation, customer experience, and organizational branding capabilities. The preliminary conceptual framework derived from the literature was used to formulate the principal interview questions, while additional open-ended and probing questions were incorporated so that participants could freely describe factors that they considered important but that might not have been fully represented in the initial theoretical framework. Consequently, the interview protocol combined theory-informed inquiry with sufficient flexibility for inductive identification of new concepts and strategies.

The preliminary conceptual framework covered four broad domains. The first domain comprised traditional brand-equity components, including brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations. The second domain addressed technology-related components, including digital experience, information technology service quality such as response speed and technical support, innovation in digital services and the application of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, digital marketing and digital communication, and digital infrastructures and capabilities such as system integration, security, privacy, reliability, and continuity of service. The third domain concerned organizational components, including leadership and an organizational culture supportive of innovation, customer experience and relationship management, and the competence and allocation of human resources in branding and technology-related activities. The fourth domain incorporated cultural and environmental considerations, including local beliefs and preferences, price sensitivity, attitudes toward domestic brands, internal laws and regulations, governmental policies, and sanction-related conditions. These domains

served as an initial sensitizing framework rather than a rigid coding structure, thereby allowing additional factors and strategic themes to emerge directly from the interview data.

To strengthen the credibility and content validity of the interview protocol, peer review was used before the main interviews were conducted. The interview guide was examined by three academic experts in marketing and branding, who evaluated the relevance, clarity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of the questions in relation to the research objective. Their comments were used to refine the wording and sequencing of the interview questions. Data were gathered from both library-based and field sources. The library phase involved reviewing specialized books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theses and dissertations, research reports, and credible academic and professional sources related to brand equity and information technology. The results of this review informed the conceptual framework and the formulation of the interview questions. The field phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with the selected experts. Interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever possible and online when necessary. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. With appropriate attention to research ethics and confidentiality, interview content was transcribed into textual form for coding and analysis. Participant codes A1 to A21 were retained throughout the analytical process to enable systematic linkage between coded statements and individual interviews without revealing participants' identities.

The qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with Microsoft Excel used to organize transcripts, codes, categories, theme development, and comparisons across participants. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, organizing, interpreting, and reporting recurring patterns of meaning in qualitative textual data. The analytical procedure followed the general framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. Analysis began with intensive familiarization with the data. The interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' accounts, identify potentially meaningful passages, and recognize recurrent ideas relating to brand equity and the strategies required for its enhancement. Particular attention was paid to statements concerning traditional branding factors, digital experiences, technological service quality, organizational capabilities, human resources, stakeholder relationships, institutional constraints, environmental conditions, and strategic actions that could strengthen the organization's brand.

During the initial coding stage, transcripts were reviewed line by line and sentence by sentence, and concise conceptual labels were assigned to segments containing information relevant to the research question. Coding was conducted iteratively rather than as a single mechanical procedure. Similar statements were compared across interviews, codes were repeatedly reviewed, and overlapping or conceptually equivalent codes were consolidated where appropriate. This repeated coding process was intended to enhance consistency and reduce the likelihood that potentially important meanings would be overlooked. The initial codes were then grouped according to conceptual similarity and explanatory relevance. Through this process, recurring patterns were identified and preliminary themes were developed. These themes represented broader clusters of meaning that captured common perceptions regarding the determinants of brand equity and the strategies considered necessary for improving it in the ICT-related organizational context.

The preliminary themes were subsequently reviewed against both the coded extracts and the complete interview dataset. Themes that lacked sufficient internal coherence were revised, merged, divided, or removed, whereas themes that represented conceptually distinct patterns were retained as separate analytical categories. The objective at this stage was to ensure that each theme demonstrated internal consistency while remaining clearly distinguishable from other themes. After the thematic structure had been stabilized, each theme was precisely defined and assigned a descriptive name reflecting its central meaning and strategic significance. The analysis was conducted with attention to both the initial conceptual domains derived from the literature and novel concepts that emerged inductively from participants' accounts. Thus, the final thematic structure was not restricted to the initial framework but incorporated additional context-specific insights generated through the interviews.

