

BRAND AUDIT: A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR ASSESSING BRAND POSITIONING IN THE MARKET

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Abstract: *Brand audit is a fundamental strategic tool used to evaluate a brand's market position, performance, and perception among consumers. The concept of brand audit has evolved significantly since its early usage in the 20th century, originating as a financial assessment tool before expanding into a comprehensive evaluation framework integrating marketing, consumer perception, and strategic brand management. This paper explores the key components of brand audits, research topics related to them, and how to conduct brand auditing.*

• Keywords: *brand audit, brand management, market position.*

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1. Introduction

A brand audit is a comprehensive diagnostic process that assesses how a brand is perceived in the market, helping organizations identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities to enhance brand equity. The formal foundations of brand auditing stem from Aaker's (1991) brand equity framework and Keller's (2001) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which offer structured approaches to evaluating brand health. Regular brand audits allow firms to adapt their strategies to changing consumer preferences and technological advancements (Keller, 2013).

In the digital era, brand audits have evolved to incorporate advanced analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), social media engagement, and CSR indicators. Digital brand audits help assess online sentiment, user-generated content, and real-time consumer behavior, while CSR and sustainability metrics reflect the growing importance of ethical and responsible branding (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). These tools are essential in an environment where brand reputation can shift rapidly due to product issues or public relations crises.

Brand audits also support internal brand alignment by revealing gaps between intended identity and actual image across departments and touchpoints. This is crucial for large organizations or those undergoing restructuring or expansion. Beyond the private sector, educational institutions, nonprofits, and government agencies increasingly conduct brand audits to strengthen stakeholder trust, improve visibility, and guide strategic communication.

Furthermore, brand audits play a strategic role in decisions related to repositioning, brand extensions, and mergers or acquisitions by determining the compatibility of brand equities and identifying risks. With branding

now functioning as a two-way interaction between firms and consumers, audits must examine engagement, advocacy, and digital community behavior.

Sustainability and social impact have also become integral components of modern brand audits, reflecting consumer expectations for transparency and ethical practices. Evaluating ESG activities, CSR initiatives, and third-party certifications helps organizations understand whether their values resonate with target audiences.

In sum, a brand audit has transitioned from a periodic marketing exercise to a strategic management tool that integrates internal evaluation, market intelligence, consumer psychology, and digital analytics. This paper explores the theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and practical applications of brand audits to provide a comprehensive understanding of their role in contemporary brand management.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a scoping review methodology to map and synthesize existing literature on brand auditing. A scoping review is particularly appropriate for broad research areas with diverse methodologies, conceptual definitions, and applications across different contexts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac, Colquhoun, & O'Brien, 2010). Given the multidisciplinary nature of brand audits spanning marketing, strategic management, consumer behavior, and digital transformation this methodological approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the field.

2.1. Research design

The review follows the five-step framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), refined by Levac et al. (2010). The objective is to understand how

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brand audit is conceptualized, which methodologies are employed, and how the practice is evolving in both academic and applied domains.

2.2. Research questions

This review is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What theoretical frameworks are most commonly used to guide brand audit research?

RQ2: What are the predominant methodological approaches in brand auditing studies?

RQ3: How have brand audits been applied across sectors (e.g., corporate, education, non-profit)?

RQ4: What are the emerging trends in digital and AI-enabled brand audit methodologies?

2.3. Search strategy

An initial exploratory search was conducted in March 2024. The following databases were systematically searched: Google Scholar. The search term included: "brand audit". The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings published between 2021 and 2024 in English.

2.4. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure quality and relevance, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Inclusion criteria: Peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, or conference papers; Publications written in English; Research focused on brand audit frameworks, tools, models, or applications; Studies including methodological descriptions. Exclusion criteria: Trade magazine articles, news sources, or blog content; Publications lacking methodological clarity or without theoretical basis; Duplicates or inaccessible full texts

A total of 56 documents were initially identified. After title and abstract screening, 23 documents were selected for full-text review. Ultimately, 10 studies were retained for structured synthesis based on rigorous application of the above criteria.

2.5. Data extraction and coding

A standardized data extraction form was developed and pilot-tested using a subset of five studies. The form included fields for: Publication year; Author(s); Theoretical framework applied (e.g., Aaker's model, Keller's CBBE); Methodological approach (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods); Sectoral application (e.g., corporate, education, nonprofit); Country or region of focus; Key findings and implications

2.6. Synthesis and analysis

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, a method suitable for aggregating findings from heterogeneous sources (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Themes were generated both deductively (based on research questions) and inductively (emerging patterns

across studies). A final set of four core thematic areas were identified: Theoretical foundations: Dominant branding models used in audits; Audit methodology: Research tools and data collection techniques; Sector-specific implementation: Application contexts and stakeholder perspectives; Digital transformation and innovation: Use of AI, social listening, and data analytics

This thematic organization supports a narrative synthesis that presents trends, gaps, and implications across the literature.

