

Branding Strategy in Brunei Darussalam

by

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Branding Research Project in Brunei Darussalam

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ERIA Research Project Report FY2025 No. 35
Published in December 2025

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List of Abbreviations

AITI	Authority for Info-communications Technology Industry of Brunei Darussalam
BDBC	Autoriti Monetari Brunei Darussalam
BEDB	Brunei Economic Development Board
BIBD	Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam
BruIPO	Intellectual Property Office Brunei Darussalam
CEO	chief executive officer
CSR	corporate social responsibility
DARe	Darussalam Enterprise
ICT	information and communications technology
IP	intellectual property
MUIB	Brunei Islamic Religious Council
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Background

Brunei Darussalam is a small, sovereign state located on the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia. It is known for its rich cultural heritage and robust economy, fuelled by its oil and gas resources. Although Brunei has a small population, it enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the region.

Despite its modest size, Brunei has been able to establish a comprehensive legal framework to protect intellectual property (IP), including trademarks, patents, and industrial design. The primary legislation governing trademarks in Brunei is the Trade Marks Act (Chapter 98), which provides the legal basis for the registration, protection, and enforcement of trademarks in the country. Under the Trade Marks Act, any distinctive sign, logo, word, design, or combination thereof that can distinguish goods or services from others can be registered as a trademark, thus offering legal protection against counterfeit or misleading imitations. The Intellectual Property Office Brunei Darussalam (BrulPO) is the regulatory body responsible for the enforcement and compliance of IP in Brunei.

Branding is the process of creating and managing an identity for businesses, products, and services. In Brunei, branding has become an increasingly strategic tool for driving the growth of local businesses and shaping the country's identity. *Wawasan Brunei 2035*¹ is aiming to create a sustainable economy beyond oil and gas; branding can help diversify Brunei's economy, such as by expanding its *halal* food, tourism, finance, and creative industry sectors.

Traditionally, Bruneian businesses have relied on word-of-mouth and community-based marketing over formal brand-building to attract customers. However, the rise of digital connectivity and entrepreneurship is prompting a more deliberate approach to branding. This transition is supported by government initiatives such as the establishment of Darussalam Enterprise (DARe), which assists micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in formalising their brand identities, enhancing their visibility,

¹ *Wawasan Brunei 2035* is Brunei's long-term national vision, launched in 2007 under the leadership of Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah. The vision aspires that by 2035, Brunei will be recognised for its educated and highly skilled populace, high quality of life, and dynamic economy. In 2014, the *Wawasan Brunei 2035* Supreme Council was established to monitor progress and to support associated governmental initiatives. Thirteen strategy champions were appointed to drive action plans and to ensure the delivery of high-impact programmes aligned with national outcomes, which focus on education, economy, security, institutional development, local businesses, infrastructure, social security, environment, health, religion, land use, information and communications technology (ICT), and human resources planning (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2023).

and expanding their market reach. The Authority for Info-communications Technology Industry of Brunei Darussalam (AITI) has also developed e-commerce platforms and schemes to support local businesses with their digital branding.

While the domestic market may be limited due to its limited population of 455,500 (DEPS, 2024), Brunei has an opportunity to develop unique cultural branding reflective of its values and traditions. Its Syariah Penal Code Order² unquestionably influences the content and presentation of branding in Brunei; Brunei's compliance with Syariah principles distinguishes it from other countries, permitting it to develop a distinctive identity overseas. The Brunei Islamic Religious Council (MUIB) also issues the Brunei Halal Certification, which provides confidence to observant Muslim consumers in various products.

2. Objectives and Outline of the Report

This report analyses practical impacts of Brunei's IP frameworks as well as branding practices in the country. The rapid development of digital and communication technology has facilitated and accelerated business transactions there, making branding essential in commercial settings. Thanks to Brunei's high purchasing power and favourable geopolitical position within South-east Asia, Brunei should provide local businesses with opportunities for wider regional and international outreach.

This report aims to

- (i) gain a comprehensive understanding of the current trademark system in Brunei, including exploring the legal and institutional frameworks enforced in Brunei and how branding is applied by local businesses;
- (ii) analyse branding in Brunei, and encourage the development of local businesses through the strategic use of branding; and
- (iii) identify Bruneian brands with the potential for regional or international exportation.

To achieve these objectives, BrulPO provided official statistics, and data were collected from websites on the number of trademark applications made in Brunei domestically and internationally (Tables 1–5). To analyse the legislative framework in Brunei, the processes of applying for a trademark were explored, as were the rights conferred to a registered trademark and the enforcement of these rights in Brunei. Brand owners were also interviewed over e-mail or by phone.

² This Islamic framework governs practical aspects, such as product permissibility, and ensures that businesses do not bear any *haram* (forbidden) elements or inappropriate imagery.

Those in Brunei can register trademarks through the Madrid Protocol, which is an international system that facilitates trademark registration by allowing owners to file a single application to register their trademark across multiple jurisdictions (i.e. countries) that are members of the system (see Chapter 2). Table 1.1 shows that more applications were filed through the Madrid Protocol for trademarks designating³ Brunei than those originating from Brunei from 2019 to 2024.

Table 1: Number of Trademark Applications in Brunei Darussalam

Source	Year					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Domestic	180	112	99	115	144	135
Foreign	639	528	588	565	561	640
Madrid Protocol (Application filed with WIPO, designating Brunei)	1,486	1,207	1,359	1,219	1,229	1,374
Madrid Protocol (Application filed in Brunei)	2	0	0	0	0	2
Total	2,307	1,847	2,046	1,899	1,934	2,151

WIPO = World Intellectual Property Organization.
Source: BrulPO.

Table 2: Number of Trademarks Registered in Brunei Darussalam

Source	Year					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Domestic (Local applicants)	136	88	67	66	56	63
Foreign	1,003	759	486	514	346	343
Madrid Protocol (Application filed with WIPO, designating Brunei)	726	1,150	2,015	1,868	707	616
Madrid Protocol (Application filed in Brunei)	2	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1,867	1,997	2,568	2,448	1,109	1,022

WIPO = World Intellectual Property Organization.
Source: BrulPO.

³ 'Designating Brunei' requests that BrulPO examine the trademark under Brunei law, granting protection as under a national filing and allowing for centralised renewals but requiring national maintenance.

Table 3: Top Three Countries with Trademark Applications in Brunei Darussalam

Year	Top Three	No. of Applications
2019	Singapore	2
	Japan	1
	Thailand	1
2020	N/A	
2021	N/A	
2022	N/A	
2023	N/A	
2024	Malaysia	2
	United States	2
	Japan	1

Source: BrulPO.

**Table 4: Top Three Countries with Trademark Applications Filed with WIPO
(Originating in Brunei) Based on the Madrid Protocol**

Year	Top Three	No. of Applications
2019	China	583
	United States	192
	Singapore	93
2020	China	416
	United States	160
	Japan	68
2021	China	413
	United States	203
	Singapore	115
2022	China	373
	United States of America	166
	Japan	102
2023	China	445
	United States	166
	Singapore	83
2024	China	544
	United States	117
	Singapore	103

WIPO = World Intellectual Property Organization.

Source: BrulPO.

Table 5: Number of Trademark Applications Approved (Registered), Rejected, Withdrawn, Considered as Withdrawn, and Pending, 2019–2024, in Brunei Darussalam

Status		Year					
		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Applications	Registered	712	537	551	468	374	147
	Rejected	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Withdrawn	52	49	37	51	62	68
	Considered as withdrawn	41 (abandoned)	37 (abandoned)	37	6	21	98
	Pending	14	13	55	77	252	291
Based on Madrid Protocol	Registered	1,456	1,141	1,276	1,040	724	471
	Rejected	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Withdrawn	20	26	16	17	5	6
	Considered as withdrawn	0	0	0	5 (abandoned)	0	0
	Pending	2	38	89	156	498	897

Source: BrulPO.

Chapter 2

Trademark Protection in Brunei

1. Trademark System

To protect a brand of goods or services, an owner must register the brand as a trademark. Registration gives the owner exclusive rights to use, sell, or license the registered trademark while preventing others from using or exploiting it. Brunei adopts a first-to-file system, where trademark rights are granted to the first person who files a valid application.

A trademark is defined in Section 4(1) of the Trade Marks Act as 'any perceptible sign capable of being represented graphically which is capable of distinguishing goods or services of one undertaking from those of other undertakings.' It may consist of words, numbers, letters, designs, devices, shapes of things, colours, packaging, or dressing; it can also be the personal name of the owner. Regarding the shape of the trademark, it may be represented by several iterations, in various angles, views, or perspective. For a colour to be a trademark, it must be accompanied by a statement referring to the specific colour in the trademark application form.

In 2017, the Trade Mark Amendment Order was passed in which the definition of trademarks deleted the word 'visually.' This amendment allowed sound and scent to be registered as trademarks as long as they can be described or represented in the application form. An inquiry at BrulPO confirmed that, since 2017, neither sounds nor scents have been registered in Brunei, however.

The national statutes and regulations related to trademarks in Brunei include:

- (i) Trade Marks Act (Chapter 98) as amended over the years,
- (ii) Trade Marks Rules (Revised Edition 2000),
- (iii) Trade Marks (International Registration) Rules 2018,
- (iv) Trade Marks (Importation of Infringing Goods) Regulations 2000, and
- (iv) Trade Marks Act (Amendment) Order 2017.

International agreements entered into by Brunei Darussalam related to trademarks comprise:

- (i) World Trade Organization Agreement, with Brunei being a member since 1 January 1995;
- (ii) Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, entered into force on 17 February 2012;

- (iii) Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement, entered into force on 1 April 1995;
- (iv) Nice Agreement Concerning International Classification of Goods and Services for the Purposes of the Registration of Marks, as the classification used by Brunei;
- (v) Madrid Protocol for the International Registration of Marks, with Brunei becoming a member on 6 October 2016; and
- (vi) ASEAN Framework Agreement on Intellectual Property Cooperation, by virtue of being an ASEAN Member State.

When a trademark has been successfully registered in Brunei, the applicant is legally recognised as the owner of the trademark and has exclusive rights of ownership. The trademark owner can use, sell, or license the trademark and has the right to prohibit other persons – especially competitors – from using an identical or confusingly similar-looking trademark on goods and services that the trademark owner does not own nor manufacture (Trade Marks Act, Section 12).

A person is considered a trademark infringer if he/she uses an identical or similar looking trademark in the course of trade; where any likelihood of confusion of the identity of the origin or owner of the goods and services can arise if the trademark is similar-looking; or he/she employs the registered identical or similar trademark on his/her own goods and services (Trade Marks Act, Section 13).

Brunei also provides for the registration of certification marks and collective marks. Section 50 of the Trade Marks Act defines 'collective mark' as a mark distinguishing the goods or services of an association, making the association the owner of that mark. 'Certification mark' is defined under Section 52 of the Trade Marks Act as a mark indicating that the goods or services are certified by the owner of that mark in respect to the origin, material, mode of manufacture of goods or performance of services, quality, accuracy, or other specific characteristics.

There are very few registered certification marks or collective marks in Brunei. Certification marks are few due to the scarcity of manufacturers in Brunei. Not many manufacturers and producers are prepared to impose specific standards on their goods and services. Owners are generally content with the rights that they receive from ordinary trademark registration. Further, collective marks can only be registered by associations and societies, of which there are few in Brunei. Most also find ordinary trademark registration to have sufficient protection. Thus far, it has not been possible to ascertain the exact number of certification marks and collective marks registered in Brunei.

Since Brunei is party to the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, all trademarks protected under the convention are also protected in Brunei (e.g. Apple, Coca-Cola, and McDonald's) under Section 54 of the Trade Marks Act. Even if a trademark owner does not do business in nor has any goodwill in Brunei due to domestic law restrictions –

such as cigarette and alcohol manufacturers – their trademarks are still protected in the country. The owner is still entitled to restrain, by injunction, the use of a trademark in Brunei that is identical to his/her trademark or similar in relation to identical goods or services where such use is likely to cause confusion (Trade Marks Act, Section 54).

BrulPO oversees the examination of trademark applications, provides guidance on IP matters, and works to enhance awareness of IP rights within the country. It is also tasked to hear disputes, such as opposition to trademark applications, cancellation of trademarks for non-use, and revocation of trademark registration. BrulPO operates under the Attorney General's Chambers, which is responsible for enforcing trademark laws.

2. Trademark Registration System

2.1. Filing Requirements

Filing requirements are specifically provided in Trade Marks Rules and in guidelines issued by BrulPO. According to Rule 13 of the Trade Marks Rules, the applicant is required to provide his/her name, address, and country of citizenship; a corporate entity must provide name, registered address, type of entity (e.g. private limited), country of incorporation, and state of incorporation (for a federal country, e.g. United States).⁴ According to Rule 14 of the Trade Marks Rules, the mark specification must contain a clear sample of the trademark;⁵ class under Nice Classification;⁶ specification of good or service to be protected; meaning of word mark in English; and English translation of mark if not in English. Prior claim details, under Rule 18, must be noted and include the date of the prior application, application number, country where the prior application was filed, good or service covered under prior application, and certified prior application and English translation (if applicable).

The Registrar has chief control of the Registry of Trade Marks (Trade Marks Act, Section 3). There are also one or more deputy registrars who, subject to the control of the Registrar, have all powers and functions of the Registrar except for delegating their powers to any other officer (Trade Marks Act, Section 3(2)).

⁴ Form TM 1, to be completed by the applicant, requires these details and the type and representation of the mark under application. Guidelines for Form TM 1 provided by BrulPO may be found here: <https://www.bruipo.gov.bn/Shared%20Documents/PDF%20Forms/TM%20Forms/TM1%20Guidelines.pdf>.

⁵ The mark must be well represented, and it must be noted whether it is to be registered in black and white or in colour. If a colour mark is to be registered, the description of the colour must be stated in the form.

⁶ When applying for trademark protection, the classification of goods and services must be clearly delineated and be in line with World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) guidelines. See WIPO (2017).

2.2 Application

Form TM 1 (application) and Form TM 22 (application for agent)⁷ are to be completed with details mentioned above. These forms are then submitted to BrulPO with payment of official fees (Table 2.1). At present, online submission is not available; however, BrulPO is reportedly working towards enabling online filing in the future.⁸

Table 2.1: Trademark Application Registration Fees

Form	Application	Official Fee
TM 01	Application to register a trademark	B\$150.00 per mark, per class
TM 22	Request to appoint or change agent, or to enter or change an address for service	B\$6.00 per mark
TM 27	Publication	B\$125.00 per mark

Source: Second Schedule of Trade Marks Rules.

Note that all applicants must appoint an agent to submit these applications to BrulPO. Although Section 75 of the Trade Marks Act does not make it mandatory for applicants to file the application through an agent, as a matter of practice, the Registry has insisted that an agent be appointed. Foreign applicants may appoint foreign agents, but they must have a local address for service in Brunei. The local address is to allow the foreign agents to receive all correspondence from BrulPO and other local agents.

An applicant who made separate applications for trademarks may, at any time before preparations for the publication of any of the applications have been completed, request that the Registrar merge the separate applications into a single application (via Form TM 12). The Registrar will grant the merger if all applications are for the same trademark; bear the same date of application; and are, at the time of the request, in the name of the same person (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 16).

An applicant may also apply to register two or more trademarks in a single registration. Each trademark must be significantly similar to the other either in its form or colour (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 17).

Upon receipt of an application, a simple formality examination will first be conducted to check if Form TM 1 has been properly completed. This formality examination may take 2

⁷ All relevant forms can be found at BrulPO. Trademark Forms. <https://www.bruipo.gov.bn/SitePages/Trademark%20Forms.aspx>.

⁸ This information was informally conveyed by the Registrar.

to 4 months. If the formality examination goes through without any objection, the application is given a filing date and filing number.

If the requirements for registration are not met, written notice will be sent to the applicant (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 24(1)). The applicant has 2 months from the date of the written notice to make representations in writing, apply to the Registrar for a hearing, or apply to have the application amended (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 24(2)). If the applicant requests a hearing, the applicant must file with the Registrar a written submission and bundle of authorities⁹ at least 14 days before the date of the hearing (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 24(5)). If the applicant objects to the decision of the Registrar, the applicant may file Form TM 3 with the Registrar within 1 month from the date of the decision requesting that the Registrar state the grounds for the decision (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 24(6)). Another examination will follow; this process takes 2 to 6 months.

There are two reasons that cause an application to fail the substantive examination – ‘absolute grounds for refusal’ and ‘relative grounds for refusal’ (Trade Marks Act, Sections 6 and 8) (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Grounds for Refusal for a Trademark Application

Absolute Grounds	Relative Grounds
• The sign does not satisfy the definition of a trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(1)(a)). • The trademark is devoid of distinctive characters (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(1)(b)). • The trademark consists exclusively of signs or indications that designate the characteristics of goods and services (e.g. kind, quality, quantity) (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(1)(c)). • The trademark consists exclusively of signs or indications that are customary in the current language or in the bona fide and established practices of the trade (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(1)(d)). • The sign consists exclusively of the shape resulting from the nature of the goods (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(2)(a)).	• The sign is identical to an earlier trademark, and the goods or services for the applied trademark are identical to the goods or service of the earlier protected trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 8(1)). • There is likelihood of confusion because the trademark is identical to an earlier trademark and is to be registered for goods or services like those of the earlier trademark (Trade

⁹ Laws referred to in the written submission.