In the final stage, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research objective and organized into an integrated conceptual representation of effective strategies for enhancing brand equity in the information and communication technology industry. Relevant participant statements were retained as supporting evidence to strengthen the transparency and traceability of interpretation. The analysis sought to move beyond simple description by clarifying how technological, traditional branding, organizational, cultural, and environmental dimensions interacted in shaping brand equity and by identifying the strategic actions through which these dimensions could be strengthened. The final thematic framework therefore constituted the empirical basis for the study's findings and subsequent discussion of effective brand-equity enhancement strategies.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative analysis was based on 21 semi-structured interviews with experts working in the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company who possessed professional experience related to information technology, branding, digital services, stakeholder relations, management, or organizational development. Of the 21 participants, 14 were men and 7 were women. In terms of educational attainment, 5 participants held doctoral degrees, 15 held master's degrees, and 1 participant held a bachelor's degree. Regarding organizational position, the sample included 1 manager, 7 heads of organizational units, 8 senior experts, and 5 experts. Professional experience was generally high, as 20 participants had more than 10 years of work experience and only 1 participant reported between 5 and 10 years of experience. The predominance of highly experienced professionals increased the informational richness of the interviews because most participants had prolonged exposure to organizational processes, information technology systems, branding activities, stakeholder expectations, service delivery procedures, and managerial decision-making. During the interviews, the participants discussed brand equity not merely as a marketing outcome but as a multidimensional organizational asset resulting from the interaction of brand-related capabilities, digital and technological performance, internal organizational mechanisms, and external environmental conditions. Theoretical saturation was reached in the twenty-first interview, as the final interviews largely reinforced previously identified categories and did not generate substantively new themes.

Table 1. Results of the Coding and Theme Development Process

Stage of analysis	Analytical output	Number identified	Description
Initial transcription and familiarization	Meaningful statements	412	Statements directly related to brand equity, digital services, customer and stakeholder experience, organizational capabilities, technological infrastructure, and environmental conditions
Initial coding	Initial codes	186	Conceptual labels extracted from participants' statements through line-by-line and sentence-by-sentence coding
Code refinement	Final non-redundant codes	94	Codes remaining after merging synonymous, overlapping, or repetitive concepts
Formation of categories	Basic categories	28	Conceptually related codes grouped according to similarity of meaning and strategic function
Development of subthemes	Subthemes	13	Higher-order categories representing distinct dimensions affecting brand-equity enhancement
Theme development	Main themes	4	Traditional brand-equity strengthening, technology-enabled brand development, organizational capability development, and cultural-environmental alignment
Strategic synthesis	Core strategic framework	1	An integrated framework explaining the effective strategies for enhancing brand equity in the ICT context

As shown in Table 1, thematic analysis resulted in a gradual reduction and conceptual organization of the interview data. The 21 interviews initially yielded 412 meaningful statements that were directly relevant to the study objective. Through initial coding, these statements generated 186 preliminary codes. Because participants frequently expressed similar concepts using different terminology, the initial code list was repeatedly reviewed, compared, and refined. Synonymous and highly overlapping codes were merged, resulting in 94 final non-redundant codes. These codes were subsequently organized into 28 basic categories based on conceptual similarity and the role each concept played in explaining brand equity. At the next level of analysis, the categories were integrated into 13 subthemes. Finally, four overarching themes were identified: strengthening traditional dimensions of brand equity, developing technology-enabled brand capabilities, strengthening organizational and managerial capabilities, and achieving cultural and environmental alignment. These four themes formed the central structure of the final model. The progression from numerous descriptive codes toward a smaller number of conceptually comprehensive themes indicated that participants viewed brand equity as the outcome of several interconnected mechanisms rather than as an isolated marketing construct. In particular, the findings demonstrated that conventional dimensions such as awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations remained important, but their effectiveness increasingly depended on digital service performance, technological reliability, organizational responsiveness, innovation, and alignment with environmental expectations.

Table 2. Main Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Concepts Identified from the Interviews

Main theme	Subtheme	Representative concepts and codes

Strengthening traditional brand equity	Brand awareness and visibility	Consistent brand identity, visibility among stakeholders, coherent brand communication, recognition of organizational capabilities, continuity of brand messages
Strengthening traditional brand equity	Perceived quality and credibility	Quality consistency, reliability of services, professional competence, fulfillment of commitments, technical credibility, organizational reputation
Strengthening traditional brand equity	Brand loyalty and stakeholder trust	Trust-building, continuity of relationships, stakeholder commitment, satisfaction, responsiveness, long-term engagement
Strengthening traditional brand equity	Positive brand associations	Innovation-oriented image, professionalism, technological capability, national competence, reliability, responsibility
Technology-enabled brand development	Digital customer and stakeholder experience	Ease of access, user-friendly platforms, digital interaction quality, transparency, personalized communication, integrated service experience
Technology-enabled brand development	IT service quality	Response speed, system availability, technical support, reliability, service continuity, problem resolution
Technology-enabled brand development	Digital innovation	Artificial intelligence, automation, data-driven services, emerging technologies, intelligent decision support, digital transformation
Technology-enabled brand development	Digital communication and marketing	Digital content, online communication channels, stakeholder engagement, social and professional media, integrated digital communication
Technology-enabled brand development	Digital infrastructure and security	System integration, cybersecurity, privacy protection, infrastructure reliability, interoperability, data governance
Organizational capability development	Leadership and innovation culture	Management commitment, innovation support, learning orientation, cross-functional collaboration, openness to technological change
Organizational capability development	Human-resource capability	Employee digital competence, branding knowledge, specialized training, empowerment, interdisciplinary expertise
Organizational capability development	Customer and stakeholder relationship management	Feedback systems, complaint management, stakeholder participation, relationship continuity, service recovery
Cultural and environmental alignment	Institutional, cultural, and regulatory adaptation	Local preferences, domestic-brand orientation, sanctions, governmental policies, regulatory compliance, economic constraints, cultural sensitivity