3. Results

3.1. What theoretical frameworks are most commonly used to guide brand audit research?

Brand audit research is primarily guided by classic brand management frameworks from Aaker (1991), Kapferer (2008), and Keller (2001). Aaker's Brand Equity model comprising brand awareness, associations, loyalty, and perceived quality remains widely applied due to its clear structure, although it has been critiqued for limited relevance to digital environments (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010). Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism offers a holistic view of brand identity across six facets but is used more in conceptual analysis than large-scale empirical audits due to its qualitative orientation. Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model emphasizes consumer perceptions and brand resonance, making it suitable for audits focused on sentiment and loyalty, though it tends to prioritize emotional aspects over functional or data-driven measures.

Recent studies extend these traditional models by integrating stakeholder theory, institutional branding, and AI-enabled metrics, reflecting a shift toward more dynamic, data-informed audit approaches (Suhardi et al., 2022; Brandão & Sousa, 2022).

A comprehensive brand audit typically includes two components. Brand Inventory examines internal brand elements visual identity, messaging, digital presence, and trademark protection to ensure consistency and strategic alignment. Brand Exploratory evaluates consumer perceptions and brand experiences through surveys, interviews, social media analytics, and emerging techniques such as neuromarketing and sentiment analysis. Together, these components provide a balanced assessment of how brands are communicated and how they are perceived in the marketplace.

3.2. What are the predominant methodological approaches in brand auditing studies?

Brand auditing studies deploy a mix of qualitative, quantitative, and hybrid methodologies depending on the objectives and contexts.

Qualitative methods such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, and thematic content analysis are often used

to explore internal brand understanding and customer perceptions. For instance, cultural and higher education institutions, such as museums or universities, prefer ethnographic methods and stakeholder interviews to evaluate internal coherence (Baumgarth et al., 2016).

Quantitative approaches dominate in corporate brand audits. These include large-scale surveys measuring awareness, loyalty, and perception; statistical tools like Structural Equation Modeling (SEM); and digital tracking metrics. Suhardi et al. (2022) used SEM to evaluate brand salience in an academic program, while Staisch (2007) utilized structured consumer surveys to assess L'Oréal's market position and perception.

Hybrid designs are increasingly favored. Valparaíso University's audit (Pinar et al., 2011) combined survey data, digital engagement metrics, and competitor benchmarking. Similarly, Chandon (2004) outlines mixed-method audit templates combining visual audits, survey data, and managerial interviews.

Moreover, content analysis of user-generated content (e.g., reviews, forums) is gaining traction as an indirect yet rich data source for brand audits especially in digital consumer environments.

3.3. How have brand audits been applied across sectors (e.g., corporate, education, non-profit)?

The purpose of a brand audit is to thoroughly evaluate a brand's health and market position to identify its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for growth. A brand audit helps in multiple ways, particularly refining the brand strategy. This diagnostic tool evaluates the brand's performance, identifying areas that require enhancement or change. This allows companies to align their marketing plan with their overall business strategy and objectives, ensuring that every marketing initiative contributes effectively to the brand's growth. Also, a brand audit plays a critical role in increasing brand awareness. This identifies the most effective channels and strategies to reach the target audience, enhancing the brand's visibility and recognition. Incorporating a brand audit into the company culture, external branding, and marketing plan is essential for sustained growth and competitiveness (TMDesign, 2024).

In general, there are a lot of purposes of brand audits. The author compiles purposes of brand audits based on the results of previous studies.

Brand audits have shown high adaptability across sectors, tailored to unique stakeholder needs and brand architectures. Numerous case studies and sectoral applications reinforce the growing importance and adaptability of brand audits in modern strategic management.

In the corporate sector, brand audits typically focus on customer-brand relationships, product-level associations, and competitive positioning. L'Oréal's

audit emphasized brand familiarity and emotional connection (Staisch, 2007), while Unilever integrates sustainability and AI-based sentiment analysis to monitor brand performance (INSEAD, 2023).

Table 1: Key purposes of a brand audit

Key purposes	Meanings
Assess brand health	A brand audit provides a comprehensive evaluation of a brand's current position in the market, acting as a tool to gauge its overall health and discover the source of its brand equity.
Identify strengths and weaknesses	It helps a company understand its brand's strengths and weaknesses, which informs where improvements are needed and which elements are working well.
Enhance brand consistency	By reviewing all brand touchpoints (website, social media, advertising, etc.), an audit ensures the brand's message, values, and visual identity are consistent across all platforms.
Measure and align with the target audience	It determines if the brand resonates with its target audience, ensuring it is aligning with customer needs and values, and can identify if demographics have changed.
Analyze the competition	A brand audit examines competitors' strategies to identify opportunities and ensure the brand remains competitive in the market.
Inform strategic decisions	The insights gained from an audit are used to make data-driven decisions about restructuring marketing strategies, messaging, and brand identity.
Position for growth	It helps identify gaps in the market, new opportunities, and areas for growth, allowing a business to position itself for future success.
Gain customer insights	Audits gather data on customer perception and sentiment, providing a clear view of how the brand is being received and where improvements can be made.