Absolute Grounds	Relative Grounds
• The sign consists exclusively of the shape of goods necessary to obtain a technical result (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(2)(b)). • The sign consists exclusively of the shape that gives substantial value to the goods (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(2)(a)). • The trademark is contrary to public policy or morality (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(3)(a)). • The trademark is of such a nature as to deceive the public (e.g. regarding nature, quality, or geographical origin of goods) (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(3)(b)). • The use of the trademark is prohibited by any written law or rule of law of Brunei (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(4)). • The trademark application is not made in good faith (Trade Marks Act, Section 6(6)). • The trademark contains or consists of a representation of the emblem, arms, and/or regalia of Brunei or resembles them; is a representation of the royal crowns or royal flags; or is a representation of the Sultan or his family unless there is consent given by or on behalf of the Sultan or members of the royal family (Trade Marks Act, Section 7(1)). • The trademark contains or consists of a representation of the national flag and use of that trademark would be misleading or grossly offensive (Trade Marks Act, Section 7(2)). • The name or representation of any person is on a trademark without the consent of the person (or if recently dead, of his/her legal representatives), and it is impossible to obtain consent (Trade Marks Rules, Section 12.).	Marks Act, Section 8(2)). • There is a likelihood of confusion because the trademark is identical or like an earlier trademark that has a reputation in Brunei and the use of that trademark on goods or services to be registered, causing dilution in an unfair manner of the distinctive character of the earlier trademark; or takes unfair advantage of the distinctive character of the earlier trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 8(3)).

Source: Authors.

Brunei primarily follows a first-to-file system; however, under Section 10 of the Trade Marks Act, the Registrar may accept the registration of a trademark if the applicant can demonstrate honest concurrent use in the course of trade. However, the Registrar will not allow the honest concurrent-use argument if refusal is one on absolute grounds.

Section 11 of the Trade Marks Act is an exceptional provision in which the Attorney-General has the power to request that the Registrar accept a registration even if the Registrar refuses registration on relative grounds.

If there are no grounds for refusal after substantive examination, then the application will be accepted for registration. The Registrar will issue Form TM 27 to notify applicant that the application will be published in the *Trade Mark Journal* for any third party to oppose or to object to the application. The applicant has 2 months from the date of the notice to comply with the requirements set out in the notice, check and sign the notice, and file it with the Registrar (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 25).

2.3 Opposition Process

The opposition process under the Trade Marks Rules is subject to a strict timeline and procedural steps, as outlined below:

- (i) Within 3 months of an application appearing in the *Trade Marks Journal*, a notice of opposition must be filed, and a copy of the notice will be sent to the applicant by the Registrar (Rule 29, Trade Marks Rules).
- (ii) Within 3 months of the date on which the notice is sent to the applicant, the applicant may file a counter-statement and a notice on Form TM 5 to defend the application (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 29(2)). The Registrar will send a copy of the counter-statement to the opponent.
- (iii) Within 3 months of the date on which the counter-statement is sent to the opponent, the opponent must file evidence by way of statutory declaration or affidavit to support the opposition and send a copy to the applicant (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 29(3)). If the evidence is not filed within 3 months, the opponent is deemed to have abandoned opposition (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 29(4)).
- (iv) Within 3 months of the date on which the opponent's statutory declaration or affidavit has been served to the applicant, the applicant may file evidence in the same manner to support his/her application and send a copy to the opponent (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 29(5)).
- (v) Within 3 months of the date on which above statutory declaration or affidavit has been served to the opponent, the opponent may file evidence by way of statutory declaration or affidavit, which must be confined to matters strictly in the applicant's evidence (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 29(6)).

Following the close of evidence, no further evidence may be filed thereafter without the Registrar's concurrence. No extension is allowed for the prescribed times in items (i) and (ii) above. However, the Registrar can grant an extension of time during the subsequent phases of the proceedings as prescribed in items (iii), (iv), and (v) above (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 32).

After all evidence has been filed, the Registrar must notify both parties of the hearing date (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 30(1)). Both parties will file with the Registrar their written submissions and bundles of authority at least 1 month before the date of the hearing and exchange these with each other (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 30(2)). The Registrar will hear the parties' arguments on the scheduled date and then issue a decision. This decision may be appealed to the Supreme Court, in which case the matter will be heard by a judge.

A third party (i.e. someone who has an interest in the trademark, like a licensee) who intends to appear at the hearing must file Form TM 28 with the Registrar before the hearing (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 30(3)). If the party does not appear at the hearing, the Registrar may proceed to give his/her decision, dismiss the proceedings, or make any other order in his/her absence (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 30(5)). If neither the applicant nor the opponent appears at the hearing, the proceedings may be struck out but may be restored at the discretion of the Registrar (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 30(6)). If the Registrar makes a decision in the physical absence of a party and that party later makes an application, the Registrar may set aside that application (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 30(7)).

A hearing before the Registrar of any dispute between two or more parties relating to any matter in connection with a trademark registration application must be public. However, the Registrar may direct otherwise after consulting with the parties involved (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 59). Opposition hearings before the Registrar are done in the Office of the Registrar.

There have not been many trademark proceedings in Brunei; yet one is noted in the box below.

International Coffee & Tea LLC versus The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf Sdn Bhd

International Coffee & Tea LLC versus The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf Sdn Bhd (2001) dealt with infringement and honest concurrent use in Brunei. The plaintiff registered its trademark in Brunei in November 1999 and is known worldwide. It issued proceedings against the defendant, which was operating a restaurant and café under the name and style of 'The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf' 500 metres away from the plaintiff's establishment. The defendant had registered its business name in June 1999. The defendant claimed that (i) it had an earlier right to the name, (ii) it was an honest concurrent user, and (iii) the plaintiff's trademark was devoid of any distinctive character.

In this case, the Court had to clarify if an 'earlier right' can be extended to an unregistered trademark or other sign that has been continuously used in relation to goods and services from a date prior to the use of the registered trademark or its registration, whichever was earlier. The word 'continuous' had not been specifically defined previously, except that it is more than just occasional, although not necessarily 'every week or even every month'. The Registrar had usually sought a reasonable period of use, usually about 5 years prior to application date. Therefore, the period of 5 months (from November 1999 to June 1999) in this case was questionable.

The Court also had to decide whether the defendant's concurrent use of the name was honest. The plaintiff had also asserted that the defendant used various items, like plastic bags, receipts, and table napkins, in the style of the popular United States chain, Starbucks, as a ploy to attract customers. The plaintiff further argued that due to the extent of its establishments being advertised in various prominent newspapers and magazines in Brunei, the defendant's use was done with the full knowledge of the plaintiff's existence and with the intention of misappropriating the goodwill of its trademark. Furthermore, although there was no evidence of actual confusion between the two businesses, their proximity gave the impression that they were the same, so the likelihood of confusion was very real.

The Court held that the designs of the various items used in the defendant's establishment closely resembled those of Starbucks. As such, it found that the defendant's use of plaintiff's trademarked name was not continuous nor honest and so did not have an earlier right. An injunction was thus granted in favour of the plaintiff.

This case shows that 'earlier right' and 'honest concurrent use' are interpreted narrowly in Brunei. Mere registration or short-term use is insufficient to meet the threshold of continuous use. Additionally, despite an absence of actual confusion, the potential for public confusion in this case was deemed satisfactory. The Court was also willing to infer dishonest intent if the infringed brand has a strong, well-known reputation, and the infringer operates in a similar style. Hence, this decision shows Brunei's determination to deter bad-faith practices and to place significant importance on protecting trademarks and reputation.

Source: *International Coffee & Tea LLC versus The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf Sdn Bhd* [2001] 2 JCBD 510.

Table 2.3: Flow of the Trademark Registration Process in Brunei Darussalam

Step	Procedure
1	The application is submitted with appropriate forms, paperwork, and fee payment.
2	The Registrar sends a formal acknowledgement letter of the application and provides the application number and filing date. This may take 2 weeks.
3	The application is examined for any deficiencies (i.e. the formalities examination) and in accordance with the set requirements under the Trade Marks Act. The examination takes 2–4 months. If the application is not accepted, the Registrar will issue a letter of notification of objection. The applicant has 2 months to respond to the Registrar. Failure to respond may result refusal of the application.
4	If the application is approved, the Registrar will provide an acceptance letter and Form TM 27. Form TM 27 must be submitted to the Registrar with the payment of the publication fee within 2 months from the date of the acceptance letter to avoid the abandonment of the application.
5	Trademark notification is published in the <i>Trade Marks Journal</i> for 3 months (i.e. opposition period).
6	After 3 months and with no opposition, the trademark will be registered. The Registrar will issue the registration certificate after a few months.

Source: Authors.

2.4 Invalidation and Revocation

An invalidated trademark registration is deemed never to have been made. Revocation normally takes effect from the date of the application for revocation. When the owner of an earlier trademark has acquiesced for a continuous period of 5 years the use of a registered trademark in Brunei and is aware of that use, this owner is not entitled to apply for a declaration of invalidity or to oppose the use of the later trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 49).

A registered trademark may be invalidated if

- (i) It was registered in breach of certain absolute grounds of refusal (e.g. the trademark was devoid of distinctiveness) provided it has not acquired distinctiveness thereafter.
- (ii) It was registered in breach of relative grounds of refusal unless the owner of the earlier trademark has consented to the registration.
- (iii) It was registered in bad faith (Trade Marks Act, Section 48).

An application for a declaration of invalidity may be made by any person (Trade Marks Act, Section 48(3)). If proceedings concerning the trademark are pending in the court, then the application must be made to the court. If it is in any other case, the application is made to the Registrar and may, at any stage of the proceedings, refer the application to the court. The same applies to revocation of a trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 47(4)).

If the grounds for invalidity of registration are that it was registered in bad faith, the Registrar may apply to the court for a declaration of invalidity of the registration.

A registered trademark may be revoked if:

- (i) It is not put to genuine use in the course of trade in Brunei within 5 years following the date of completion of the registration procedure without proper reasons (Trade Marks Act, Section 47(1)(a)).
- (ii) Such use is suspended for an uninterrupted period of 5 years without proper reasons (Trade Marks Act, Section 47(1)(b)).
- (iii) It becomes the common name in trade for the product or service for which it is registered due to acts of inactivity of the owner (Trade Marks Act, Section 47(1)(c)).
- (iv) It can mislead the public, particularly as to the nature, quality, or geographical origin of the goods or services for which it is registered due to use of the trademark owner (Trade Marks Act, Section 47(1)(d)).

Where the invalidation affects only some of the goods and services for which the trademark is registered, the trademark will be declared invalid in regard only to those goods or services.

The registration of a trademark cannot be revoked on the grounds mentioned in Sections 47(1)(a) and (b) of the Trade Marks Act if the use commenced or resumed after 5 years and before the application for revocation was made (Trade Marks Act, Section 47(3)). However, if the commencement or resumption was within 3 months of the application, the commencement or resumption will be disregarded unless preparations for it began before the owner became aware that an application for revocation may be made.

2.5 Appeal

Where the Registrar has rendered a decision under the Trade Marks Act in relation to any matter concerning trademarks, such decision may be subject to appeal. An appeal may be filed before the court by any person aggrieved by the Registrar's decision.

2.6 International Trademarks

Brunei ratified the Madrid Protocol and amended the Trade Marks Order in 2017 to enable BrulPO to accept international applications via the Madrid Protocol system. There are specific forms available when an international application is to be filed by owners through the Madrid Protocol. This application is considered the basic application/registration for further registrations in other countries who have also ratified the Madrid Protocol.

If the Registrar receives an application to register a trademark designating Brunei under the Madrid Protocol, the Registrar then conducts a substantive examination and sees if there are any absolute or relative grounds for refusing the application. After that, the application is published in the *Trade Marks Journal* to see if any person objects to the application in Brunei. If the Registrar has any reason to refuse the application, notice is given to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the applicant is requested to submit a response to the refusal, which is either a provisional or absolute refusal. The applicant must respond within 2 months from the date that WIPO serves the notice. A local Brunei agent is also appointed to take over the application and to submit the necessary responses to the refusal.

The application is either finally accepted or refused, even after responses have been submitted. In the event there is no notice of refusal sent by the Registrar, and 18 months have lapsed since Brunei receives WIPO's notification of the application, the application is accepted for registration in Brunei.

In the past, the Registrar has not issued any registration certificate or statement of grant for these trademarks. Recently, however, the Registrar has begun to issue statements of grant at the request of the applicant, or the Registrar sends them directly to WIPO.

Brunei has received a significant number of applications under the Madrid Protocol to register trademarks. However, there are comparatively few applications to register through the Madrid Protocol system with Brunei as the office of origin.

Several international applications originating in Brunei have received provisional refusal on the following grounds:

- (i) there is an earlier registered trademark in Brunei, indicating that the applicant may not have conducted an availability search prior to filing;
- (ii) there are deficiencies in the specification of goods and services; or
- (iii) the trademark is considered non-distinctive or descriptive.

Many international applications are now being successfully accepted by BrulPO, reflecting greater awareness amongst applicants and improvements in filing practices.

3. Renewal of or Changes to Trademarks

A registered trademark provides protection to the registered owner against infringement for 10 years calculated from the date the application was first filed with the Registrar (Trade Marks Act, Section 43). Registration may be renewed for further periods, each of 10 years, at the request of the owner, subject to payment of a renewal fee.

The application to renew the trademark must be made 6 months before the expiry date of the registration. If the 6-month grace period is missed, the owner is given another 6 months provided that the trademark has not yet been removed from the registry. The Registrar has the discretion to allow a late renewal, but this is still subject to payment of late charges. This discretion is exercised with a degree of leniency, as late applications for renewal have been accepted by the Registrar on several occasions, even after long delays of up to 2 years.

The owner, licensee, or any person who has an interest in a registered trademark may change his/her name or address as recorded by submitting Form TM 13 to the Registrar (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 38(1)). If a person who had already furnished an address wishes to change the address for service, he/she may make this request on Form TM 22 to the Registrar (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 38(2)).

The owner may request that the Registrar, using Form TM 17, alter his/her registered trademark as well. The Registrar may require evidence by statutory declaration as to the circumstances in which the application is being made (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 53(1)). Section 45 of the Trade Marks Act permits alteration of a registered trademark where the mark includes the owner's name or address, and the alteration is limited only to that name or address and does not substantially affect the identity of the trademark. If the request is allowed by the Registrar, the trademark will be published as altered (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 53(2)).

If a person is affected by the alteration, he/she may send a notice on Form TM 4 to the Registrar to oppose the alteration within 3 months of the date of publication of the alteration. The notice must include a statement for the opposition, and the Registrar must send a copy of the notice and statement to the owner. The same process as explained in the opposition process will commence (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 53(3)).

4. Other Trademark Transactions

The following types of transactions can be registered with BrulPO:

- (i) assigning ownership to a registered trademark or any right to it,
- (ii) granting of a licence under a registered trademark,

- (iii) granting of any interest by way of security (fixed or floating) for a registered trademark; and
- (iv) assigning a personal representative in relation to a registered trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 26(2)).

4.1 Assigning Ownership

A registered trademark is personal property owned by the trademark owner. The owner may assign ownership of his/her trademarks to any assignee. A deceased owner will also have ownership of his/her trademarks transmitted to his/her personal representatives and eventually his/her heirs.

An assignment of ownership must be recorded with the Registrar to benefit from certain advantages (Trade Marks Act, Section 26(3)). If an assignment is not recorded,

- (i) the assignment is not effective against any person who acquires a conflicting interest under the trademark,
- (ii) the assignee is unable to sue in his/her own name in respect of any infringement of the trademark, and
- (iii) the assignee is not entitled to damages for infringement until after the assignment has been recorded.

The name and address of the assignee, date of the assignment, and where the assignment is in respect to any right in the trademark must be conveyed to the Registrar (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 51(a)). The Trade Marks Act does not state that registration of an assignment is mandatory. Similarly, registration of a licence is not mandatory but advisable because it helps prove ownership status for trademark protection.

Ownership of a trademark can also be transferred from the owner to a third party. The Trade Marks Act does not make registration mandatory, but it is recommended. The assignment would be effective against any person who acquires a conflicting interest under the trademark; the assignee can sue in his/her own name in respect of any infringement of the trademark; and the assignee is entitled to damages for infringement after the assignment is recorded.

The rights of ownership by inheritance where an owner has died may also be registered. The name and address of the transferee, the date of the order of the court, and the description of the right in the trademark to be transferred by court order to the transferee should be entered into the registry (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 51(e)).

4.2 Granting a Licence

The owner of a trademark may grant a licence to a third party to use the trademark by entering into a licence agreement. The registration of these transactions is commonly accepted by providing the licence agreement. Licence agreements are accepted at face value if the parties are clearly named, the trademark described is still active, and the registration has not expired. The licence must be in writing and signed by or on behalf of the grantor to be effective (Trade Marks Act, Section 29(2)). This may be satisfied by the affixing of its seal if the grantor is a corporate body.

A licence may be general or limited. A limited licence may apply to some but not all the goods or services for which the trademark is registered, or it may apply in relation to the use of the trademark in a particular manner or a certain locality (Trade Marks Act, Section 29(1)). Both a general and limited licence can be an 'exclusive licence', which is a licence authorising the licensee – to the exclusion of all other persons, including the person granting the licence – to use a registered trademark in the manner authorised by the licence (Trade Marks Act, Section 30). The rights of an exclusive licensee are concurrent with those of the owner of the registered trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 32(2)).