Table 2 presents the thematic structure developed from the interview data. The first overarching theme was the strengthening of traditional brand equity. Participants repeatedly emphasized that technological development could not replace the fundamental dimensions of brand building. Brand awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, trust, and favorable associations were described as the basic foundations upon which other digital and organizational strategies should be built. According to participants, awareness was strengthened when the organization communicated a coherent identity and made its technological and professional capabilities visible to relevant stakeholders. Perceived quality was associated not only with technical performance but also with consistency, professional competence, reliability, and fulfillment of organizational commitments. Trust and loyalty were strongly linked to the continuity of stakeholder relationships, responsiveness, and accumulated positive experiences. The second major theme, technology-enabled brand development, received particularly extensive attention. Participants viewed the quality of digital interactions as a direct manifestation of the brand itself. User-friendly platforms, fast access, system stability, reliable technical support, secure information exchange, and integrated digital services were all considered determinants of stakeholders' evaluation of the organization. Digital innovation, including the use of artificial intelligence, automation, data analytics, and intelligent systems, was also perceived as an important mechanism for creating a modern and capable brand image. The third theme concerned organizational capability development. Participants stressed that advanced technology alone would not enhance brand equity unless managers supported innovation, employees possessed appropriate digital and branding competencies, and different organizational units cooperated effectively. Finally, cultural and environmental alignment reflected the importance of contextual influences such as governmental policies, sanctions, regulatory requirements, domestic market conditions, local preferences, and the perceived legitimacy of domestic technological capabilities. This theme demonstrated that brand-equity strategies in the ICT context had to be adapted to environmental constraints and could not simply replicate models developed in different institutional settings.

Table 3. Effective Strategies for Enhancing Brand Equity and Their Strategic Mechanisms

Strategic area	Effective strategy	Mechanism through which brand equity is enhanced	Expected brand-equity consequence
Brand identity	Developing an integrated and consistent organizational brand identity	Creates coherence between organizational values, technological capabilities, and stakeholder communications	Greater brand awareness and clearer brand associations
Service quality	Improving reliability and responsiveness of technology-based services	Reduces service failure and strengthens perceptions of competence and dependability	Higher perceived quality and trust

Digital experience	Designing simple, accessible, and integrated digital stakeholder journeys	Improves convenience and reduces friction across digital interactions	Greater satisfaction and stronger loyalty
Innovation	Institutionalizing continuous digital innovation	Signals adaptability, modernity, and technological leadership	Stronger innovative brand image and differentiation
Artificial intelligence and analytics	Applying AI and data analytics to services and decision-making	Enables personalization, faster responses, predictive capability, and evidence-based decisions	Improved perceived value and technological credibility
Digital communication	Establishing coherent multichannel digital communication	Provides timely information and creates continuous stakeholder interaction	Increased awareness, engagement, and transparency
Infrastructure	Strengthening integration, cybersecurity, privacy, and system reliability	Reduces operational risk and increases confidence in digital services	Greater trust and perceived reliability
Human resources	Developing employees' branding and digital competencies	Aligns employee behavior and service delivery with brand promises	More consistent stakeholder experiences
Leadership	Strengthening managerial commitment to brand-oriented digital transformation	Facilitates resource allocation, coordination, experimentation, and organizational learning	Sustainable implementation of brand-enhancement initiatives
Stakeholder relations	Establishing systematic feedback and relationship-management mechanisms	Converts stakeholder needs and complaints into organizational learning	Greater satisfaction, loyalty, and relational trust
Organizational culture	Promoting an innovation-oriented and customer-oriented culture	Encourages flexibility, collaboration, responsiveness, and continuous improvement	Stronger organizational credibility and differentiation
Environmental adaptation	Aligning branding strategy with regulations, national priorities, and sanctions-related conditions	Ensures strategic feasibility and contextual legitimacy	Greater resilience and stakeholder acceptance
Cultural adaptation	Adapting brand communication to local expectations and domestic preferences	Increases cultural relevance and identification with the brand	More favorable associations and stronger acceptance