Source: Compiled by the author

In the education sector, brand audits are used to strengthen institutional identity and student engagement. Valparaíso University and Ashesi University conducted multi-stakeholder audits involving students, parents, and alumni to refine positioning strategies and enhance international reach (Pinar et al., 2011; Silantoi Olting'idi, 2017).

In cultural institutions, brand audits help assess visibility, emotional connection, and brand coherence across exhibitions and community engagement. The BAC model (Baumgarth et al., 2016) applied in German museums demonstrated how structured branding assessments can improve donor confidence and visitor loyalty.

In non-profit and public sectors, although fewer in number, brand audits help organizations build credibility and donor trust. These audits typically focus on stakeholder trust, communication clarity, and alignment with mission (Zozul'ov et al., 2022).

The sectoral applications show that while the core audit logic remains consistent evaluating awareness, positioning, and consistency the metrics, stakeholders, and tools vary significantly by context.

Despite these promising developments, brand audits face key challenges. Data complexity and interpretation remain critical issues. Rust et al. (2019) note that without clear frameworks, interpreting large-scale consumer data can lead to misleading conclusions or brand misalignment. Rapid market shifts, driven by technological disruption and evolving consumer

preferences, require continuous auditing rather than one-time evaluations (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019).

Another concern is subjectivity in stakeholder perception. As noted by Keller (2013), brand identity exists differently in the eyes of customers, employees, and investors thus requiring multi-stakeholder audit designs. Moreover, privacy regulations (e.g., GDPR, CCPA) have narrowed the scope for passive data collection, prompting a rise in consent-based surveys and anonymized AI models to maintain compliance.

In response, many organizations now employ hybrid audit methodologies, combining qualitative and quantitative tools. Brand auditing today involves a diverse set of methodologies that transcend traditional marketing research, incorporating both qualitative depth and quantitative rigor, enhanced by technology-driven innovation.

(1) Qualitative Approaches

In-depth interviews remain one of the most effective tools for understanding how internal and external stakeholders perceive a brand. These interviews, conducted with customers, employees, executives, and even suppliers, uncover rich narratives around brand meaning, trust, and emotional connection (Kapferer, 2008; Baumgarth et al., 2016). For example, in the audit conducted by Baumgarth et al. (2016) on cultural institutions, interviews helped reveal how donors and visitors interpreted the museum's identity differently, leading to improved alignment in future campaigns.

Digital ethnography adds another layer, allowing researchers to observe consumer behaviors and interactions with a brand in natural digital settings. This is especially useful for youth - or lifestyle-driven brands whose identity is co-created by user-generated content (Kozinets, 2020). In academic branding, ethnographic analysis of student social media content revealed how unofficial symbols and memes influenced brand perception more than formal campaigns (Suhardi et al., 2022).

Social listening tools enable passive but rich data collection. These systems monitor forums, social media, blogs, and reviews to uncover public sentiment and brand associations in real time. This method is invaluable for brands managing crisis communication or seeking to track competitor mentions (Gensler et al., 2013). Nike and Tesla are known for using real-time listening to identify shifts in public mood and respond within hours an impossible feat through traditional surveys (Zhao et al., 2023).

(2) Quantitative Approaches

Quantitative methods are essential for measuring brand awareness, perception, and loyalty across large populations. Brand tracking surveys whether administered quarterly or annually provide time-series data on key

metrics such as aided/unaided recall, brand preference, and loyalty intent (Chandon, 2004; Aaker, 1991).

The Net Promoter Score (NPS) has become a staple indicator, measuring customers' likelihood to recommend a brand. While simplistic, it serves as a powerful proxy for satisfaction and loyalty, especially when tracked over time across demographic segments (Reichheld, 2003).

Clickstream data analysis is becoming a core method in digital brand audits. By examining user behavior on websites and apps what pages they visit, how long they stay, what paths they follow brands can infer interest, friction points, and emotional reaction (Wedel & Kannan, 2016). When combined with heatmaps and bounce-rate data, clickstream metrics reveal whether the digital brand experience is fulfilling its promise.

For example, INSEAD's case note on brand audit (Chandon, 2004) recommends combining survey data with behavioral metrics such as time spent on product pages or engagement with branded video content, offering a more complete view of brand salience.

(3) Technology-enhanced tools

The frontier of brand audit methodology lies in AI-powered tools and biometric feedback mechanisms.