A licence holder is entitled to call on the owner of the registered trademark to invoke infringement proceedings in respect of any matter that affects his/her interests (Trade Marks Act, Section 31(2)). If the owner refuses to do so or fails to do so within 2 months of being called upon, the licensee may bring proceedings in his/her own name as if he/she were the owner of the trademark (Trade Marks Act, Section 31(3)).

To grant licences, the name and address of the licensee, fact that the licence is an exclusive licence (if it is), description of the limitation of the licence (if it is), and duration of the licence must be entered into the registry (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 51(b)).

4.3 Granting of Interest by Way of Security

The owner of a trademark may obtain financial assistance from a bank for whatever reason; as security, the bank may ask for a debenture. Under a debenture, IP rights are assigned to the bank by way of security. To do so, the name and address of the grantee, nature of interest (fixed or floating¹⁰), and extent of the security and right to or under the trademark must be entered into the registry (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 51(c)).

¹⁰ A type of security interest, such as a charge over property, can be fixed or floating. A fixed charge attaches to specific and identifiable assets (e.g. land or heavy equipment). A corporation cannot deal with these assets freely without the bank's consent. A floating charge hovers over a pool of assets that can fluctuate. These are usually things which are commonly bought and sold (e.g. stocks or receivables). The corporation can use and dispose of these assets in the ordinary course of business until the charge 'crystallises', usually upon insolvency.

4.4 Registering a Personal Representative

After a trademark owner passes away, his/her personal representatives (i.e. an administrator or executor) should become the legal persons authorised to deal with the trademark. To do so, the name and address of the person in whom the trademark or any right to or under it vests by virtue of assent, and the date of the assent must be entered into the registry (Trade Marks Rules, Rule 51(d)).

5. Infringement

There are various acts considered to be offences under the Trade Marks Act:

- (i) unauthorised use of trademarks in relation to goods (Section 94(1)-(3)),
- (ii) falsely applying registered trademarks to services (Section 96),
- (iii) falsely representing trademarks as registered (Section 97),
- (iv) counterfeiting trademarks used by another (Section 98),
- (v) having possession of instruments for counterfeiting any trademark (Section 99),
- (vi) importing or selling goods marked with a counterfeit trademark (Section 100),
- (vii) falsely applying a registered trademark to services (Section 101), and
- (viii) unauthorised use of trademarks resembling the Royal Arms (Section 102).

Moreover, any person in possession of counterfeit goods may be liable to a court order for forfeiture of such goods (Trade Marks Act, Section 104). A person who applies a registered trademark to material intended to be used for labelling or packaging goods will also be treated as a party to any use of the material that infringes on the registered trademark if, when he/she applied the trademark, he/she knew or had reason to believe that the application of the trademark was not duly authorised by the owner or a licensee (Trade Marks Act, Section 13(5)).¹¹

If a trademark owner finds that his/her trademark has been wrongfully used by another person, he/she can send, as the first step, a warning letter to the infringer to stop use (i.e. a cease-and-desist letter). In Brunei, the cease-and-desist letter is quite effective. Many infringers are willing to stop the infringing act upon being served by such a warning letter

¹¹ There is a provision in Section 14(3) of the Trade Marks Act that if a person has been using a sign (i.e. an unregistered trademark) in a locality before someone else registered an identical or similar trademark, the local user may continue using that sign without committing an infringement. However, he/she did infringe if the sign was affixed to goods or packaging, offered or exposed such goods for sale, imported or exported goods under the sign, or used the sign on business papers or in advertising (Trade Marks Act, Section 13(4)).

by solicitors. Most trademark owners do not want to incur heavy legal costs by commencing civil action.

When an infringer ceases the wrongful use of the trademark, the goods are usually surrendered for destruction. Where a trademark is related to food and drink, notice may be given to the Ministry of Health.

If an infringer refuses to cease the wrongful use of the trademark, the trademark owner may be compelled to commence civil action for an injunction, damages, recovery of profits, erasure or destruction of offending sign, delivery of infringing goods,¹² and/or disposal of infringing goods (Trade Marks Act, Section 18).

An application for an order for the delivery of infringing goods may not be made after 6 years from the date of the infringement, unless during the whole or part of that period, the owner of the registered trademark is disabled¹³ or prevented by fraud or concealment from discovering the facts entitling him/her to apply for an order (Trade Marks Act, Section 18). Thus, an application may be made at any time 6 years from the date that he/she ceased to be disabled or could, with reasonable diligence, have discovered those facts.

5.1 Customs Authority and Police

The customs authority in Brunei, Royal Customs and Excise, is responsible for monitoring all goods entering and leaving Brunei. Under the Trade Marks (Importation of Infringing Goods) Regulations 2000, a trademark owner who suspects that goods to be imported into Brunei are counterfeits or are infringing the owner's trademarks may give notice to the Controller of Customs, who must prevent such identified goods from entering the country by detaining or seizing the goods at the point of entry (Trade Marks Act, Section 82(1)).

However, there is no system in Brunei to register trademarks with Customs for them to look out for and to detain counterfeit or infringing goods. Customs will act only upon receiving notice from a trademark owner or authorised agent. The notice will be in force no longer than 5 years from the date of the notice or if the registration of the trademark expires within 5 years from the date of the notice (Trade Marks Act, Section 82(2)(b)). Customs is not positioned to watch for possible infringing goods coming into the country, and the Trade Marks (Importation of Infringing Goods) Regulations 2000 does not impose any statutory obligation to detain infringing goods.

There are laws allowing a trademark owner to lodge a police complaint against a counterfeit product. The owner can lodge a complaint with the Royal Brunei Police Force

¹² Surrendering infringing goods to either the trademark owner or a third party to ensure their destruction and to prevent the goods from being distributed.

¹³ 'Disabled' entails a person who, by reason of mental disorder, is incapable of managing and administering his/her property and affairs (Section 4(3), Limitation Act 2000).

for the counterfeiting activity and request that the police investigate for the purpose of commencing criminal prosecution. The police may thus conduct a raid and seize the counterfeit product. Infringing acts may be reported to the police to investigate as well.

5.2 Criminal Penalties

Any person accused of unauthorised use of a trademark in relation to goods and services has opportunity to a defence, including presenting his/her belief with reasonable ground(s) to prove that the use of the trademark is in such manner as not to constitute as infringement.

If found guilty of offences under the Trade Marks Act, penalties include the following.

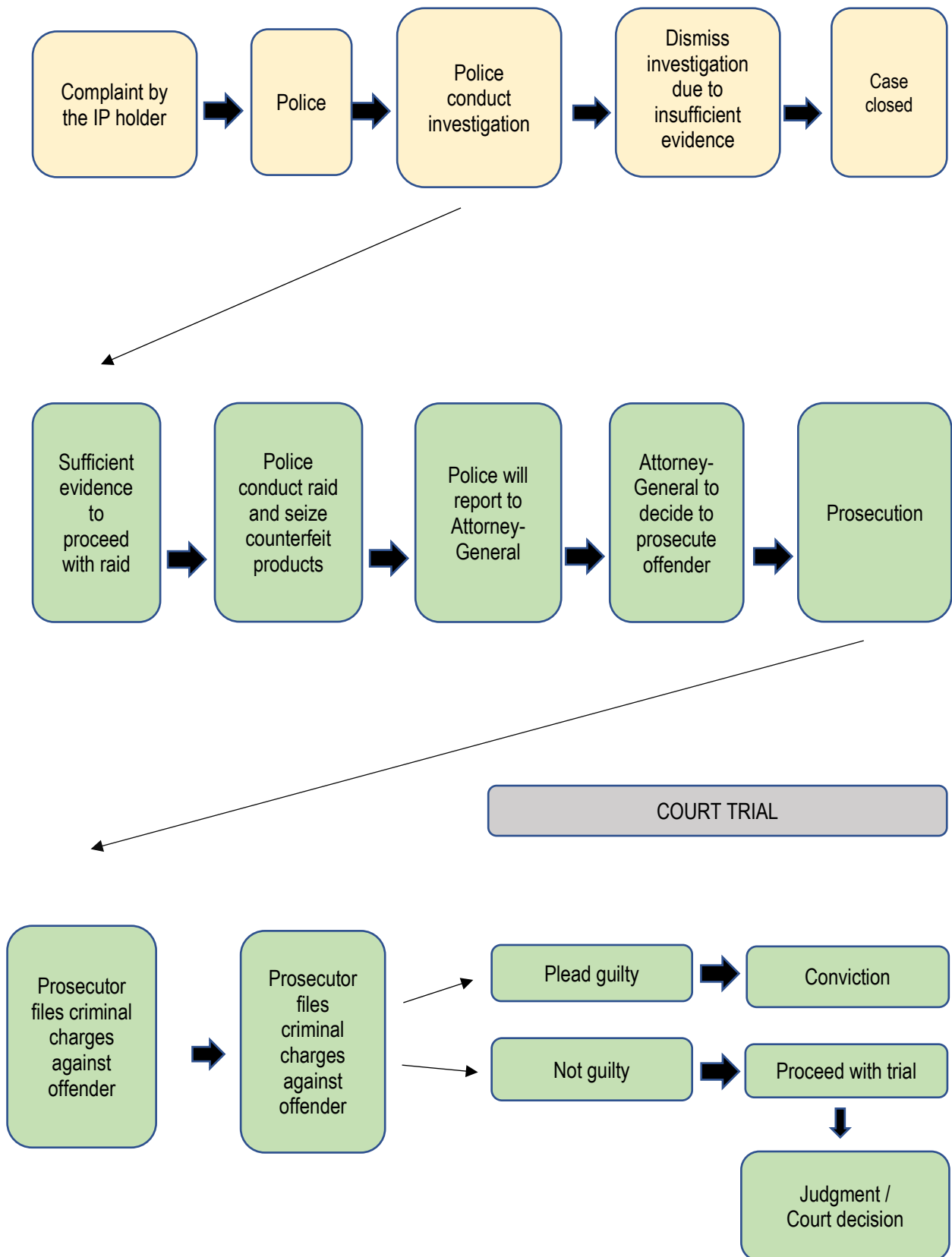
- (i) Any person found guilty of unauthorised use of a trademark in relation to goods and services is liable on conviction to imprisonment for 10 years, a fine, or both (Trade Marks Act, Section 94(6)).
- (ii) Any person found guilty of making, or causing to be made, a false entry into the Registry of Trade Marks is liable on conviction to imprisonment for 5 years, a fine of B\$50,000, or both (Trade Marks Act, Section 96(3)).
- (iii) Any person found guilty of counterfeiting a trademark is liable on conviction to imprisonment for 5 years, a fine of B\$100,000, or both (Trade Marks Act, Section 98(1)).
- (iv) Any person found guilty of making or possessing an instrument for counterfeiting trademarks is liable on conviction to imprisonment for 5 years, a fine of B\$100,000, or both (Trade Marks Act, Section 99).
- (v) Any person who imports, sells, exposes, or has in his/her possession for sale or for any purpose of trade or manufacture any good to which a counterfeit trademark has been applied or to which a registered trademark has been falsely applied is liable on conviction to imprisonment of 5 years for each good, a fine of B\$10,000, or both (Trade Marks Act, Section 100).
- (vi) Any person found guilty of falsely representing a trademark as registered is liable on conviction to imprisonment of 5 years, a fine of B\$10,000, or both (Trade Marks Act, Section 101).

The court may also make orders against an infringer or offender under the Trade Marks Act. It may order the erasure of the offending sign from the infringing goods; delivery of any infringing goods, materials, or articles that are in the possession, custody, or control of the infringer; and/or disposal of the infringing goods (Trade Marks Act, Section 104). Before making an order for disposal, the court will consider whether there are alternative remedies available to compensate the owner and to protect the infringer's interests.

Where the offender is a partnership, every partner is guilty of the offence and liable unless it is proven that the person was ignorant or attempted to prevent the commission of the offence (Trade Marks Act, Section 103(1)). When someone who is in a managerial capacity commits an offence, then both he/she and the body corporate are liable (Trade Marks Act, Section 103(2)).

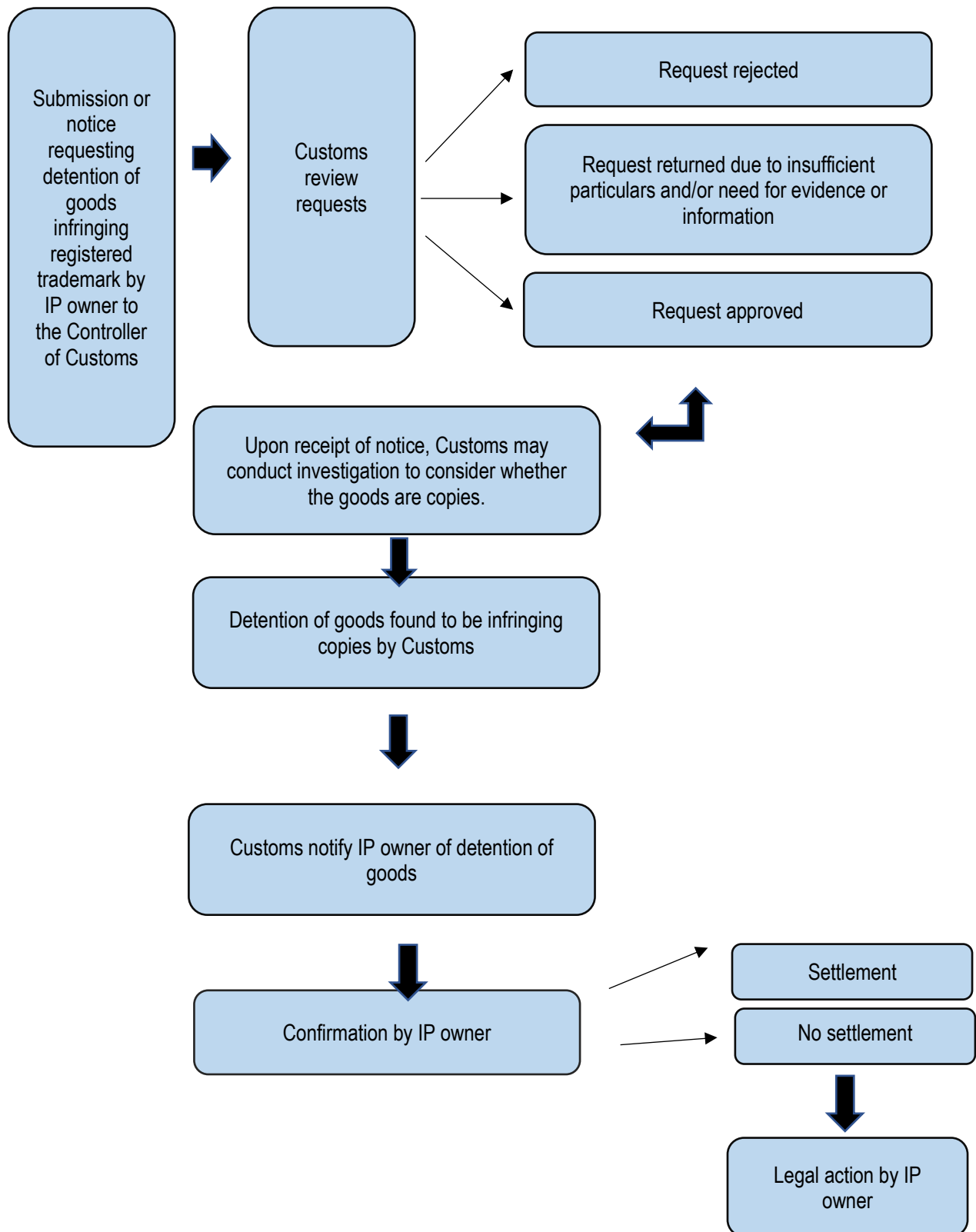
No governmental body or enforcement authority has yet been set up in Brunei to apply administrative measures against IP infringers.

Figure 2.1: Criminal Procedures for Trademark Infringement in Brunei



Source: Authors.

Figure 2.2: Customs Recording Process for Trademark Infringement



Source: Authors.

Chapter 3

Overview of Branding in Brunei Darussalam

1. Significance of Branding

1.1. Concept of Branding

The term 'brand' is believed to originate from terms such as '*brand*' in ancient Frisian languages, '*brant*' in Althochdeutsch, or '*brandr*' in an ancient Scandinavian language, all of which referred to a mark used to identify livestock owned by different people (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, 2002). Modern definitions of 'brand' vary. One report offers the following definition: 'A brand is an emblem such as a name, logo, mark, symbol, package design, etc. for an enterprise to identify or differentiate its products, etc. against its competitor's products' (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan; Author, 2002).

Branding aims to convey value, build a reputation, and foster customer loyalty, making it an essential tool for both business growth and consumer confidence. A brand enables businesses to communicate the values of their offerings to the consumer, while giving consumers confidence in quality and aiding in their purchasing decisions. Branding can extend to regions or countries, positioning them as attractive destinations for tourism, investment, or commerce.