As Table 3 indicates, the strategies identified by participants operated through multiple but interrelated mechanisms. A central finding was that brand equity could not be enhanced through promotional communication alone. Instead, participants consistently connected brand strength with the actual performance of the organization, especially the quality of its digital and technology-enabled services. Improving system reliability, accelerating responses, strengthening technical support, reducing complexity in digital processes, and maintaining secure and uninterrupted services were considered particularly important because stakeholders increasingly evaluate an organization's brand through their direct interaction with its digital infrastructure. Digital innovation was another major strategic mechanism. Participants stated that the adoption of artificial intelligence, data analytics, automation, and other emerging technologies could strengthen brand equity when these technologies produced visible improvements in service quality, decision-making, speed, accessibility, and stakeholder experience. Merely adopting technology without creating tangible value was not viewed as sufficient. The findings further demonstrated that human and organizational capabilities acted as enabling conditions. Employees required both technical competence and an understanding of the organization's brand values so that service delivery would remain consistent with the intended brand promise. Similarly, managerial commitment was described as essential for allocating resources, supporting innovation, coordinating branding and information technology functions, and overcoming resistance to organizational change. Stakeholder relationship management was another important strategy because systematic feedback, complaint handling, responsiveness, and stakeholder participation enabled the organization to convert interactions into trust and loyalty. Finally, cultural and institutional adaptation was considered particularly important in the Iranian context, where regulations, governmental priorities, sanctions, economic uncertainty, technological restrictions, and preferences for domestic capabilities could influence both the feasibility of digital initiatives and stakeholders' interpretation of the brand.

Table 4. Integrated Framework of Brand-Equity Enhancement in the ICT Context

Strategic layer	Key components	Role in the integrated framework	Directly affected dimensions of brand equity
Foundational organizational layer	Leadership commitment, innovation culture, human-resource capability, interdepartmental coordination	Provides managerial, cultural, and human capacity required for implementing other strategies	Perceived quality, trust, favorable associations
Technological capability layer	IT service quality, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, system integration, artificial intelligence, digital innovation	Determines the functional quality, reliability, intelligence, and modernity of technology-enabled services	Perceived quality, technological associations, trust
Stakeholder experience layer	Digital experience, communication quality, responsiveness, relationship management, feedback systems	Converts organizational and technological capabilities into observable stakeholder experiences	Satisfaction, loyalty, awareness, trust

Brand management layer	Identity consistency, brand communication, brand visibility, reputation management, value proposition	Translates organizational capabilities and stakeholder experiences into clear brand meaning	Awareness, associations, loyalty, perceived quality
Environmental alignment layer	Regulatory compliance, cultural compatibility, governmental policies, sanctions adaptation, market sensitivity	Moderates the feasibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness of brand-enhancement strategies	Brand acceptance, credibility, resilience
Final outcome	Enhanced brand equity	Emerges through interaction among all strategic layers rather than through a single isolated factor	Stronger awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, positive associations, stakeholder trust

The integrated framework presented in Table 4 summarizes the central interpretive finding of the study. Brand equity in an ICT-related organizational environment was found to emerge through the interaction of five strategic layers rather than through a single marketing activity. The foundational organizational layer represented the internal capacity of the organization to implement change and included leadership commitment, employee competence, an innovation-supportive culture, and coordination among functional units. Participants considered this layer fundamental because technological and branding initiatives were unlikely to succeed when organizational support, skills, or managerial commitment were inadequate. The technological capability layer consisted of service quality, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, integration, artificial intelligence, and digital innovation. This layer shaped stakeholders' perceptions of competence, reliability, and modernity and therefore influenced both perceived quality and brand associations. The stakeholder experience layer represented the point at which internal capabilities became directly observable. When digital services were easy to use, responsive, transparent, personalized, and well supported, stakeholders were more likely to perceive the organization positively and develop trust and loyalty. The brand-management layer subsequently transformed these positive experiences and organizational capabilities into coherent brand meaning through consistent identity, reputation management, communication, and visibility. The environmental alignment layer influenced all other layers by determining whether strategies were compatible with legal, cultural, economic, technological, and institutional realities. The findings therefore suggest that brand equity should be treated as an organizationally embedded outcome generated through alignment between internal capability, technological performance, stakeholder experience, brand-management practices, and contextual adaptation.