AI-based emotion recognition uses facial analysis, voice tone, or written language cues to detect user emotions in response to brand content. These tools are now used in focus groups or UX testing, where emotional responses to logos, taglines, or packaging are automatically coded and analyzed (Cambria et al., 2022).

Biometric feedback such as heart rate, skin conductance, and brainwave tracking is used in neuromarketing studies to gauge subconscious reactions (Plassmann et al., 2012). Brands like Pepsi and Unilever have used such tools in limited test environments to optimize ad length, music choice, and color palette based on measured arousal and attention.

Eye-tracking technology provides insight into what visual elements consumers focus on and how quickly they process them. For branding, this helps refine packaging, signage, and even web interfaces to ensure key brand cues are seen and understood (Wedel & Pieters, 2008). For example, eye-tracking studies on in-store shelf displays revealed that some brand elements were consistently overlooked, prompting design repositioning.

The combination of traditional brand theory (Aaker, Kapferer, Keller) with new digital methods represents a synthesis trend across brand audit results. Each brand context corporate, educational, cultural requires tailored frameworks. However, across all contexts, key elements emerge consistently: clarity of

identity, stakeholder alignment, emotional resonance, and digital visibility. These findings affirm that brand audits are no longer static tools but dynamic, data-rich diagnostic systems that empower brands to proactively manage perception, identity, and strategic growth.

3.4. What are the emerging trends in digital and AI-enabled brand audit methodologies?

Recent years have witnessed the rapid integration of AI, machine learning (ML), and real-time analytics into brand audit processes. These technologies expand both the scale and depth of analysis, particularly in dynamic digital environments.

AI-based sentiment analysis tools now allow brands to track customer emotion and polarity across vast amounts of online content. For instance, the Dynamic Brand Topic Model (dBTM) proposed by Zhao et al. (2023) helps brands track how customer concerns and praise evolve over time, with topic-specific sentiment.

Social media listening platforms like Brandwatch, Sprinklr, and Hootsuite have been embedded in brand audits to assess brand mentions, hashtag performance, influencer reach, and public sentiment. Brands like Nike and Tesla rely on real-time dashboards that flag positive or negative spikes in reputation, allowing proactive response.

Blockchain technology is also being employed, especially in luxury sectors. LVMH uses blockchain to verify product authenticity and preserve brand integrity, integrating transparency into the brand narrative and reducing counterfeit-related damage (INSEAD, 2023).

Another major shift is the rise of interactive dashboards for internal brand reporting. Tools like Tableau and Power BI are now customized for brand audit reporting, offering visual summaries of key brand health indicators, often in real time. Digital audits increasingly include sustainability and ESG metrics. For example, Unilever's brand audit incorporates environmental impact assessments and ethical sourcing data into brand health tracking demonstrating a broader shift toward "responsible brand audits. These trends suggest a future where brand audits are not just retrospective evaluations but predictive, AI-powered systems embedded in continuous brand monitoring.

4. Conclusion

For many businesses, its brand is its greatest asset. An effective brand represents a company's vision, mission and personality, and these work together best when they're clear to the customer. An audit helps companies evaluate their internal and external branding through customer surveys, data analytics and competitive review (Indeed, 2025). Brand audits are essential for organizations seeking to strengthen their market positioning and enhance consumer

engagement. By integrating traditional methodologies with AI-driven analytics, businesses can gain deeper insights into their brand performance. Companies such as Tesla, Unilever, and LVMH exemplify the benefits of leveraging advanced auditing techniques to maintain competitive advantage. Future research should explore the ethical implications of data-driven brand audits and further refine methodologies to incorporate evolving technological innovations.

5. Limitation

Brand audit, despite its strategic importance, faces several limitations that impact its effectiveness. One major challenge is data complexity and interpretation, as vast amounts of consumer data can be misinterpreted, leading to inaccurate strategic decisions (Rust et al., 2019). Additionally, rapid market evolution makes it difficult to maintain an up-to-date brand audit, requiring continuous monitoring to keep pace with shifting consumer preferences and technological advancements (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). Another limitation is the subjectivity in brand perception, as different stakeholders including consumers, management, and competitors often have varied views on a brand, making it challenging to establish a unified brand identity (Keller, 2013).

Furthermore, privacy and ethical concerns pose significant obstacles, with data protection laws such as GDPR and CCPA limiting the scope of digital brand audits, reducing the depth of consumer insights. An overemphasis on digital metrics can also be problematic, as AI-driven analytics may overlook traditional brand engagement and emotional connections with consumers. Lastly, while AI can enhance brand sentiment analysis, it cannot fully replace human expertise, which remains crucial for contextual interpretation. These limitations highlight the need for a balanced approach, integrating AI-driven analytics with qualitative insights to achieve a comprehensive brand audit.

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