1.2. Utilising Branding

With economic shifts such as globalisation and technological advancement, companies are now increasingly focussing on elevating brands as key business resources. This is because a strong brand is itself a valuable intangible resource that allows companies to influence consumer perception. It does this by allowing companies to charge premium prices; secure and/or maintain customer loyalty; optimise distribution; and create opportunities for expansion into new products, services, markets, or countries. As such, branding has become a crucial tool in clarifying corporate direction by strengthening company culture and promoting healthy competition, while protecting consumers by signalling product quality.

2.1. Benefits of Branding

The advantages of branding are both financial and strategic. For example, a well-established brand often allows a company to sell its products at a higher price and to maintain stable sales. Effective branding offers several crucial benefits, including:

- (i) **Differentiation.** In a market with a high volume of imported goods, local businesses can leverage branding to help domestic products stand out from the competition, which can attract both domestic and international consumers and, in turn, support national economic initiatives.
- (ii) **Customer loyalty.** A well-defined brand can create a powerful emotional bond with consumers, leading to repeat business and brand advocacy. For Brunei's small population and close-knit community, a strong brand is a powerful tool for cultivating a loyal following. For example, domestic SMEs and businesses frequently use social media platforms to engage with their audiences directly. This personal touch builds trust and brand loyalty, driving repeat businesses and making word-of-mouth recommendations a highly valued mark of approval within the Bruneian market.
- (iii) **Value creation.** A strong brand can allow a business to command a higher price point than generic products, thereby increasing profitability and business valuation. The Brunei-based sportswear company, Repathlete, for example, has stated that registering its trademark was a 'necessity' to protect its brand identity and to allow it to promote quality products to its customers (ARISE+, 2025; Alwines, 2017b).
- (iv) **Market expansion.** Branding is a prerequisite for expanding beyond Brunei's borders, as a reputable and legally protected brand is more likely to be taken seriously by international distributors and retailers. A local sauce brand, Mantap, is an example. After obtaining key international food safety and quality certifications that helped it develop into a strong brand, the company announced its plans to begin exports to ASEAN Member States (Alwines, 2025a, 2025b; *The Bruneian*, 2025).

2.2. Methods of Branding

Branding strategies vary depending on their objectives and context in which they are applied. Common approaches include:

- (i) **Product branding.** Product branding is the most basic and popular method of branding. It focusses on making individual products recognisable through logos, designs, and advertising, often with the aim of targeting and connecting with specific consumer groups.

- (ii) **Corporate branding.** Corporate branding focusses on promoting a company's core values, mission, and personality to create a distinctive identity in the market, as opposed to promoting a specific product or service. The goal is to build trust across all current and future products and to ensure that the public associates its name with a reliable promise. A notable example is Apple, whose strong brand identity drives global demand, with consumers lining up for new product releases simply because they carry the Apple name. Corporate branding can also enhance the employee experience, as seen with Google, which has built a brand around its creative and innovative workplace culture to attract top talent.
- (iii) **Personal branding.** Personal branding refers to the branding of an individual rather than a business or product. It typically draws on an individual's reputation to promote a product or service, often through social media or public presence. Celebrities, politicians, or other public or well-known figures may launch such personalised and/or customised products.
- (iv) **Geographical branding.** Geographical branding links products or services to specific regions, thereby emphasising origin and quality. One example is the concept of appellation in the wine industry.
- (v) **Online branding.** Online branding is one of the most accessible and effective methods of branding, referring to any branding activity that takes place online (i.e. the marketing of a product or service on digital platforms).
- (vi) **Offline branding.** Offline branding refers to any branding activity that is carried out through traditional media or physical channels, without the use of the internet. An example is retail branding, which focusses on creating positive in-store experiences through elements such as décor, lighting, music, and product displays; billboard advertising, which provides wide public visibility; and word-of-mouth marketing where satisfied customers personally recommend a brand to others. When combined with online branding, this branding approach helps ensure visibility and strengthens consumer engagement across multiple channels.
- (vii) **Co-branding.** Co-branding involves a collaboration between multiple brands to enhance perceived value or awareness and to reach wider audiences. For example, Nike and Apple partnered to create the Nike+iPod product line, integrating fitness tracking with Apple devices to appeal to both fitness enthusiasts and tech-savvy consumers.
- (viii) **Service branding.** Service branding adds value to services and is particularly common in hospitality or retail initiatives where the customer experience is central (e.g. hotels that offer complimentary welcome drinks at check-in or restaurants that provide playground facilities). The goal is to create a positive user experience that encourages customers to return.

- (ix) **Activist branding.** Activist branding incorporates social or environmental values into a brand's activities to appeal to ethnically or socially conscious consumers. For example, Patagonia, an outdoor clothing and gear store, promotes environmental sustainability through initiatives such as using recycled materials in its products and supporting conservation efforts.
- (x) **Ingredient branding.** Ingredient branding highlights the unique features or key components of a product to reinforce quality and differentiation. It works to create brand awareness for an ingredient to generate pull effects with the customer (Butnariu, 2017). For example, Intel's 1991 Intel Inside campaign emphasised the presence of Intel processors in computers, assuring consumers of the quality and technical superiority of Intel processors within devices built by other manufacturers. Other examples include Dolby (audio, visual, and voice technologies), Gore-Tex (a waterproof, breathable fabric membrane), Teflon (non-stick coating), and Tetra Pak (multilayered cartons).

3. Branding Awareness in Brunei Darussalam

3.1. Importance of Trademarks

Trademarks are crucial in Brunei for protecting brand identity and indicating the origin of a business's products and services, regardless of its size. A registered trademark grants exclusive rights and legal protection against infringement. This prevents others from marketing identical or similar products under the same or a confusingly similar mark. This protection is particularly important in Brunei's small market where competitors can easily replicate successful products or brand identities.

Additionally, trademarks are an asset for domestic businesses looking to export their products outside of Brunei, as they provide credibility and legal recourse in foreign markets.

3.2. Public Awareness of Trademarks

While there is general awareness of well-known global brands in Brunei, examination of the country's trademark application data suggests that public understanding of the importance of trademark registration and IP rights for local businesses remains limited.

Non-resident trademark applications in Brunei have historically outnumbered resident applications by a considerable margin (CEIC, 2021a). For example, in 2019, direct non-resident filings stood at 1,820 units compared to just 180 direct resident filings (CEIC, 2021b). This pattern continued into 2021, with only 177 resident applications reported (CEIC, 2021a). The marked difference between resident and non-resident filings suggests that a significant portion of IP rights activity in Brunei is driven by foreign companies

seeking to protect their brands in the local market. Conversely, the low number of resident applications points to still-developing domestic IP rights awareness. This could be due to several factors, including limited understanding of the commercial value of IP rights and a tendency amongst domestic businesses to focus on the domestic market where formal registration is viewed as less necessary. It could also point to business strategies that rely more on 'copying and deft, niche-focused marketing' rather than formal IP protection (MacDonald and Turpin, 2008).

This low level of local engagement with the formal IP system poses a key challenge to the government's efforts to foster an innovation-driven economy, particularly when IP rights are a fundamental mechanism for rewarding and commercialising innovative efforts.

3.3. Counterfeiting in Brunei Darussalam

3.3.1. Intellectual Property Rights Enforcement and Control of Counterfeit Goods

In cases of IP infringement, a trademark owner in Brunei can pursue enforcement of his/her IP rights through three main avenues: civil litigation, criminal prosecution, and customs seizures. In practice, however, judicial proceedings for IP matters are uncommon. As mentioned previously, due to the small Bruneian market, trademark owners in Brunei do not tend to pursue civil litigation for trademark infringement due to the costs involved, which may not be proportionate to the actual monetary harm suffered. Instead, private settlements facilitated by legal professionals are often more effective and considered a viable enforcement option. Usually, legal practitioners issue a cease-and-desist letter to the alleged infringer(s), followed by negotiations. If no resolution is achieved, civil proceedings may be pursued.

Despite having a robust legal framework, the practical enforcement of IP rights in Brunei faces several hurdles, including the time-consuming and expensive nature of civil litigation. Court hearings can extend up to 2 years; however, recent improvements mean that trial dates are now often scheduled within 12 to 15 months. Where an infringer responds to the initial cease-and-desist letter, the settlement process is typically concluded more quickly.

Criminal prosecution is generally the most cost-effective enforcement route, as prosecutions are undertaken by the Attorney-General, with the associated legal expenses being borne by the government. This route is most effective for large-scale commercial infringement or cases involving the distribution of dangerous goods. As previously mentioned, administrative enforcement mechanisms are currently unavailable in Brunei, as no governmental body or authority has been established to apply administrative measures against IP infringement. Consequently, there is no dedicated body to which IP infringement cases – such as the sale of counterfeit goods – can be directly reported.

While the government does not maintain a formal enforcement body or framework for such cases, it may offer assistance, particularly in situations where the sale or distribution

of infringing goods poses a risk to public health or safety. This includes instances involving counterfeit food products, cosmetics, or pharmaceuticals. In practice, however, remedies for IP infringement require affected individuals or businesses to take proactive steps to protect their IP rights through the available legal or procedural channels.

While specific statistics on counterfeit goods seizures and/or counterfeit goods being sold in Brunei are not readily available, data from neighbouring ASEAN Member States provide some insight. Counterfeit goods are widely available in the region, with 70% of respondents of one WIPO survey reporting that they had purchased at least one counterfeit item in the past 12 months (Clubbe, 2024). This suggests a prevailing consumer behaviour as well as a high level of visibility of counterfeit products across the region.

In 2022, a company in Brunei pleaded guilty to selling counterfeit HP printer toner, with court proceedings revealing that a total of 215 fake products had been displayed for sale on its premises (Faisal, 2022). A Government of the United States report also highlighted 'high piracy rates' in Brunei, with pirated optical discs and unlicensed software being openly sold in stores (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2009). The rise of online retail platforms has further encouraged the sale of counterfeit goods; amongst consumers who knowingly purchased them, 65% reported doing so through online platforms (Clubbe, 2024).

3.3.2. Recent and Proposed Reforms

The Government of Brunei is actively pursuing reforms to modernise its IP rights system. In March 2024, the WIPO Singapore Office led the first IP Management Clinic for SMEs Program in Brunei, with the aim of strengthening the IP strategies of domestic enterprises through mentoring and training (WIPO, 2024). In addition, the government recently introduced the Personal Data Protection Order, landmark legislation designed to give individuals greater control over the handling of their personal data by the private sector. Scheduled to come into full force in January 2026, the order will be implemented in phases with the aim of supporting secure and reliable cross-border data flow (Hj Abu Bakar, 2025a). These initiatives demonstrate recognition of the need to align Brunei's IP rights framework with the demands of a rapidly evolving technological landscape, particularly amidst ongoing digital transformation.

4. Potential Areas for Branding in Brunei Darussalam

As highlighted above, the number of resident trademark applications remains low, and the lack of publicly available statistical data on the most frequently registered Nice classifications¹⁴ in Brunei within the last 5 years further limits insight into local registration trends and potential opportunities for branding. However, an analysis of WIPO's 2023 statistical data showed that the top Nice classification in Brunei is in food and drink services (Class 43) with 18.8%, followed by advertising and business management (Class 35); education (Class 41); finance services (Class 36); and meat, fish, and poultry (Class 29) (WIPO, 2025). Regardless of the lack of more recent data, it is still possible to identify potential branding opportunities by examining key industries and national economic priorities in Brunei. The following section highlights sectors where Brunei's strategic initiatives and market trends suggest strong prospects for branding.

4.1. Branding Opportunities in Key Industries

Brunei is undergoing a significant economic transformation guided by its long-term vision, *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, which aims to shift its national identity from that of a country heavily reliant on its oil and gas resources to a dynamic, diversified, and sustainable economy (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2023). Brunei is strategically positioning itself across five priority sectors to drive its economic diversification and national branding efforts: downstream oil and gas, food production, tourism, ICT, and services (MFE, 2017).

- (i) **Downstream oil and gas.** The oil and gas sector remains the cornerstone of Brunei's economy, contributing to 45.8% of Brunei's total gross value added in the first quarter of 2025 (DEPS, 2025). Although the oil and gas industry is dominated by large, established state-owned enterprises like Brunei Shell Petroleum, a joint venture between Shell and the Government of Brunei, the sector does present some branding opportunities. Brunei can be transformed into a regional chemical hub by shifting from raw resource exports to value-added products.
- (ii) **Food production.** The agriculture sector is a small but growing area in Brunei. Over the past 8 years, the country has seen a 41% increase in domestic food production, with a strong focus on self-sufficiency in key commodities (Hj Abu Bakar, 2025b). Thus, there is potential for these sectors to serve as a strong foundation for a 'Made in Brunei' branding. Brunei's strategic branding in the food sector should be two-fold – ensuring domestic food security while positioning Brunei as a global *halal* food hub through the development of high-tech aquaculture and agriculture. Challenges do remain in areas like rice production, but the overall trajectory is positive. There are government-backed initiatives (e.g. streamlined regulations

¹⁴ Nice Classification, established by the Nice Agreement in 1957, is an international classification of goods and services applied for the registration of trademarks.

and increased budgets), and the country's poultry, beef, eggs, and tropical vegetables signal a fertile environment for agriculture branding.

- (iii) **Tourism.** Brunei is also branding itself as a destination for eco-tourism, wellness, and adventure by offering 'niche experiences' that showcase its pristine rainforests, diverse wildlife, and rich culture and biodiversity. Its use of the tagline 'Abode of Peace' encapsulates this brand and highlights unique attractions like Ulu Temburong National Park, which has a canopy walkway with stunning panoramic views of the jungle. The government is also committed to regenerative tourism, which aims to protect the environment and support local communities, a brand position that appeals to the growing number of conscious travellers seeking sustainable experiences (MFE, 2025). Furthermore, the nation is capitalising on its cultural heritage to create unique tourism brands that combine natural beauty and cultural authenticity; the Omar Ali Saifuddien Mosque and Royal Regalia Museum have been branded as must-visit destinations that provide a glimpse into the nation's history and royal legacy.
- (iv) **ICT.** Brunei is actively branding itself as a 'Smart Nation', a narrative driven by the *Digital Economy Masterplan 2025* (Digital Economy Council, 2025). This initiative aims to accelerate economic growth through digital transformation across all sectors, particularly the energy and services industries. Although the nation's small size is sometimes perceived as a branding challenge, its size is actually being framed as a key brand asset in the context of achieving advanced digital infrastructure across the country. It allows Brunei to be more agile in policymaking and more responsive to foreign investors – qualities that larger, more bureaucratic economies cannot easily replicate (MFE, 2025).
- (v) **Services.** The services sector seeks to establish Brunei as a logistics and services hub within ASEAN by expanding its aviation and maritime infrastructure. This can be seen in the ongoing expansion of Muara Port, which includes the construction of a new 350-metre container terminal and establishment of a direct shipping route to China. The government's commitment to expanding its port infrastructure is a tangible brand promise to facilitate the seamless movement of goods and to attract global trade as more businesses look to access the vast South-east Asian market.

Although the government is focussing on agriculture, forestry, livestock, fisheries, construction, and restaurants as promising drivers of economic growth, the economic promise of each sector has yet to be established (Zaini and Ismail, 2024). This is reflected in the decline in the non-oil and gas sector by 2.0% in the first quarter of 2025, with agriculture, forestry, and fisheries decreasing by 11.7% (DEPS, 2025). This highlights the need for stronger policy support, targeted investment, and greater innovation to help these industries realise their potential and contribute to Brunei's long-term economic

diversification goals. Therefore, the government is also marketing Brunei as an investment-friendly hub by premising this brand on key incentives such as:

- (i) **Tax advantages.** There is no personal income or capital gains tax, and Brunei has a low corporate taxation rate of 18.5%.
- (ii) **Foreign ownership.** In many sectors, 100% foreign ownership is allowed, providing investors with full control over their operations.
- (iii) **Trade access.** From Brunei, there is access to over 3 billion consumers through 10 foreign trade agreements, including the *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership*.
- (iv) **Streamlined processes.** The government is set to introduce a national digital identification card and a single sign-on platform for public services aimed at further streamlining business and licensing processes.
- (v) **Ready-to-use infrastructure.** The presence of more than 20 industrial trademarks and modern infrastructure, including an expansion of the port, makes Brunei an attractive destination for manufacturing and logistics (MFE, 2025).

4.2. Government Initiatives Regarding Trademark and Geographical Indication

Brunei does not currently have a dedicated or *sui generis* legal framework for the protection of geographical indication (Bru IPO, 2019). Instead, geographical indication is protected under the existing trademark system, primarily as a collective or certification mark. BruIPO, in collaboration with international partners, is actively exploring the development of a dedicated geographical indication system to provide more robust protection, particularly in terms of benefiting domestic products such as *madu kelulut* (wild honey) and *beras laila* (local rice), by enhancing their economic value and promoting rural development (Information Department Brunei Darussalam, 2009; BruIPO, 2021).

4.3. Established National Brands

Brunei's national brand narrative is most visibly expressed through its leading corporate entities that act as ambassadors on the regional and global stage. As a result, many of the country's most established and recognisable brands are concentrated in the services sector. These include:

- (i) **Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam (BIBD).** BIBD is the largest bank in the country, reinforcing the national brand's focus on sustainability and digital innovation through initiatives such as the Advocating Life-Long Learning for Aspiring Future

Program for underprivileged students (BIBD, 2025). It is also helping create a national payment gateway through BIBD QuickPay¹⁵ and BIBD NEXGEN Wallet.