A closer examination of the interview narratives further demonstrated that the relationship among these themes was sequential as well as reciprocal. Participants frequently described leadership and organizational culture as antecedent conditions because decisions regarding technological investment, employee development, branding priorities, and stakeholder orientation were largely dependent on senior management support. Once these organizational foundations were established, technological capabilities could be developed more effectively. Improvements in infrastructure, service reliability, information security, automation, artificial intelligence, and integration subsequently influenced the quality of stakeholder experiences. Positive experiences then contributed to increased trust, perceived quality, favorable brand associations, and loyalty. At the same time, feedback generated through stakeholder interactions could return to the organization and stimulate further service improvement, innovation, and refinement of brand strategies. Thus, the emerging model was not entirely linear; rather, it contained reinforcing feedback relationships through which stakeholder responses contributed to organizational learning and continuous brand development.

Another important finding concerned the changing meaning of perceived quality in technology-intensive environments. Participants did not define quality only in terms of the technical characteristics of a service or the professional competence of the organization. Instead, perceived quality was described as a composite evaluation incorporating speed, accessibility, reliability, security, transparency, continuity, support, and ease of interaction. In this sense, information technology was not considered merely an internal operational resource but a visible component of the organization's brand promise. Failures such as slow systems, fragmented platforms, inadequate technical support, inconsistent digital communication, or security concerns could therefore weaken brand equity even when the organization's core technical competencies remained strong. Conversely, integrated and reliable digital services could reinforce perceptions of professionalism, innovation, and institutional credibility.

Innovation also emerged as an important source of brand differentiation. Participants associated the use of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, automation, advanced analytics, and intelligent service systems, with a more progressive and future-oriented organizational identity. Nevertheless, participants stressed that technological novelty by itself did not necessarily create brand value. New technologies had to solve actual stakeholder problems, simplify processes, improve response times, increase transparency, or enhance decision quality. Therefore, innovation was perceived as brand-enhancing

when it was purposeful, service-oriented, and visibly connected to stakeholder value. This finding positioned digital innovation as both a functional and symbolic component of brand equity: functionally, it could improve efficiency and service performance; symbolically, it could strengthen associations with modernity, expertise, technological leadership, and organizational adaptability.

The findings also revealed that employees constituted an important link between organizational strategy and brand perception. Participants emphasized that employees, particularly those interacting directly or indirectly with stakeholders through digital systems and service processes, played a significant role in fulfilling or undermining the brand promise. Insufficient digital skills, limited branding knowledge, weak cross-functional communication, or resistance to technological change could reduce the effectiveness of even well-designed digital strategies. Accordingly, continuous training, employee empowerment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the integration of branding considerations into information-technology functions were identified as necessary conditions for sustainable brand-equity improvement. From this perspective, brand equity was not the exclusive responsibility of marketing units but a shared organizational outcome to which managers, technology specialists, service personnel, and other employees contributed.

The environmental and cultural findings were particularly relevant to the contextual interpretation of the model. Participants noted that organizations operating in Iran face conditions that can affect access to technologies, platforms, software, international partnerships, investment decisions, and communication practices. Sanctions, regulatory requirements, governmental policies, and economic instability could constrain the speed or scope of digital transformation. However, these constraints were also considered potential drivers of domestic technological capability and locally adapted innovation. Participants therefore emphasized the importance of developing resilient technological systems, reducing excessive dependence on inaccessible external solutions, and communicating domestic capabilities in a manner that reinforces professional credibility rather than appearing merely defensive. Cultural preferences, expectations regarding organizational trustworthiness, sensitivity to pricing and resource efficiency, and attitudes toward domestic brands were also considered relevant when designing communication and stakeholder-engagement strategies.

Overall, the qualitative findings showed that effective enhancement of brand equity in the information and communication technology industry requires an integrated strategy rather than isolated branding interventions. Traditional brand-equity dimensions remained central, but their development was increasingly dependent on the quality of digital infrastructure, technology-enabled services, organizational innovation, employee capabilities, leadership commitment, stakeholder relationship management, and contextual adaptation. The final thematic model therefore conceptualized brand equity as the outcome of interaction among organizational, technological, relational, branding, and environmental capabilities. From the perspective of the interviewed experts, organizations that simultaneously improve digital service quality, strengthen innovative capabilities, invest in human resources, create coherent stakeholder experiences, and maintain a consistent and credible brand identity are more likely to develop sustainable brand equity in technology-intensive environments.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to identify effective strategies for enhancing brand equity in the information and communication technology context by drawing on the experiences and perspectives of experts working at the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company. The thematic analysis demonstrated that brand equity in this setting is not created through a single marketing mechanism but emerges from the interaction of four major domains: strengthening traditional brand-equity dimensions, developing technology-enabled brand capabilities, reinforcing organizational and managerial capacities, and aligning branding activities with cultural and environmental conditions. The findings further showed that these domains operate through several interdependent mechanisms, including brand awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, stakeholder trust, digital experience, IT service quality, innovation, digital communication, infrastructure reliability, leadership, employee competence, stakeholder relationship management, and environmental adaptation. This integrated pattern supports the view that contemporary brand equity should be treated as a multidimensional organizational capability rather than merely as an outcome of advertising or external communication.