- (ii) **Baiduri Bank.** As the largest conventional bank in Brunei and a recipient of many international accolades, Baiduri Bank provides a powerful endorsement of Brunei's stable and secure finance sector. The bank's recent strategic shift to a cloud-based core banking system signals its commitment to technological advancement and efficiency (Baiduri Bank, 2022).
- (iii) **Royal Brunei Airlines.** Perhaps the most direct ambassador for the Brunei brand is its national airline, Royal Brunei Airlines. Its decision to add new routes, such as to Chennai and Balikpapan, coupled with its collaboration with the Brunei Economic Development Board (BEDB), actively promotes Brunei's brand and links the airline's growth to the country's economic and tourism goals (RBA, 2024a; 2024b). Partnerships between Royal Brunei Airlines and Baiduri Bank through the Royal Skies loyalty programme,¹⁶ which allows customers to earn Royal Skies miles on their everyday spending, illustrate how established national brands can collaborate to strengthen Brunei's branding. This partnership not only promotes travel and tourism by making it easier for customers to earn and to redeem miles but also enhances trust and reliability in the country's business and finance sectors through a unified customer experience.

At the consumer level, Brunei also has established names in the retail and consumer sector. These include:

- (i) **Hua Ho.**¹⁷ Since its establishment in 1947, Hua Ho has become one of Brunei's oldest and largest local retail chains, with operations spanning across multiple outlets, supermarkets, and department stores in the country, as well as farms that supply its home-grown produce. Hua Ho is also a major retail channel for imported goods including food, household items, electronics, and clothing. It sources international brands for its stores, supplements local farm production when needed, and produces and sells in-house products under its BONUS brand.
- (ii) **Ben Foods.**¹⁸ Ben Foods, which is part of the QAF Group, is a long-established food distributor and retail operator in Brunei. It operates Supa Save supermarkets, a premier supermarket chain with the brand promise of 'Better Quality, Better Value' and is also a principal importer/distributor of many fast-moving consumer goods and international brands in Brunei, such as Kellogg's,

¹⁵ BIBD, BIBD QuickPay, <https://bibd.com.bn/personal-banking/digital-banking/bibd-quickpay/>

¹⁶ RBA, 'Royal Brunei Visa Credit and Debit Cards by Baiduri Bank', <https://www.flyroyalbrunei.com/brunei/en/royal-skies/royal-brunei-visa-credit-debit-cards-by-baiduri-bank/>

¹⁷ Hua Ho, <https://huaho.com/>

¹⁸ Ben Foods, <https://qaf-brunei.com.bn/ben-foods-b-sdn-bhd/>

Pringles, and Unilever (USDA, 2016). Ben Foods imports finished foods, frozen products, and groceries.

- (iii) **Brunei Halal.**¹⁹ Brunei Halal is a national *halal* branding scheme and product portfolio managed by Ghanim International Corporation and its associated entities. The initiative aims to market local *halal* foods both for domestic use and overseas export. Many products under the Brunei Halal umbrella are produced locally or are manufactured via local partnerships. Their product portfolio includes confections, snacks, ready-to-eat meals, and frozen poultry. Ghanim International also manages distribution channels and export marketing and acts as a gateway for Bruneian *halal* products to international markets.

4.4. Key Emerging Brands and Investments

The success of Brunei's branding strategy is supported by its ability to attract and to nurture significant emerging brands. Examples of emerging brands and investments in Brunei include the following.

- (i) **Hengyi Industries.** As a key foreign direct investor in Brunei's downstream petrochemical sector, Hengyi Industries has quickly become a central pillar of the Bruneian economy, with its oil refinery and petrochemical plant contributing 10% to the nation's annual gross domestic product. This contribution is expected to increase to 30% with the planned Phase 2 expansion that seeks to grow refining capacity and to diversify petrochemical products (BEDB, 2025; *Xinhua*, 2023). This project is a strategic collaboration between Hengyi Industries and the government (i.e. Petroleum Authority of Brunei Darussalam and BEDB) and is designed to align with *Wawasan Brunei 2035* by providing new opportunities for domestic enterprises and fostering long-term skills development (BEDB, 2024b).
- (ii) **Brunei Fertilizer Industries.** Brunei Fertilizer Industries is another emerging brand that directly supports Brunei's diversification narrative. The company produces high-quality fertiliser and is exploring various carbon-capture technologies, aligning with the nation's broader push towards sustainability and technology-driven branding. A notable aspect of its corporate brand is that more than half of its workforce is local, thereby demonstrating that the nation's investment in education is translating into tangible benefits for the country (*The Scoop*, 2020).
- (iii) **Exceltech Solutions.** Starting out in the oil and gas sector in 2012, Exceltech Solutions has now evolved into a comprehensive service provider that has diversified into renewable energy and digital solutions, directly mirroring the national strategic pivot (MFE, 2025). Similar to Brunei Fertilizer Industries, the

¹⁹ Brunei Halal, <https://brunei-halal.com/>

company's focus on upskilling local talent further reinforces the nation's vision to create a future-ready workforce.

- (iv) **Mantap.** Launched in early 2025 by Atoll Agro, Mantap is a line of locally made sauces and condiments (e.g. tomato ketchup, chilli sauce, soy sauce, *ssamjang*, mayonnaise, cheese dressing, and Thousand Island dressing) that is currently stocked in over 100 retail outlets nationwide. With a production capacity of two tonnes per day, the brand combines local manufacturing with regional sourcing for ingredients. It aims to supply to over 400 retail stores in Brunei while targeting export markets in ASEAN (Alwines, 2025b). Mantap is fully *halal*-certified and meets international food safety standards. The brand exemplifies Brunei's push for economic diversification by reducing reliance on imports, strengthening food security, and providing local employment. Mantap also contributes to the broader development of Brunei's consumer goods sector by offering facilities for food testing and certification that can support other SMEs.

4.5. Government Support for Startups and SMEs

The government's branding efforts extend to supporting entrepreneurship and innovation at the grassroots level. For example, initiatives like the Brunei Startup Summit, organised annually by BEDB, are designed to connect local entrepreneurs with regional investors including international startups, aspiring entrepreneurs, industry experts, investors, and relevant stakeholders (MFE, 2025; BEDB, 2024). Another notable example is the Crown Prince Creative, Innovative Product and Technological Advancement Award, a biennial competition in Brunei organised by the Universiti Teknologi Brunei in partnership with Brunei LNG. The award encourages innovation across the fields of science, technology, and engineering and is open to a wide range of participants, from schools to the public. Winners compete for another award that offers a cash prize of B\$8,000 and a trophy. The private sector has followed suit, with programmes such as DST's Innovate@Uni: Catalyst;²⁰ Shell's LiveWIRE by Shell;²¹ and a variety of workshops, bootcamps, and training programmes run by DARE, an initiative designed to help local Bruneians start and grow their businesses. This positions Brunei as a hub for innovation, while also demonstrating that its economic transformation will not solely be driven by large foreign investments but also by robust local growth.

²⁰ DST, DST Innovation@Uni: Catalyst, <https://dst.com.bn/innovateuni-catalyst/>

²¹ Shell LiveWire Brunei, <https://www.livewirebrunei.com/>

5. Digital Transformation and the E-commerce Ecosystem in Brunei Darussalam

5.1. Government-led Initiatives

Brunei's digital transformation is a national priority guided by the *Digital Economy Masterplan 2025*, which structured around four key pillars – smart government, smart society, smart business, and smart environment – aims to create a digital, future-ready society; a vibrant and sustainable economy; and a digitally conducive ecosystem (Digital Economy Council, 2025). It underscores trust and cybersecurity as both strategic enablers and key outcomes. Recognising that digital adoption is predicated on public confidence, the government has established various associated entities, such as Cyber Security Brunei, and launched a flagship project to develop a national cybersecurity framework. These measures reflect the core requirements of a successful digital economy – a robust infrastructure underpinned by public trust.

5.2. E-commerce Market Overview

As of January 2023, Brunei boasted an internet penetration rate of 98.1% and a social media usage rate of 94.5% of its population. E-commerce adoption in the country has been steadily increasing, with a penetration rate of 54.55% in 2021 (Anshari, 2025). One e-commerce survey showed that 76% of Bruneians use e-commerce for shopping, banking, and bill payments (AITI, 2018). Amongst online shoppers, 57% preferred dedicated shopping websites, while 24% opted for social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to buy goods and services, with the most common purchases being clothing, travel services, cosmetics, and healthcare items (AITI, 2018; International Trade Administration, 2024).

5.3. Key Challenges

Despite the population's high level of digital readiness, the e-commerce industry in Brunei has been described as in its infancy (International Trade Administration, 2024). This suggests that widespread internet and social media use do not automatically translate into a mature digital commerce market. A key challenge is that many domestic businesses, particularly SMEs, sell almost exclusively offline or through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok through in-app features such as messaging, short videos, and livestreams. This reliance on social commerce rather than dedicated e-commerce websites creates a fragmented market where there is no single, centralised platform for consumers to browse products from different sellers. Although AITI and DARE have partnered to launch Brunei's first local e-commerce directory, eKadaiBrunei, uptake has been limited. As of April 2020, the platform only listed 12 e-

commerce sites, 12 logistics companies, and 6 delivery services, suggesting that it has yet to gain meaningful traction amongst businesses and consumers (Alwines, 2020a).

The country's legal and regulatory environment is also a key factor limiting the growth of Brunei's e-commerce market. There is currently no specific e-commerce legislation in Brunei (Zico Law, 2021). Instead, electronic transactions are governed by the Electronic Transactions Act, which provides a framework for contracts, but most activities remain subject to common law principles (Zico Law, 2021). In the absence of specific e-commerce legislation in Brunei, trademark owners who discover infringements of their IP rights or the sale of counterfeit goods on online platforms may seek relief under Sections 98 to 100 of the Trade Marks Act. However, this relief is only available to trademarks registered in Brunei; moreover, trademark owners must be able to prove that the counterfeit activities are being carried out online and in Brunei. The resulting regulatory ambiguity for trademark owners not in Brunei creates uncertainty for both businesses and investors and may undermine trust in the digital marketplace.

Another challenge is the difficulty of converting online engagement, such as 'likes' and 'follows', into sustained business transactions (Digital Sage, 2025). The low and declining average transaction value per user indicates that the market is dominated by small, occasional purchases rather than serving as a primary channel for major spending (Haini and Hashim, 2025). This could point to underlying constraints, including limited trust in online payment systems, a narrow range of available products, and continued consumer preference for in-person shopping, all of which prevent the Bruneian digital market from reaching its full potential.

5.4. FinTech and Telemedicine

Brunei's FinTech ecosystem is being developed through a multi-faceted approach involving government support, targeted regulations, and collaborative initiatives (BDCB, 2020). Autoriti Monetari Brunei Darussalam (BDCB) has targeted the finance services sector – with FinTech identified as a key driver – as a priority cluster expected to contribute to up to 8% of national gross domestic product by 2035 (BDCB, 2020). To that end, the government has taken a proactive role by offering tax incentives (e.g. income tax exemptions for certain companies), grants, and support schemes to foster growth amongst rising FinTech firms.

In 2017, BDCB launched its dedicated FinTech Office and FinTech Regulatory Sandbox to enable the testing new FinTech a controlled environment, with a focus on improving the accessibility, efficiency, and security of finance services (Khut and Chea, 2022). One notable participant in this initiative was Jana Kapital, Brunei's pioneering Islamic peer-to-peer crowdfunding platform, which aims to provide alternative financing for micro and SMEs (BDCB, 2024; Wasil, 2022). After an extensive testing phase, the company concluded its participation in October 2024, marking a significant milestone in its journey towards

becoming a fully operational and regulated entity.²² Other examples of FinTech offerings include Beep Digital Solutions, DSTPay, and Takaful Brunei Mobile – all of which work in the areas of digital payments, insurance, and remittance (Haini and Hashim, 2025).

BDCB has also rolled out specific regulations for peer-to-peer lending and equity-based crowdfunding to widen finance options for startups and SMEs. BDCB has taken part in cross-border collaborations with regional regulators, as seen from its FinTech Co-operation Agreement with the Monetary Authority of Singapore to facilitate information sharing and joint innovation projects, connecting Brunei to a more mature FinTech hub (BDCB, 2020).

Islamic finance has also become a key pillar, now accounting for more than half of the total finance activity in Brunei (Santosdiaz, 2024). Major Sharia-compliant institutions – BIBD, BIBD At-Tamwil, and Takaful Brunei – play significant roles in providing banking, financing, and insurance services in Brunei. Indeed, the prominence of Islamic finance reflects both the nation's regulatory framework and the growing importance of – as well as the demand for – Sharia-compliant finance products in Brunei's economy. This is in addition to the rise of digital payments, which has allowed the introduction of new features into the finance landscape, such as MoneyMatch Brunei. BIBD has further expanded digital banking through its Olive Pro mobile banking app, which integrates features such as digital signatures, e-contracts, and e-KYC functionality. These efforts illustrate Brunei's effort to create an environment conducive to innovation while aligning FinTech development with its broader diversification agenda.

Yet the FinTech sector does still face challenges related to capital and talent. The availability of early-stage funding is limited, with most funding coming from angel investors and local institutions, and there is a need for a more robust venture capital ecosystem to support the scaling up of FinTech startups (BDCB, 2020). The shortage of local FinTech-specific talent is also a key constraint that requires building the necessary skills through education and training programmes (BDCB, 2020). Similarly, the limited participation observed in Brunei's regulatory sandboxes also suggest that the pool of local innovators with viable products may be small.

In terms of the current healthcare solutions adopted in Brunei, one example is Brunei's national mobile health app, BruHealth. Initially launched in May 2020 as a COVID-19 contact-tracing tool, BruHealth has evolved into a comprehensive health management platform. The app now offers features such as appointment scheduling, access to health records, and online consultations (*The Scoop*, 2022; MFE, 2017; Koh et al., 2022). While the app provides essential services, its effectiveness is contingent upon public trust in digital platforms and availability of reliable internet infrastructure. These factors mirror the challenges faced in the FinTech sector, where user engagement and system reliability are critical for success. While BruHealth serves as a pivotal component in Brunei's growing

²² A food vendor, Station Ayam Gunting, successfully raised funds through Jana Kapital to acquire a modified shipping container to be used as its main operations centre (BDCB, 2024; Wasil, 2022).

digital health strategy, its development underscores the broader need for proper technological infrastructure to fully support the nation's digital transformation goals.

5.5. E-payment Systems

The banking sector in Brunei has adopted a variety of FinTech solutions to enhance operational efficiency and customer satisfaction, including BIBD QuickPay for users to make fast cashless payments via QR codes; Baiduri Qpay, which is integrated into the b.Digital Personal mobile app for smooth QR code-based use; and TAIB Scan To Pay (Haini and Hashim, 2025). Telco-branded digital wallets have also been noteworthy in Brunei's FinTech landscape. Progresif's Ding! offers a digital wallet for cashless transactions without a bank account, increasing accessibility. Moreover, MyDST, Brunei's first SuperApp, is now providing various functions such as fund transfers, bill payments, and online shopping.

Brunei also has independent FinTech operators. Beep Digital Solutions – a local startup – specialises in innovative payment solutions; merchants can customise their own branding when facing their customers and may receive payments from customers remotely by sharing a secured payment link with them.²³ It works on several platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. In 2019, Beep was awarded an acquiring licence to integrate Alipay into its merchant aggregator payment gateway (Alwines, 2019). This brings it one step closer to becoming an all-in-one platform for various cashless payments from traditional credit and debit cards to online payment systems. Another example is Pocket, a mobile app aimed at simplifying money management for users by allowing instant payments via QR codes (Haini and Hashim, 2025).

In alignment with *Wawasan Brunei 2035*, *Digital Economy Masterplan 2025*, BDCB's *Digital Payment Roadmap for 2019–2025*, and *Brunei Darussalam Financial Sector Blueprint 2016–2025*, the National Digital Payments Network has introduced *tarus*, Brunei's first instant payment system approved by BDCB. *tarus* allows its users to send money instantly to each other using mobile phone numbers instead of bank account numbers, again broadening the audience. It is currently in Phase 2 of implementation and hopes to create partnerships with regional payment providers for seamless cross-border transactions using existing banking apps and e-wallets.²⁴

However, despite the advancement of e-payment systems in Brunei, concerns remain. For instance, few merchants accept FinTech solutions, security concerns prevail, internet connectivity is inconsistent, and there is a reluctance to abandon cash transactions. Although the country has a high level of internet penetration, digital literacy remains low. Brunei's relatively small population limits the scale of finance products and services, and

²³Beep Digital Solutions, 'beep plus',

<https://app.imagine.com.bn/media/pdf/equote/coverletter/Makkauihijau.pdf>

²⁴ Tarus, <https://www.tarus.com.bn/>

only around two-thirds of the population hold bank accounts (Haini and Hashim, 2025). There also seems to be limited international exposure in Brunei's FinTech landscape. For instance, MoneyMatch, a FinTech organisation from Malaysia, is the only international payment system operating in Brunei. BruPay, a domestic FinTech company, ceased operations in 2021, underscoring the challenges in sustaining adoption of e-payment in Brunei.

Overall, while Brunei has a growing range of e-payment platforms, adoption of FinTech innovations remain segmented. For e-payments to become mainstream, the country must strengthen finance literacy, merchant integration, and regulatory frameworks, while addressing gaps in banking and digital payments.

5.6. Handicrafts

Traditional handicrafts in Brunei, such as rattan weaving and basket making, are an important part of the nation's cultural heritage. In recent years, alongside the proliferation of technology and social media usage, such artisans have started using digital platforms to showcase and sell their work. Social media channels are acting as virtual storefronts to help artisans reach customers beyond their local communities while also highlighting the cultural value of their products.

The launch of the *Digital Economy Masterplan 2025* is one of the ways that the government has been supporting the shift into the digital realm by helping improve digital literacy and provide SMEs – including traditional crafts businesses – with the skills and tools to successfully navigate and to leverage online platforms. BEDB and DARE also provide platforms for artisans to connect with potential buyers and to showcase their products. Some examples of Bruneian artisans who have adapted well to digital tools and platforms include the following.

- (i) **Kraf Kitani**. Started in July 2020 by young entrepreneur Aminah Ramlee, this business makes custom crafts such as jewellery, coasters, keychains, and home décor items (e.g. earrings inspired by the *simpur* flower). Most of the products are marketed on Instagram, which enables Ramlee to directly communicate with customers, receive custom orders, and connect with others in the same field (Diah, 2002b).
- (ii) **handmadewithlove**. The crochet-based business is run by Hana Salleh and began as a hobby around 2017. She makes a variety of products with her own pattern designs, including crocheted coasters, dolls, and clothing. The branding of the business is mostly online; Salleh also uses social media to take custom orders and to arrange for delivery services (Diah, 2022a).

- (iii) **Teatimecrafts.** Started over 10 years ago by Cheng Hui Hsin, Teatimecrafts makes and sells miniature clay crafts, embroidery, stitch-craft, as well as a variety of products such as keychains, accessories, clay dishes, and figurines. The business also offers beginner workshops and supplies clay to others. Teatimecrafts currently only conducts sales through its Instagram and Facebook profiles, which also serve as a gallery showcasing all past products (Diah, 2022c).
- (iv) **Bruneian Made Finest.** The newly rebranded 'Bruneian Made Finest' initiative (formerly known as 'Unexpected Treasures'), is a government-backed initiative that offers artisans and micro and SMEs a platform to sell premium, locally made products through an online store and on display shelves in malls, airports, supermarkets, and other strategic locations. Since its launch in 2017, the initiative has helped 28 micro and SMEs retail 132 products (Alwines, 2022b).

While the most visible examples of digital transformation in Brunei's crafts sector tend to feature contemporary – rather than traditional – handicrafts, they are nonetheless significant for understanding how all crafts in Brunei may adapt and evolve. Both Bruneian consumers and artisans are increasingly turning to online platforms for marketing and sales. In this sense, the shift of Bruneian crafts into the digital space is not only an economic adaptation but also a form of branding, as it allows artisans to transform cultural heritage, symbols, and elements into marketable identities that can reach wider audiences.

6. Case Studies

This section explores how Bruneian businesses of different sizes market themselves in various sectors. It discusses how local businesses have built their brand identities through their products and services while maintaining customers in the changing market.

Nationally recognised domestic businesses were selected, and the case studies are arranged according to industry. Data collection was conducted through in-person and/or telephone interviews supported by responses from questionnaires to obtain personal insights into branding practices. Additional information was gathered through further online research.

6.1. Finance and Corporate Services

6.1.1 *Baiduri Bank*

'*Baiduri*' originates from the Malay word for opal, emphasising Baiduri Bank's similarity to a jewel – solid, precious, and reliable. Established in 1994, Baiduri Bank is a member of Baiduri Bank Group, one of the largest providers of finance products and services in

Brunei. Driven 3 decades ago by a vision to transform Brunei's banking experience, today, Baiduri has grown into a leading finance institution.²⁵

Baiduri Bank prides itself on being more than a bank; it strives to be a trusted partner throughout life's finance journey. Its vision is 'to be the leading and preferred financial partner; empowering individuals and businesses to achieve financial success in a changing world', and its mission is to enrich, empower, and engage the communities that it serves in a responsible and sustainable manner.²⁶

In 2020, Baiduri Bank unveiled a rebrand after it worked closely with an international team of brand consultants from Kuala Lumpur to create an identity that best reflects the bank's standing and outward-looking philosophy (Baiduri Bank, 2020). Speaking about the Baiduri Bank brand, Ti Eng Hui, chief executive officer (CEO), noted, 'We believe that a brand is more than just a logo, a product, or a tagline. Our brand is at the heart of everything that we do' (Baiduri Bank, 2020). Fuelled by Baiduri's desire to co-create futures with its stakeholders, the bank's refreshed logo comprises two solid strokes coming together in a symbol of partnership. It is a redesign of the Jawi letter 'ba' (باء), showcasing a deep connection to Bruneian customers (Baiduri Bank, 2020). It did not stray too far from the original design, showing customers that while it is looking to the future, it still has its roots in Brunei.

Figure 3.1: Baiduri Bank's Logos



Source: Baiduri Bank.

Along with the refreshed logo, Baiduri Bank introduced its brand promise, 'Co-creating your future'. At the heart of this promise is a greater focus on customers. These changes define the bank's renewed purpose and direction for its future engagements with all its stakeholders.

In its business operations, Baiduri Bank employs several branding methods, including corporate branding, online and offline branding, service branding, and activist branding. Its corporate branding comprises its strong vision, mission statement, and core values.

²⁵ N.Y. Wick (2025), interview with Baiduri Bank's head, Group Strategic Marketing and Communications, 13 June.

²⁶ Baiduri Bank, <https://www.baiduri.com.bn/about-us>

The bank also integrates both online and offline branding, emphasising the company's values of trustworthiness, inclusivity, empathy, and enterprise. This instils a sense of reliability in the brand, encouraging people to use its services.

Baiduri Bank has also adopted activist branding. It fosters corporate social responsibility (CSR) through sponsoring key events in the community such as Baiduri Care, which offers professional caregiving services in partnership with the Brunei Darussalam Red Crescent Society. This is further reflected in its service branding, which is embodied in its core values, known as 'TIME':²⁷

- (i) **(T)rust.** Baiduri Bank values the trust placed in it by its customers, partners, and colleagues, standing full heartedly on the promises that it makes.
- (ii) **(I)nclusion.** Baiduri Bank works as a team. It embraces diversity and works towards the greater good of the organisation and society.
- (iii) **(M)pathy.** Baiduri Bank prioritises its customers' interests and seeks to understand their needs better through active listening.
- (iv) **(E)nterprise.** Baiduri Bank is always seeking better ways to add value and to adapt to the market.

As part of its service branding, Baiduri Bank works to retain its customers through excellent service and a transparent approach built on authenticity, sincerity, and dedicated support. It offers consumer choice, has global partners, and is open to co-branding with both local companies and international partnerships.

Baiduri's rebranding has been a success, as shown in brand surveys that measured the public's perception of the bank. Where Baiduri Bank was once seen as more corporate and formal, it is now regarded as approachable and family-oriented. Additional indicators of the brand's success include customer satisfaction levels, achievement of finance performance/net profit goals, and recognition through corporate awards.

Baiduri Bank is Brunei's second-largest bank and has won a multitude of awards over the years, including being named Best Managed Bank in Brunei at The Asian Banker Global Leadership Achievement Awards 2025. The bank's CEO was also named Best Bank CEO in Brunei. In 2024, Baiduri Bank received the prestigious Bank of the Year 2024 award by *The Banker*, a globally renowned publication, marking the 16th time the bank has received this honour.²⁸ Baiduri is also the first Bruneian bank to open an overseas branch in Singapore, following the expansion of its services nationwide (Baiduri Bank, 2025a).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

6.1.2 Progresif

Progresif was formed in 2014 with the aim of bringing a fresh, progressive energy to Brunei's telecommunications industry. At a time when the market was dominated by established market players, Progresif saw an opportunity to stand out, not just by providing reliable connectivity but also by building a brand to which people could truly connect. In 2020, the telecommunications industry in Brunei underwent a major transformation with the establishment of Unified National Networks, which turned Telcos into Salesco. Now known as Progresif, it has over 150 staff members.²⁹

From the beginning, Progresif's focus has been on innovation, accessibility, and customer-centricity. It has mobile, broadband, and digital lifestyle services designed for real-life needs – from everyday connectivity and smart devices to enterprise solutions and secure digital payments.

Through its CSR pillars, the company has positioned itself not merely as a telecom provider but as a brand with a purpose. For example, Progresif hosted a blood donation drive in collaboration with the Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Saleha Hospital Blood Donation Centre as well as an *iftar* during the month of Ramadhan for children from YASKA Brunei and orphans from Laksamana College of Business (Progresif, 2024a; 2024b). With the belief that technology alone is not enough, Progresif wants to invest in communities to foster emotional bonds that help shift consumer perception and drive brand loyalty in a competitive market.

Indeed, Progresif has always incorporated CSR into its brand – not just as an initiative but as a core part of its brand strategy. With larger competitors owning most of the market share, it differentiated itself through values of trust, relevance, and community connection. Today, Progresif is proud to be both a provider of essential digital services and a platform for progress – helping individuals, businesses, and communities move forward with confidence, clarity, and care.

The company employs several other branding methods, including product branding, corporate branding, online and offline branding, and activities branding. Progresif first applied product branding when it launched its modern flagship stores designed as open, inviting spaces that reflected its fresh identity. These became key touchpoints for customer engagement, product discovery, and brand experience. They simplify the customer journey, deliver personalised service and transparent products, and feature consistent support – ensuring every interaction shows Progresif's commitment to putting customers first.

As its core identity revolves around being innovative, bold, and community-focussed, it wants to go beyond telecom services by enabling digital lifestyles; supporting local creativity; and championing progressive values such as sustainability, inclusivity, and empowerment. This is demonstrated by Progresif's strong mix of online and offline

²⁹ S. Othman (2025), questionnaire answered by vice-president, Progresif Marketing, 2 July.

branding, such as partnerships, digital campaigns, influencer/ambassador programmes, and its customer care app, Progresif CARE+. Its product branding is showcased by its logo, which is comprised of three primary colours that embody its progressive spirit: healing teal, creative magenta, and elegant black.

Figure 3.2: Progresif's Logos



Source: Progresif.

Progresif's branding has proven effective in expanding its business segment with tailored solutions, positioning itself as a trusted and reliable digital partner for SMEs and corporations seeking flexible, innovative services. Progresif's brand success is measured through a mix of metrics such as Progresif's market share and subscriber growth, customer retention and churn metrics, engagement rates across digital and social platforms, Customer Net Promoter Score, and customer surveys, all of which have been on the rise.

Moving forward, Progresif plans to evolve from a telecom company into a digital lifestyle and FinTech enabler by developing a multi-service SuperApp integrating e-wallet, rewards, lifestyle content, and connectivity. Given Progresif's position as a recognised leader in the telecom and creative industries, CSR, as well as its ability to maintain simplicity in brand communications and overall approach, there have been instances where certain elements of the brand have been imitated. However, Progresif views this as less of a problem and more of a compliment, as it is a sign that its approach is inspiring others.

6.1.3 D'Sunlit

D'Sunlit's journey started in 1983 when it acquired Benley Advertising Company. It then established itself as Sunlit Advertising in 1985 and focussed on signage production. The name 'Sunlit' was chosen to symbolise a new beginning.³⁰

Figure 3.3: D'Sunlit's Logo



Source: D'Sunlit.

Today, D'Sunlit provides a wide spectrum of services, including advertising, event management, marketing campaigns, creative design and branding, printing, production, interior design, and construction. It also conceptualises and manages flagship in-house events, most notably the Brunei Consumer Fair and Trade Expo that takes place bi-annually. Other notable projects also include lifestyle expos and themed showcases, which have become staples of the local events calendar.

D'Sunlit prides itself on being client-focussed and adaptable, often going the extra mile to meet even the most urgent or last-minute requests. This dedication to meeting clients' needs – regardless of the challenge – has earned the brand a reputation for being reliable and trustworthy. Backed by a strong track record of consistent delivery and long-standing client relationships, D'Sunlit stands out for its ability to create exceptional experiences through a blend of creativity, dedication, and teamwork.

D'Sunlit has adopted several branding methods, including product and service branding, corporate branding, and offline branding. The company adopted corporate branding by rebranding its name. As the company evolved and diversified beyond advertising, the brand embraced a broader identity and thus rebranded during its 30th anniversary. The removal of the term 'Advertising' signified the expansion of its service branding and its transformation into a multifaceted company that offers advertising-related services as well as many others.

D'Sunlit caters to a broad range of clients by taking the time to understand the goals of each and tailoring solutions accordingly. This approach is supported by the brand's dedicated internal team, driven and led by the respective heads of department who embody D'Sunlit's core values and level of commitment. United by a shared vision, every

³⁰ T.C. San (2025), questionnaire answered by head, Corporate Communications, D'Sunlit, 19 July.

team member works collaboratively to ensure that the brand's message and promises are delivered with consistency and integrity.

Rather than relying solely on aggressive promotional strategies, the brand believes in the power of building trust amongst its clients through proven outcomes. The long-standing relationship that the brand has cultivated amongst its clients is a testament to the brand's strength and has helped establish its strong presence on a domestic and international level.

Key indicators of the brand's success include steady growth in clientele, positive customer feedback, and a high rate of repeat business. D'Sunlit's future direction is committed to upholding its high standards while continuing to enhance its current products and services. The brand also aims to expand its presence and establish D'Sunlit as a trusted and well-known name throughout South-east Asia.

6.1.4 Aewon

Aewon Garment was established in 2001 but was brought under Aewon management in 2006. It initially had a background in wholesale before transitioning into the garment business. The brand originated from a mission to provide quality, customised clothing solutions for both corporate and non-corporate sectors. It was founded to address the local market's need for consistent, professional uniform services and has since evolved into a reputable name in the industry. Today, Aewon offers manufacturing services for corporate uniforms, custom polos, sportswear, food and beverage services apparel, and school uniforms. Aewon has its own high-technology manufacturing operations in Brunei. It has its own fabric inventory, allowing Aewon to accommodate a variety of customer requests. It also uses experienced, talented, and skilled tailors.

It has diversified its clients and now caters to all ages and demographics, including governmental officers and workers, businesses, schools, and startups. Aewon upholds its mission and vision by being open to local opportunities and working with local creators. It is willing to invest in initiatives that benefit the community as well.³¹

Figure 3.4: Aewon's Logo



Source: Aewon Brunei.

³¹ J. Lau (2025), interview with operations manager, Aewon, 7 July; and Lau, J. (2025), questionnaire answered by operations manager, Aewon, 7 July.

Aewon's brand identity is centred around its commitment to customisation, reliability, professionalism, and local pride. Its core identity is focussed on its products, quality, and service excellence. It aims to instil confidence in customers as a cost-effective and reliable brand.

Aewon markets itself through online and offline branding. While its digital marketing is still in progress, it actively uses social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, as well as its website, to promote its goods and services. However, Aewon places more emphasis on its offline branding, such as word of mouth, to build awareness. Aewon also utilises service branding by prioritising good experiences when providing in-person services, such as client consultations, and enabling direct communication with key account representatives to engage with customers. Aewon's product branding includes offering made-to-measure services, innovative garment production, premium materials, competitive prices, and excellent customer service.

Through its corporate branding, Aewon highlights its mission to deliver quality garments, adhere to strict timelines, and ensure customer satisfaction. The company regularly reviews and evaluates key performance indicators, which ensure accountability.

Aewon is organised into different departments – Aewon Garment & Embroidery, Aewon PPE, and Aewon Axotiq Creations (i.e. branding and premium items). These departments were initially under one Aewon umbrella, but the separation is intended to gain consumers' trust and confidence. It signals that Aewon can create more than one type of garment. Aewon's Bruneian roots are also a core part of its identity, as seen in its growing range of souvenir retail offerings that connect the brand to the country and its people.

Although Aewon does not actively seek out collaborations, it does not reject any invitations. Notably, it has partnered with local creators and become sponsors for events hosted by the local universities and schools, as it believes that collaborations and sponsorships foster customer relations and build connections within the business industry.

Aewon retains customer loyalty through flexible pricing. It has also explored new materials to cater to customers' expectations and demands. Its pricing is considered on par or lower than others, given the level of its operations. By taking into account the market price and buying materials in bulk, Aewon can price its products and services competitively.

Aewon measures its brand success through several key indicators, including client retention and repeat orders, sales growth and revenue performance, customer feedback and satisfaction, brand recognition, and an expanding list of corporate clients. All these factors indicate the growth of the brand. It aims to attract more business in the future by expanding its premium product lines, strengthening its digital presence and e-commerce capabilities, and providing personalised consultations alongside efficient production timelines. Its future direction includes expanding to other premium-level goods and services, such as by starting its own clothing line of daily essentials.

As of 2025, Aewon is not aware of any competitors in the field attempting to replicate its designs. However, the previous owner's sister owns a store, Aewon, in Miri, Malaysia. Despite sharing the same name, the logos of Aewon (Malaysia) and Aewon (Brunei) are very different. The owner of Aewon in Brunei does not have any intention of changing the name.

6.2. Retail and Lifestyle

6.2.1 *Nimanja*

Nimanja, established in 2016, continues the founder's family legacy of owning the first dedicated pet retail store in Brunei. Nimanja also has an online store.³²

The goal of establishing Nimanja was to saturate the Bruneian pet product market by providing a wide range of imported premium and economy pet products such as accessories, cages, and food options. Later, Nimanja expanded its services to include grooming and boarding.