One of the central findings was that traditional brand-equity dimensions remain highly relevant even in technology-intensive environments. Participants emphasized brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, favorable associations, and

stakeholder trust as fundamental components of a strong brand. However, they also suggested that these traditional dimensions are increasingly shaped by digital interactions and organizational performance. This finding is consistent with research showing that brand equity continues to influence consumer decisions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions across diverse markets (Ahada et al., 2025; Mohammadpour, 2025). It also aligns with evidence that brand strength is related to broader organizational and financial outcomes, indicating that brand equity has strategic significance beyond communication and promotion (Desai & Mehta, 2025). Similarly, the relationship between marketing variables and brand-equity dimensions reported in previous research supports the present finding that awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty remain central elements but are formed through multiple organizational and market mechanisms (Shin et al., 2025). Therefore, the results of this study extend traditional brand-equity thinking by showing that classical dimensions retain their importance while the processes through which they are created have become increasingly technological and organizational.

The findings particularly highlighted perceived quality as a multidimensional judgment involving technical reliability, service continuity, responsiveness, professional competence, and consistency between organizational promises and actual performance. In the ICT context, participants did not perceive quality solely in terms of the technical characteristics of products or systems; rather, they considered service speed, accessibility, system reliability, technical support, and problem resolution as visible indicators of brand quality. This interpretation is compatible with previous research suggesting that brand equity is strongly influenced by customer experience and that the experiential pathway can mediate the effect of branding activities on overall brand value (Taghipourian, 2026). It also corresponds with studies emphasizing the importance of brand equity in shaping customer attitudes and purchasing-related outcomes (Ahada et al., 2025; Mohammadpour, 2025). The present study therefore suggests that, within technology-intensive organizational settings, perceived quality is increasingly experienced through service systems and digital touchpoints rather than being formed solely through communication about quality.

A second major finding concerned the strategic importance of digital experience and digital communication. Participants described user-friendly systems, integrated digital services, rapid access to information, transparent communication, responsiveness, and coherent digital interactions as essential mechanisms through which stakeholders evaluate the organization. These findings strongly align with research demonstrating that social media and digital communication activities affect brand equity, brand trust, purchase decisions, and loyalty (Angelica & Tj, 2025; Ekklesi & Sondakh, 2025). The mediating role of brand equity in the relationship between social media activities and outcomes such as loyalty and willingness to pay also supports the present finding that digital engagement is not simply a promotional activity but a mechanism through which stakeholders construct an overall evaluation of the brand (Pashazadeh & Abdi, 2025). Moreover, the role of co-creation and electronic word of mouth in shaping dynamic brand experience further confirms that stakeholders increasingly participate actively in brand formation rather than functioning as passive recipients of organizational messages (Qadri, 2025). The findings of the present study therefore reinforce the need to conceptualize digital communication as an interactive component of brand-equity development.

Digital innovation emerged as another important strategic theme. Participants associated artificial intelligence, automation, data analytics, intelligent services, and emerging technologies with stronger perceptions of organizational modernity, expertise, responsiveness, and technological leadership. Importantly, they emphasized that innovation enhances brand equity only when it produces visible value for stakeholders, such as faster responses, improved service quality, more accurate decisions, greater accessibility, or simplified processes. This result is consistent with the broader argument that brand management in the digital era requires the strategic integration of technological capabilities with brand-building activities (Goradiya et al., 2025). It also resonates with evidence showing that digitalization can influence both brand equity and organizational efficiency when technological transformation is integrated with broader organizational priorities (Pham et al., 2025). The present findings therefore suggest that innovation functions through both instrumental and symbolic mechanisms: it improves service performance while simultaneously communicating competence, adaptability, and future orientation.

The role of technological infrastructure and digital responsibility was also prominent in the interviews. Participants identified system integration, cybersecurity, privacy, reliability, service continuity, and data governance as conditions that can either strengthen or weaken stakeholder trust. This finding is particularly important because technological infrastructure often remains invisible when it works effectively but becomes highly visible when failures occur. The results are aligned with prior

research on corporate digital responsibility and responsible technological practices, which demonstrates that responsible digital behavior can contribute to positive brand evaluations and broader forms of brand equity (Chaudhary et al., 2025). The relationship between digitalized environmental, social, and governance practices and brand equity similarly suggests that stakeholders increasingly evaluate brands through the perceived responsibility and reliability of their technological and institutional practices (Pham et al., 2025). In this sense, cybersecurity, privacy, and service continuity should not be understood merely as technical concerns; they also function as brand signals that communicate competence, responsibility, and trustworthiness.