Currently, Nimanja operates 10 branches across Brunei. In addition, it has five branches in East Malaysia. Nimanja has further plans to open a new branch in Kuching in 2025 and to expand regionally in the future.³³

Figure 3.5: Nimanja's Logos



Source: Nimanja.

Nimanja's goal was to become a household name in the pet industry, so that hearing the name would instantly bring 'pet shop' to mind. The origin of the name, 'Nimanja', is inspired by '*manja*', a colloquial Malay term meaning 'affectionate', which is generally used to refer to cats. To keep the brand simple and memorable, Nimanja engaged a local team to design a minimalistic logo featuring a cartoon cat. This logo is still being used.

Nimanja utilises online branding in the form of social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, to advertise and to keep customers updated on new product arrivals and

³² Nimanja, <https://nimanja.com/>

³³ A. Lim (2025), interview with founder of Nimanja, 5 June.

shipments. Nimanja remains open to the idea of collaborating with others in the future. To stay relevant, Nimanja monitors market trends to identify and to select what brands and products to bring in. This allows it to stay ahead of competitors and to meet customer needs.

In addition to online efforts, Nimanja uses corporate branding by promising an 'Ever better life for all pets', which is reflected in its lifestyle-focussed store designs. In 2017, it also began to roll out a private label, starting with Brunei's first brand of cat litter (Alwines, 2017a).

Customer service is a priority for Nimanja, which allows it to build and to retain loyal customers. It encourages feedback and works closely with its veterinarians, veterinary assistants, and team members on ways to implement customer input into store operations. It also runs a loyalty programme whereby customers can earn and collect points for every dollar spent across all Nimanja stores, encouraging customers to keep re-purchasing. Additionally, lucky draws and promotions are run periodically throughout the year with the aim of attracting new customers while retaining existing ones.

Nimanja's branding initiatives have been highly successful in Brunei, as Nimanja has now become a household name, monopolising most of the domestic pet product market. Nimanja's numerous branches throughout Brunei have made its stores and services very accessible. Moreover, its extensive shop experience sets it apart from competitors in Brunei and Malaysia, such as Biocare and Pet's Arena.

The brand promise of an 'Ever better life for all pets' and a 'clean cat' through its cat litter has driven strong sales and outperformed foreign brands in Brunei. This success has, in turn, led to Nimanja expanding its cat litter range to include more scents to cater to consumer preferences.

While it has no system to measure brand success, customer awareness of Nimanja is a key indicator, particularly in cities or countries where Nimanja has not yet been launched. The success of these branding strategies has transformed Nimanja from a local business into an international player, with Nimanja opening branches in Malaysia. The brand is also exploring expanded services such as pet funeral services and insurance in its Malaysian branches.

In Brunei, Nimanja intends to focus on improving existing branches and expanding grooming and boarding services, which are not yet available at every store location. Plans also include building direct relationships with product manufacturers to eliminate intermediaries and to deliver competitively priced premium products across the entire market.

As of 2025, while some companies have adopted similar names, Nimanja has not encountered any that have copied its products and services.

6.2.2 Melvida

Melvida, established in December 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed to address the gap in the market created by pandemic circumstances.³⁴ Today, Melvida stores offer a variety of products – ranging from supplements and personal care items to skincare and cosmetics. As of 2025, Melvida operates seven branches nationwide.

The name 'Melvida' is derived from the combination of the Latin word '*melior*' (meaning 'better') and the Spanish word '*vida*' (meaning 'life'), thereby symbolising the goal of a better life. This vision is reflected in the products that it carries, which pertain to healthcare and beauty. Its brand identity is built on providing quality services and products and fostering customer trust. As such, Melvida's target audience is females ages 20 to 45 years old.

Figure 3.6: Melvida's Logo



Source: [Melvida](#).

Melvida utilises online branding through multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, to interact with its customers and to introduce products and services. It also brands itself through its customer service and quality of its product range. Staff members at Melvida are encouraged to proactively approach customers, recommend cost-effective options, and avoid limiting their suggestions to only trending products.

To ensure business continuity, Melvida incorporates corporate branding by continually working to improve staff knowledge; customer service; and balance amongst cost-effective, popular, and niche brands. Melvida achieves this by conducting research into the products on the market to understand demand. Examples include a combination of in-person surveys, overseas retail visits, online research, and monitoring discussions on online threads and forums. This process allows Melvida to identify the products that meet customer needs and align with its brand values. While it does consider customers' requests to import certain products, Melvida first conducts further research on local demand before placing them in stores.

³⁴ A.J. Hui (2025), interview with founder of Melvida, 3 June.

To encourage repeat business, Melvida operates a loyalty programme that rewards customers with points and benefits for every purchase across its stores. Melvida also remains competitive by maintaining affordability in its pricing.

Melvida's online branding has proven to be effective given that it now has several branches throughout the country. It now carries bigger brands and is extending its reach beyond Brunei. In addition to retail, Melvida plans to enter the wholesale market. To date, the concept and branding of Melvida remain unique and have not been copied.

6.2.3 Hokko

Hokko was established in 1992, specialising in clothing and home décor, with its main outlet located in Bandar Seri Begawan. The business previously operated in Kiarong. However, as of 2024, Hokko created a central hub for all its products and services.

Figure 3.7: Hokko's Logo



Source: Hokko.

When it first opened, Hokko did not always sell clothing or home décor supplies; it imported any items that customers requested.³⁵ As Hokko started out as a local business with no prior experience, it faced challenges in gauging and identifying what was needed in the market. After various trials and errors and feedback from customers, Hokko eventually learned the market demand and refined its inventory.

Hokko currently does not have plans for expansion. Given the nature of its business and the variety of products imported that must keep up with market trends, repeat orders of the same products are rare. Careful consideration goes into the selection of its products for sale and whether there is local demand. It plans inventory purchases 1 month in advance to ensure that popular items are available year-round and are restocked.

The name '*Hokko*' carries a personal meaning and connection for the founder. Having enjoyed visiting Japan, the founder wanted to name the business after Hokkaido, a prefecture in Japan. One early suggestion was '*Hokka*', but its pronunciation lacked a natural flow and momentum to make it memorable. Eventually, the name '*Hokko*' was decided, resembling the Chinese words "*fú gāo*" (福高) meaning 'high prosperity'.

Hokko was envisioned to be a one-stop shop for women, as it differentiates itself from its competitors by becoming one of – if not the only – establishment in Brunei to provide an

³⁵ L.B. Chin (2025), interview with founder of Hokko, 29 May.

extensive range of products and services under one roof. Hokko offers fabrics and hundreds of lace options alongside other clothing and home décor items. In addition, Hokko also provides personalised services, such as by sourcing specific types of beads or materials upon customer request.

Hokko has adopted several branding methods, including offline branding, online branding, product branding, and service branding. Hokko's branding approach is predominantly offline, through word of mouth. Although the brand runs a social media account on Instagram, its use is limited to sharing updates and general information to its customers (e.g. stock availability or changes in opening hours). In addition, the brand has consciously avoided conventional forms of advertising such as in local newspapers; instead, it prefers to grow its reputation naturally. Loyalty from friends, family, and returning customers has been central to the brand's development.

As part of product branding, Hokko has expanded its inventory to include lace, fabric, artificial flowers, arts and crafts, and other items. This diversification highlights both the variety of goods tailored for women and positions the brand as a one-stop destination for creative and decorative needs.

Aside from its one-stop-shop approach, Hokko also engages in service branding through its good customer service. It ensures that all employees have a good work ethic and values and are trained to be attentive and respectful. Meetings are also held to discuss customer preferences and any concerns in relation to the tailoring, sewing, and/or design of their garment. Hokko has built a strong rapport with its customers, which in turn encourages customers to share feedback directly with members of staff on any potential improvements or complaints. When a complaint arises, management works to resolve the matter immediately.

Today, Hokko is recognised across Brunei by people of different age groups. Its branding approach has proven effective by the many years that the business has operated. While there has not been any known use of Hokko's name, Hokko's tailored designs have allegedly been copied in the past. Individuals had taken pictures of the models with Hokko's displayed designs and replicated these designs. Initially, Hokko tried to prevent these individuals from taking such pictures but now allows it. Having already established its brand, Hokko chooses to focus solely on improving its own products and services.

6.3. Food and Beverage

6.3.1 Excapade Sushi

Founded in March 2002, Excapade began as a local family-run Chinese food restaurant in Kiulap. The restaurant's concept and cuisine were then changed to Japanese, but the original name was maintained with the addition of the word 'Sushi' to signal the new

cuisine offered. While the reasoning behind the brand name is unknown, it is believed to be a play on the word 'escapade', referring to a daring or unconventional adventure.³⁶

The restaurant offers a wide variety of Japanese dishes, including fresh sashimi, sushi, ramen, bento boxes, beverages, and desserts at different price points. As of 2025, Excapade currently has nine branches in Brunei and one branch in Miri, Malaysia.

Figure 3.8: Excapade's Logos



Source: Excapade Sushi.

Over the past 23 years, Excapade's logo has undergone significant change. Its current logo design features the brand name in a Zen circle, which symbolises a peaceful state of mind, absolute enlightenment, and strength. In selecting this design, Excapade wants its customers to associate the brand with peace, joy, and contentment. The circle in sweeping calligraphy also connotes the idea that imperfection is a natural part of existence; Excapade endeavours to embrace all types of feedback constructively as an opportunity to learn and to strive to be better.

After rebranding as a Japanese restaurant, Excapade aimed to become the market's go-to for affordable, high-quality, and authentic Japanese cuisine at several convenient locations. At the time, the number of Japanese eateries in Brunei were extremely limited and perceived as an expensive dining option. To appeal to the mass market, Excapade positioned its food as affordable without compromising quality.

When Excapade first opened, one of its most effective marketing strategies was offline branding by relying on word of mouth. Starting with a small branch that could seat only 40 guests allowed the management to closely oversee operations and to ensure a positive dining experience for every customer. Today, with a total of 10 branches, Excapade's primary brand awareness tools consist of social media and its website. Excapade uses platforms like Instagram and Facebook to showcase its new dishes, promote special

³⁶ A. Chong (2025), questionnaire answered on behalf of Excapade Management, 10 June.

offers, and attract new customers. This has helped the brand stay relevant with younger generations and become a generational favourite in Brunei.

Excapade also uses product branding to highlight its signature dishes to customers. Its most well-known dish, the California Maki Special, was created by its head chef in 2002 and remains a local favourite. While the dish may not be a traditional Japanese creation, Excapade recognises the importance of understanding customer preferences; to this end, it continuously strives to modify its dishes to appeal to local tastes, all while maintaining high standards for Japanese cuisine in Brunei.

Service branding is another pillar of Excapade's branding or marketing strategy. Excapade is the first Japanese restaurant in Brunei to obtain *halal* certification from MUIB in 2012 and the first to introduce the 'sushi train' dining concept. Excapade is also known for its iconic '*Irasshaimase!*' greeting when customers first enter its restaurants, creating a sense of familiarity. Staff members are encouraged to build personal relationships with customers to promote loyalty. It maintains this connection through its membership system offering food discounts and benefits to encourage repeat visits.

Further, feedback is highly valued at Excapade. As such, QR codes can be found throughout its restaurants, and the staff is trained to actively seek customer input. Excapade also has an online feedback form on its website to make it easier for customers to share their dining experiences, which allows Excapade to continuously improve and to ensure that a customer's dining experience only gets better.

Excapade's growth in Brunei reflects the success of its branding efforts. Customer loyalty and satisfaction remain key indicators of the brand's success, alongside the growth of its social media accounts, which have garnered a substantial following and online engagement. This growth correlates with rising membership, sales, and customer feedback. Moreover, Excapade has been recognised nationally for its Japanese cuisine and regularly participates in major food fairs such as the Brunei Consumer Fair and Trade Expo. In 2020, Excapade won six awards in various categories at the Brunei Food Awards 2020 for dishes like the 'Horenso Hotate' (a scallop dish) and the 'Three Kind Bluefin Nigiri' (a tuna dish).

Having been around for 2 decades, Excapade faces competition from other sushi brands and business owners across the region attempting to replicate its popular recipes. However, Excapade has chosen to focus on its identity as a brand by prioritising consistency and quality in its food and services. Excapade continues to explore other niche services to offer a more refined dining experience and has committed to opening several new locations featuring modern restaurant concepts.

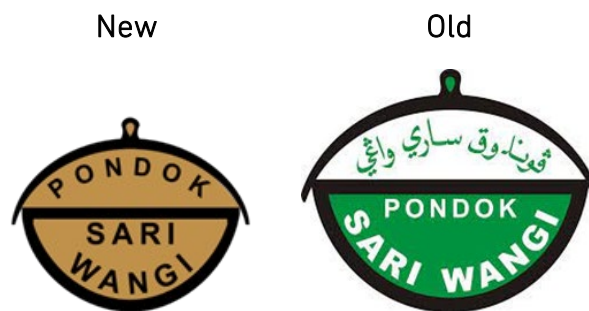
6.3.2 Pondok Sari Wangi

Pondok Sari Wangi was established in 1990 by the mother of its current owner and manager. As the first restaurant in Brunei to offer authentic Indonesian cuisine, its vision is simple – to bring the authentic tastes and flavours of Indonesia from various regions, such as Java, Padang, and Sulawesi, to the people of Brunei.³⁷

Pondok Sari Wangi first opened in Gadong and has expanded to include branches in Citis Square, Jerudong, Sengkuring, and Serusop. In its early days, each branch became known for a particular dish: Gadong for its *iga penyet*, fried beef spareribs pressed with spicy sambal and served with raw vegetables and steamed rice; Citis Square for duck *penyet*; Jerudong for seafood dishes, Sengkuring for its Padang specialities; and Serusop for its *ayam penyet*. Today, these dishes can be found across all their branches, alongside a wide range of Indonesian staples that generations of diners in Brunei have come to love and enjoy.

'Pondok Sari Wangi' comes from an Indonesian/Malay term meaning 'house of fragrance', a phrase that evokes the aroma of freshly cooked rice and the rich spices and flavours that characterise Indonesian cuisine. Its logo features a green rice bowl (formerly yellow), with the words 'Pondok Sari Wangi' enclosed within it. The branding was designed to embody the business's core value, which was to serve the best rice and finest food to customers in Brunei.³⁸

Figure 3.9: Pondok Sari Wangi's Logos



Source: Pondok Sari Wangi.

Pondok Sari Wangi's branding uses several methods including offline branding, online branding, and service and product branding. First, its branding and/or marketing strategy centres on offline branding through word of mouth and building trust and customer loyalty through consistent food quality and affordability. The owner ensures that these standards are upheld by enforcing strict operational standards during service hours and actively

³⁷ Pondok Sari Wangi, <https://www.pondoksariwangi.com>

³⁸ R. Ho (2025), interview with owner and manager of Pondok Sari Wangi, 1 August.

troubleshooting across branches. Second, it applies online branding on Facebook, Instagram, and its website, and it continues to rely heavily on word of mouth. The restaurant avoids discounts, promotions, and collaborations with public figures, preferring instead to let the food and customer experience speak for themselves.

Through service branding, the menu must be dynamic and appealing. The owner regularly frequents and explores new dining spots in Brunei and shares these food adventures on his personal Instagram account, which has garnered a substantial following. Many of these unique flavours make their way into the restaurant's menu as new and/or seasonal dishes. Customer feedback also plays a role in guiding which dishes stay on the menu.

Pondok Sari Wangi's ability to sustain a loyal customer base amidst a changing market speaks to the strength and effectiveness of its branding. Notably, it was the first restaurant in Brunei to offer *ayam penyet*, a popular East Javanese dish, made using the original recipe they obtained from the dish's creator. This once again reflects the restaurant's commitment to delivering authentic flavours to its customers.

Pondok Sari Wangi's dishes are not only recognised and appreciated locally but also internationally, as demonstrated by the multiple accolades it has received over the years. In 2002, it received the New Millennium Award from the International Award for Tourist, Hotel, and Catering Industry in Madrid. In 2019, it was honoured with the ASEAN Outstanding Business Award as an International Leading Brand in Brunei for Best Authentic Seafood Restaurant, while its head chef at the Jerudong branch won the Special Gold Award at the Master Chef Competition for Cantonese Cuisine. More recently, in 2020, two signature dishes were awarded Best Dish at the Brunei Food Awards. Speaking on the brand's future direction, the owner intends to open a larger, more spacious Pondok Sari Wangi to accommodate growing demand.

Although some competitors have imitated Pondok Sari Wangi's popular dishes, the restaurant views these imitations as compliments and embraces fair competition. Pondok Sari Wangi launched Nasi Ayam Mentiri in 2023 as a sub-brand focussed on localised dishes and flavours. Nasi Ayam Mentiri currently operates three branches, with two more planned.

6.3.3. *Kaka Restaurant and Catering Services*

Kaka Restaurant and Catering Services is a restaurant established in 2008. 'Kaka' is a colloquial spelling of the Malay word '*kakak*', meaning 'sister'. Kaka began with an emphasis on wanting to share good Bruneian food. Its signature product is the authentic local dish *nasi katok*, which is fried chicken served with rice and sambal, a sweet or spicy chilli jam, priced at just B\$1.50.³⁹

³⁹ Kaka Restaurant and Catering Services (2025), questionnaire, 8 August.

Figure 3.10: Kaka Restaurant Logos



Source: Kaka Restaurant.

Kaka's brand identity revolves around providing affordable, good food, aiming to fulfil its slogan, 'Where everyone can dine'. Kaka's roots in *nasi katok* emphasises the idea that it is an affordable meal. It connects with its customers by staying consistent. Its choice to serve Bruneian food also ties it to the Bruneian identity, drawing locals to the restaurants.

Kaka first entered the local market by focussing on product branding. It made its signature *nasi katok* the star, keeping it true to the original recipe and closely maintaining its taste and price to gain followers. Its association with the affordable dish contributes to its brand being accessible for everyone. It leveraged its geographical branding by highlighting the authenticity of the recipe and its roots in Brunei. Then, by diversifying its offerings to include local, Chinese, and Western meals, the brand has leveraged product variety as part of its identity, appealing to a wide customer base. It is also one of few restaurants in Brunei that serves food past 9 pm, making it a go-to place for late-night meals.

Early success came mainly through offline branding, through word of mouth. It also has strong service branding, as it prioritises good customer service. Each branch is managed by staff members who are trained to maintain the same standards, ensuring good customer service. Kaka also prioritises feedback to ensure customer satisfaction.

Kaka's corporate branding emphasises its commitment to keeping prices low so that anyone can afford its food. The brand name has become closely associated with *nasi katok* in Brunei, a recognition that reflects the success of its branding strategy. Building on this established reputation, it is even considering establishing a central kitchen to ensure greater consistency across all branches, allowing it to expand.

Most *nasi katok* businesses in Brunei struggle to operate from their own shophouses due to their extremely low profit margins (Azney, 2019). This makes overhead expenses – like rent – unaffordable, so most *nasi katok* vendors resort to selling out of small roadside kiosks or their own homes. Kaka has been one of very few exceptions. Despite expanding to five branches, it has managed to maintain its quality. It has also built loyalty by keeping

the consistency of its portion sizes and flavour. It encourages repeat visits through loyalty cards.

A few other restaurants have tried to replicate its signature dish and to open similar establishments with the same recipe. However, Kaka is more concerned on improving its own products and service. It believes that its customers will continue to stay loyal because they know that they will always get the same authentic taste and value for which Kaka is known.

6.4. Technology and Transport Services

6.4.1 *Dart*

Dart became operational in 2017. It is Brunei's first and only ridesharing and delivery app, allowing its users to book driving services or to become a registered driver. Dart offers various types of cars for different party sizes or occasions. For instance, it offers the ordinary 'Dart car' for up to four passengers or the 'Dart XL', which can fit up to six. The prices of the rides are fixed at affordable rates. There is also an option to book a Dart driver by the hour, where the riders may request unlimited stops across Brunei, including to different districts.⁴⁰

Dart's mission is to revolutionise transport through innovation and technology and to deliver seamless mobility while boosting the economy and quality of life.⁴¹ Its vision is to be Brunei's most trusted mobility platform and to unite communities for easy and accessible transport.

Each Dart driver is properly trained and works to achieve continual improvement against the quality management system, which aims to reduce waste, increase efficiency, and improve customer satisfaction. Dart also wants to normalise car-sharing in Brunei. The goal is to change people's mind-set and to encourage the different ways Dart can be used.

Figure 3.11: Dart's Logo



Source: Dart's.

⁴⁰ Z. Idris and S. Sarhon (2025), interview with co-founder and general manager of Dart, 11 July.

⁴¹ Dart, <https://www.dartbrunei.com/dart-about-us>.

Dart's logo has always been the same. However, the colour scheme of the logo initially gave a more technical and/or technological implication (e.g. with the colours red, blue, and/or green). Dart later worked with a graphic designer and brand specialist to simplify its logo. It changed the colour to a bright yellow, which is a tribute to the national Brunei flag. Additionally, the colour of a traditional taxi has always been yellow., which ties in well with Dart's services and mission. The italicised font of 'Dart' following the direction of the two arrows emit the feeling that it is moving quickly.

Dart's target audience is anyone who needs its services; it is not restricted by any demographic.

Dart's key marketing strategies utilise corporate branding, online and offline branding, service branding, and co-branding methods. One of Dart's marketing strategies is establishing its corporate identity. It portrays itself as the go-to service provider for logistics and getting to different destinations. The name 'Dart' itself is memorable and easy to pronounce for both fluent and non-fluent English speakers in Brunei. Dart has also built its brand by letting itself be used as both a verb and a noun. For example, customers can say that they want to 'Dart somewhere' or 'use the Dart app'.

Dart uses online and offline methods of marketing. It posts on social media (e.g. YouTube) with updates or to promote its services. It also utilises physical assets, such as incorporating 'Dart' signs on cars, drivers' identification, and car stickers. Registered drivers also wear Dart uniforms for large events, which aims to promote Dart's services and to encourage customers to try ridesharing.

Furthermore, Dart makes itself publicly visible by joining consumer fairs, where there is heavy human traffic and parking difficulties. Dart becomes a convenient drop-off option for participants who do not want the time-consuming hassle of finding parking.

Dart is accredited with an ISO 9001 quality assurance certificate. This ensures the quality of its drivers, operation systems, and client experiences. It values and encourages feedback from riders; if there is a complaint, an incident report is filed. Its mission to become an accessible service is further emphasised by staff attending sign-language workshops and autism awareness talks to ensure that they can provide good service to any customers. There are currently no plans to expand services outside of Brunei.

Dart also collaborates with certain brands to improve its brand visibility. It collaborated with Progresif as a technology partner to join in roadshows and networking events to widen outreach.

There have been instances of individuals impersonating registered Dart drivers. Dart takes these impersonations seriously for the safety of its customers. It controls access to its physical assets such as driver identification and car stickers to ensure that its customers will not confuse Dart drivers with those who have no association with Dart. Dart has taken action and filed police reports for these incidents.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Branding in Brunei

1. Trademark Framework and Protection

Trademark registration and procedures are regulated by BrulPO under the Trade Marks Act. BrulPO was set up in 2013 to restructure national IP administration to raise awareness of the benefits and protection of trademarks and their use to enhance business growth and competitiveness throughout the country. BrulPO has been moved under the purview of Attorney General's Chambers as an effort to strengthen its initiatives in protecting IP rights (Kon, 2024). Brunei has also streamlined international trademark registration by its accession to the Madrid Protocol, entered into force in 2017.

Brunei's IP framework serves to protect consumers and businesses' brand identities. It seeks to deter counterfeiting and the misuse of registered trademarks, provide legal certainty to owners and interested third parties, and integrate international registration and recognition of trademarks in Brunei. The legislative framework aims to support the diversification of the economy and trade by providing local micro and SMEs tools to protect and to commercialise their brands. The IP framework aims to align with Brunei's broader commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and shift towards a more dynamic economy under *Wawasan Brunei 2035*.

2. Potential Areas for Brunei's Economy

The majority of Brunei's gross domestic product is from the oil and gas industry. After indications that Brunei's oil and gas reserves were last only until 2035, *Wawasan Brunei 2035* directly confronts this issue. One of the goals is to thus achieve a dynamic and sustainable economy. As a small nation, diversification must be strategic.

In terms of tourism, Brunei offers a unique experience of vast rainforests and wildlife, a peaceful environment, and age-old traditions. There is significant potential to develop the Brunei market in ecotourism, but tourism is a new and challenging area for Brunei due to its relatively low international profile. Brunei has changed its tagline from 'Brunei, Kingdom of the Unexpected Treasure' to 'Abode of Peace' to highlight the tranquillity of Brunei. As of 2025, 60% of Brunei's land is untouched virgin forest, with 70% of it classified as green space (MFE, 2025). The small population and physical size of Brunei further add to its appeal; tourist attractions are within reach of each other, and there is a serene atmosphere – even in cities. This distinguishes Brunei as a niche destination for tourists seeking natural heritage, authenticity, and harmony.

Meanwhile, ICT is essential. The Minister of Primary Resources and Tourism noted that Brunei has been collaborating with United States-based YouTube users and has achieved promising results, as social media now drives around 80% of Brunei's tourism promotional efforts (MFE, 2025). Social media platforms are now able to expose Brunei's ecotourism and culture in ways from which traditional or offline marketing are restricted. Artificial intelligence may be implemented to analyse travel trends and market demands, personalise promotions, and optimise audience engagement strategies. Beyond tourism, ICT can transform how industries operate and enhance operational efficiency. It also extends into the wider economy and community by allowing online marketing and digital payments and facilitates business-to-business connections.

3. Startup Ecosystem in Brunei

Startups in Brunei may appear underdeveloped. Generally, Brunei has a risk-averse culture and is dominated by the public sector. Career stability is greatly emphasised, creating a stigma for start-up businesses or risky entrepreneurial endeavours. Due to Brunei's small population, its customer base and local venture capital are limited compared to its regional peers. However, there are many companies and initiatives that provide support to startups in Brunei. For example, the first Brunei Startup Summit in 2024 was organised by BEDB, Brunei Innovation Lab, and DARE. The summit helps foster a startup ecosystem that encourages collaboration, innovation, and growth. It was opened by the Minister of Finance and Economy and strongly supported by large institutions such as Brunei Shell Petroleum, Microsoft Brunei, and AITI (BEDB, 2024a). It is also because of Brunei's small population that important bodies and ministries are involved in these events, which are also pushing Brunei towards its objectives outlined in *Wawasan Brunei 2035*.

4. Branding Methods in Brunei

Brunei as a nation operates similarly to a tight-knit community, whereby personal connections and opinions are valued. The most common and effective method of branding is word of mouth. Hokko is a prime example of word-of-mouth marketing – it intentionally opted out of collaborative efforts and keeps its online presence to a minimum while still possessing a brand known as a one-stop shop for clothing and home décor items. This reflects the effectiveness of verbal marketing in Brunei, amplified by its small population and intertwined social networks. Brunei is also small geographically, making businesses accessible to most of the population. Combined with verbal marketing, close social

networks, and compact geography, businesses in Brunei can reach a large portion of the population without extensive advertising.

Nevertheless, marketing remains effective. Online marketing plays a pivotal role. Aewon, Melvida, and others utilise their social media presence to interact with their consumers and to promote their products. It also helps them understand their target audiences and any changes in the market. Bruneian brands also tend to focus more on their brand identity. For example, Baiduri Bank and Progresif focus on CSR pillars and initiatives to communicate their values and to connect with their consumers. Consumers can understand their brand personality and make purposeful choices, which fosters loyalty and trust. Effectively utilising the balance between traditional and modern methods of marketing are important for Bruneian businesses to establish their brand identity and presence.

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1. Make Trademark Applications More Accessible

A brand is legally protected in Brunei by converting it into a trademark. To build awareness of trademark importance, trademark registration can be introduced to business owners, especially those of micro and SMEs, through workshops or classes. This can be prioritised for smaller businesses that may be less aware of IP rights or are unable to sufficiently protect themselves against any counterfeits or copying. Collaborations can occur with registered trademark agents or legal practitioners to explain the processes and advantages of trademark registration.

After businesses are informed about trademark registration, the next step is to help them navigate the application process. This can be done by making the registration process clearer and more transparent. Although forms and schedules are accessible online, many may not be familiar with the application process. The Ministry of Finance and Economy has provided a guide on the trademark application process,⁴² but the total estimated costs for filing a trademark application is only available on the BrulPO website. Information on trademark registration may be made more accessible if it is centralised and streamlined into one comprehensive page on one website. An annual report on trademark applications, common reasons for refusal, different classes of goods and services, and average timelines for different processes may assist micro and SMEs to understand the registration process as well.

Additionally, small clinic pop-ups or community hubs offering free consultations could provide guidance on trademark concerns, such as the distinctiveness of prospective

⁴² BrulPO, Trademark: Everything You Need To Know, *businessBN*, <https://business.mofe.gov.bn/SitePages/Trademark.aspx>.

trademarks or the classes of goods and services to apply for. Increased exposure and guidance on international filing through the Madrid Protocol would also make trademark applications more accessible.

5.2. Encourage Trademark Applications

After informing owners how to register their trademarks, policies could be introduced to encourage registration. For instance, first-time applicants from micro and SMEs could be offered a discounted filing fee as an incentive to register. Furthermore, automated reminders could be introduced to alert owners of upcoming trademark expiration dates, helping them maintain their registrations, which last for 10 years before renewal is required.

5.3. Create a Centralised Digital Marketplace

As highlighted previously, many micro and SMEs in Brunei rely on social commerce sites, which creates a disjointed digital market with limited consumer outreach and protection. There is currently no e-commerce legislation that addresses the issue of counterfeit goods or IP infringement on digital platforms. Brunei should have a consistent, phased approach to strengthening its online market ecosystem and to regulating goods and services.

eKadaiBrunei, which currently only functions as a digital directory, could be made into a governmental-run online marketplace, managed by either the Ministry of Finance and Economy or DARE. BrulPO may support this marketplace by verifying any local vendors and businesses, introducing reporting tools to prevent counterfeit imports, and providing a trusted seller certification for micro and SMEs compliant with IP and consumer protection standards. It may require businesses to register their trademarks or logos and business names before being listed to ensure authenticity. The analytics and data from an online marketplace may also be utilised amongst micro and SMEs to understand the most effective method of marketing and branding.

If a government-run marketplace is begun, however, the government or any regulatory body must be prepared for any liability or responsibility for counterfeit sales. Moreover, running an online marketplace for more users would require continuous management, supervision of online transactions, dispute resolution managers, and logistics coordination. Without the necessary funding or expertise, the marketplace may not be sustainable. Another issue is that necessitating formal requirements may deter startups or private businesses from developing organically. There is no guarantee that the online marketplace may be more effective than the 'social commerce' in Brunei today, as browsing and selling through social media platforms are familiar to both consumers and sellers in Brunei. They would need strong incentives to move their businesses to a digital marketplace, especially if it means rebuilding their audience and brand again.

Instead of establishing a centralised marketplace, the government or relevant bodies could start with a verified vendor registry instead. This lowers cost of resources and training but still signals business compliance and builds trust in the community. Afterwards, micro and SMEs still selling on social media platforms can link to their verified vendor profile on the registry to establish authenticity and to prevent any counterfeit sales. A trusted seller badge could also carry strong, regional branding implications.

5.4. Develop an E-commerce Act

The Electronic Transactions Act is the only legislation that governs digital transactions in Brunei. There is currently no legislation regulating e-commerce, digital marketplaces, or online consumerism. Registered trademark owners can only seek remedies under the Trade Marks Act.

The introduction of e-commerce legislation would be in line with *Wawasan Brunei 2035* in building a dynamic and sustainable economy and a digitally literate society. Such an act should consider safe harbour provisions for platforms that acted in good faith when listing counterfeit goods and penalties for misrepresentation online (e.g. using the incorrect logo or falsely claiming that it is 'official' or 'authentic'). The legislation should provide clear obligations and duties for sellers and online mediums. There should be additional online payment protection safeguards and consumer data protection rules as well.

5.5. Foster Marketing

Brunei's institutions and regulatory bodies have been active in hosting business workshops and helping businesses build their online presence and brand identity. This can be taken a step further by introducing government-backed funding or grants to subsidise any professional branding services such as designing logos, creating a brand identity, and understanding the target audience. A study in 2024 found that workshops alone do not guarantee the success of startups and that initial fund grants are crucial to driving innovation and building a resilient, interconnected ecosystem capable of surviving a fragile market (Zaini and Ismail, 2024). It should also be acknowledged that grants by themselves may lead to dependency; to instil accountability and sustainability, the funded businesses may be required to report on their growth or branding strategies after 6 to 12 months of funding.

A unique aspect of Brunei's socioeconomic landscape is the influence of Syariah law. A *halal* certification can be important in establishing consumer trust and brand credibility. It can widen audience outreach in Brunei, as consumers can trust the origins and quality of the products (e.g. Excapade). It is an effective way of reassuring customers who may be hesitant to try non-local cuisine that the ingredients are responsibly sourced. It also

indicates the company's commitment to cleanliness, ethical practices, and a willingness to accommodate its audience, reinforcing trust and aligning its brand with local values.

5.6. Ensure Intellectual Property Rights Enforcement

Although there is no one designated authority to deal with IP infringement concerns in Brunei, the government and other bodies are still prepared to assist registered trademark owners in addressing their concerns, especially relating to matters that affect the public interest.

Administrative or monetary penalties could function as a deterrent mechanism without commencing legal action. This could be helpful to trademark owners who are hesitant or unable to initiate legal proceedings. However, the incorporation of a dedicated enforcement division may not be essential given Brunei's relatively small population and conservative market. The number of IP infringement incidents are low, which may be insufficient to justify the establishment and maintenance of a sole enforcement body.

6. Conclusion

Brunei's IP and trademark framework has undergone significant and meaningful reforms since the establishment of BrulPO and the country's accession to the Madrid Protocol. Brunei is focussing on creating a vibrant branding culture that can contribute to *Wawasan Brunei 2035's* vision of fostering a diverse economy outside of the oil and gas sector and adopting to international standards of IP protection and enforcement.

The above policy recommendations emphasise that awareness, accessibility, and support must be provided to encourage more trademark applications and intentional development of brand identities in Brunei. These actions will help introduce Bruneian businesses to regional and international markets and promote their competitive standing in global industry.

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