The findings further demonstrated that employee capability and internal brand management are essential for sustaining brand equity. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of employee digital competence, branding knowledge, interdisciplinary collaboration, training, and empowerment. This result is strongly supported by the literature on employee-based brand equity. Knowledge dissemination has been shown to strengthen employee-based brand equity by improving employees' understanding of organizational values and enabling them to enact the brand more consistently (Gulzar et al., 2025). Employee-based brand equity has also been linked with customer satisfaction, indicating that internal brand perceptions can influence external stakeholder outcomes (Malcalm et al., 2025). Similarly, research on internal brand management has emphasized that employees can become an integral source of brand equity when organizational systems align their attitudes and behaviors with the brand promise (Chatzipanagiotou et al., 2025). The present study extends these insights to the ICT context by showing that employees need not only brand knowledge but also sufficient technological capability to translate organizational values into consistent digital and service experiences.

Leadership and organizational culture constituted another major organizational mechanism identified in the study. Participants described managerial commitment, support for innovation, resource allocation, cross-functional coordination, and a learning-oriented culture as necessary antecedents of successful brand-equity enhancement. These findings are in line with research on brand-specific transformational leadership, which has demonstrated that leadership can influence employer branding and employee-based brand equity (Sousa & Ferreira, 2025). Leaders play a central role in determining whether branding becomes an organization-wide responsibility or remains confined to a specific marketing function. In technology-intensive environments, this role becomes even more significant because brand-enhancing initiatives often depend on coordination among IT, communication, human resources, management, service, and stakeholder-relations units. The findings therefore indicate that leadership commitment provides the organizational infrastructure through which technological and branding strategies can be integrated.

Stakeholder relationship management was also identified as a key route to stronger brand equity. Feedback systems, complaint management, responsive communication, long-term relationships, and stakeholder participation were described as mechanisms for building trust and loyalty. This finding is consistent with prior research demonstrating that corporate social responsibility, trust, and loyalty are closely related to overall brand equity (Jerab, 2025). It also corresponds with evidence that perceived corporate social responsibility can influence brand equity through brand image and consumer trust (Lee & Kim, 2025). The present findings suggest that trust is especially important in technology-intensive organizational contexts because stakeholders may not be able to fully evaluate complex technical processes and therefore rely on signals such as responsiveness, transparency, continuity, expertise, and institutional credibility. Trust consequently becomes a bridge between organizational behavior and brand-equity outcomes.

Another important result was the relevance of social responsibility, organizational reputation, and responsible conduct to brand equity. Although these dimensions were not treated as isolated themes, they appeared repeatedly within discussions of stakeholder trust, legitimacy, brand image, and organizational credibility. This finding is supported by research showing that social responsibility can influence employees' perceptions of brand equity through brand reputation (Haji Babaei & Ghamari, 2025). It also aligns with evidence that corporate social responsibility can enhance consumer trust, loyalty, and overall brand equity (Jerab, 2025), while perceived social responsibility may strengthen brand equity through image and trust mechanisms (Lee & Kim, 2025). Broader sustainability-oriented research also suggests that ESG performance can contribute to brand equity, brand love, and brand respect (Zhou & Zhang, 2024). These findings collectively reinforce the interpretation that

brand equity increasingly incorporates judgments about organizational legitimacy and responsibility rather than being limited to functional service characteristics.

The present findings also showed that contextual and environmental conditions play an important moderating role in brand-equity enhancement. Participants highlighted governmental policies, domestic regulations, sanctions, economic uncertainty, local cultural preferences, attitudes toward domestic brands, and institutional constraints. These factors affect not only the feasibility of technological strategies but also how stakeholders interpret organizational competence and credibility. The finding that context matters is consistent with qualitative work emphasizing the need to develop sector-specific and context-sensitive brand-equity models rather than assuming that the same determinants operate identically across all industries (Farzan Moghaddam et al., 2025). It also corresponds with recent efforts to refine and standardize brand-equity frameworks in specialized contexts, demonstrating that the meaning and measurement of brand equity may vary depending on the object of branding and the environment in which it is evaluated (Szántó et al., 2025). The current study therefore contributes by emphasizing that brand-equity strategies in ICT-related organizations must be adapted to institutional and technological realities.

Another notable finding was that tactical decisions should be evaluated according to their long-term effects on brand meaning. Participants' emphasis on consistency, perceived value, and stakeholder expectations implies that short-term practices may strengthen or weaken brand equity depending on how they affect perceived quality and credibility. This interpretation is supported by research showing that discount strategies can influence brand equity from the customer's perspective (Pakdel et al., 2025). It is also consistent with studies positioning brand equity as a tool for market expansion and strategic positioning rather than merely a communication outcome (Gurupriya & Joyce, 2025). Consequently, organizations should evaluate branding decisions according to whether they reinforce or contradict the desired long-term identity and value proposition.

The integrated framework developed in this study further suggests that brand equity is generated through a layered process. Organizational foundations such as leadership, culture, and employee capability support technological capabilities; technological capabilities shape stakeholder experiences; stakeholder experiences influence trust, satisfaction, perceived quality, loyalty, and associations; and brand-management activities translate these experiences into a coherent organizational identity. This layered interpretation is consistent with the broader literature demonstrating that brand equity is influenced by interconnected variables rather than isolated factors (Goradiya et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2025). It also helps explain why strong external communication cannot compensate for weak internal systems or poor service experiences. When digital communication promises innovation but stakeholders encounter unreliable systems, weak support, or fragmented services, the inconsistency may reduce credibility. Conversely, when organizational capabilities, technological performance, employee behavior, and communication are mutually aligned, brand equity is more likely to become sustainable.

The findings also contribute to a broader understanding of how brand equity supports organizational expansion and competitive positioning. Strong brand equity can create favorable attitudes, improve stakeholder willingness to maintain relationships, enhance perceived value, and support broader organizational performance (Desai & Mehta, 2025; Gurupriya & Joyce, 2025). In the present study, participants similarly treated brand equity as a strategic organizational resource rather than simply as an external image. This finding is important for technology-intensive organizations because many of their competencies are intangible and may be difficult for stakeholders to evaluate directly. Brand equity can therefore function as a condensed signal of organizational competence, reliability, innovation, and trustworthiness. The stronger and more consistent this signal becomes, the more effectively the organization can differentiate itself and maintain stakeholder confidence.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research was conducted within a single organizational setting, namely the Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company, and the findings therefore reflect the experiences and institutional conditions of experts working in this specific context. Although the participants possessed extensive professional experience and theoretical saturation was achieved, the results should not automatically be generalized to all organizations operating in the information and communication technology industry. Second, the study employed a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews, which means that the findings reflect participants' perceptions and professional interpretations rather than objectively measured causal relationships. Third, despite efforts to enhance credibility through iterative coding, peer review of the interview guide, and systematic thematic analysis, qualitative

interpretation inevitably involves researcher judgment. Fourth, the rapidly changing nature of digital technologies means that some of the identified technological strategies may evolve as new technologies, regulatory requirements, cybersecurity threats, and stakeholder expectations emerge. Finally, the study did not quantitatively assess the relative importance, causal ordering, or performance effects of the identified strategies.

Future studies can extend the present findings in several directions. Quantitative research could develop and validate a measurement instrument based on the themes and subthemes identified in this study and examine the relationships among organizational capability, digital capability, stakeholder experience, trust, and brand equity using structural equation modeling. Comparative research across several ICT organizations, technology companies, public-sector organizations, and infrastructure-intensive industries could determine which strategies are context-specific and which are broadly applicable. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how investments in digital transformation, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, employee development, and stakeholder engagement influence brand equity over time. Future studies may separately examine the perspectives of employees, managers, customers, suppliers, institutional stakeholders, and other external groups to identify possible differences in their evaluations of brand-equity drivers. Researchers could also explore the moderating effects of organizational size, digital maturity, market turbulence, regulatory pressure, sanctions, and innovation intensity. Finally, mixed-method studies could integrate qualitative insights with quantitative prioritization techniques to determine which strategic interventions offer the greatest potential for strengthening brand equity under limited organizational resources.

Organizations seeking to enhance brand equity in technology-intensive environments should adopt an integrated rather than fragmented approach. Managers should begin by ensuring consistency between the brand promise and the actual quality of digital and organizational services. Investment in reliable infrastructure, cybersecurity, system integration, technical support, artificial intelligence, and data-driven services should be directly linked to identifiable improvements in stakeholder experience. Leadership should treat brand equity as an organization-wide responsibility and establish stronger coordination among information technology, marketing, human resources, communication, and stakeholder-relations functions. Employees should receive continuous training in both digital competence and brand-related behavior so that their interactions consistently reflect organizational values. Systematic feedback, complaint management, and stakeholder participation mechanisms should be strengthened to convert experience into organizational learning. Organizations should also monitor regulatory, cultural, economic, and technological changes and adapt branding strategies accordingly. Finally, digital innovation should be pursued selectively and strategically, with priority given to technologies that create visible stakeholder value, strengthen reliability and trust, and reinforce a coherent image of the organization as competent, responsible, innovative, and responsive.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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