

# The Influence of Corporate Visual Identity on Brand Recognition and Recall Among Public Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya

Ndiege Nicanor Ong'owo<sup>1\*</sup>, Isaac Mutwiri<sup>2</sup>, Paul Jinaro<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Postgraduate Student, Department of Journalism and Communication, Multimedia University of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>2,3</sup>Lecturer, Department of Journalism and Communication, Multimedia University of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya

**Abstract**—Corporate visual identity (CVI) is a strategic asset for organisational branding, yet its specific influence within Kenya's public higher education sector remains underexplored. This study assessed the influence of CVI on brand recognition and recall among public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The specific objectives were to determine the influence of the brand logo, brand colour, and brand graphics on brand recognition and recall. The study was anchored by Visual Rhetoric Theory, Visual Semiotic Theory, and Signal Theory. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and content analysis. The target population comprised students, university management, and communication staff from four public universities: University of Nairobi (UoN), Technical University of Kenya (TUK), Multimedia University of Kenya (MMU), and Co-operative University of Kenya (CUK). A sample of 384 students was calculated using Cochran's formula, yielding 301 valid responses (78.4% response rate). Purposive sampling was used to select 17 staff members for interviews. Data was collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interview guides, and a qualitative content analysis of digital platforms during a peak communication period (July 2 – August 18, 2025). Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data was analysed thematically using NVivo. The study found that the brand logo is a critical element, with 76.5% of respondents agreeing it was unique and memorable. Brand colour was highly influential, with 79.8% of respondents finding it attractive and easy to recognise. Brand graphics were perceived positively but scored relatively lower at 64.4% on consistency. Over 82% of respondents demonstrated strong brand recognition and recall. Content analysis revealed a hierarchy of CVI compliance: UoN (92.1%), MMU (83.0%), TUK (75.7%), and CUK (71.0%). The study concludes that a cohesive and consistent CVI significantly enhances brand recognition and recall. It recommends that public universities prioritise logo simplification for digital use, enforce strict colour consistency across all platforms, develop comprehensive brand manuals for graphics, and conduct regular brand audits to maintain a competitive edge in the higher education landscape.

**Index Terms**—Corporate Visual Identity, Brand Recognition, Brand Recall, Public Universities, Kenya.

## 1. Introduction

### A. Background of the Study

Corporate visual identity (CVI) is globally recognised as the

critical amalgamation of symbols and graphical elements that express the fundamental essence of an organisation, serving as its visual keel in a sea of market competition (Zhu & Liu, 2023). It goes beyond mere decoration; and scholars define it as deliberate, strategic combination of symbols, colours, typography, and other graphical elements engineered to convey an organisation's core identity and values to its stakeholders (Melewar & Gupta, 2014). This planned image is a key tangible asset, a visual shorthand comprising a name, logo, typography, colour, slogan, and additional design elements that together form a cohesive system (Melewar & Saunders, 1998; Van den Bosch, de Jong, & Elving, 2005).

The power of CVI extends beyond representation. It acts as a pivotal interface, actively shaping external perceptions and signalling internal changes or stability (Foroudi, Melewar, & Gupta, 2014). This conceptual depth is rooted in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, underscoring its role as a sophisticated tool for communicating an organisation's very soul and values (Andrade, Morais, & De Lima, 2024). In the African context, CVI has surged from a peripheral concern to a central strategic imperative as higher education institutions awakened to the fierce realities of a competitive academic landscape (Waithaka, Kibera, & Munyoki, 2020). Within Kenya's setting, the role of CVI in public universities is particularly urgent and critical. As institutions strive for distinctiveness and relevance amidst a crowded field, their visual identity becomes a primary tool for recognition and recall (Jabbar, 2020; Nyakundi et al., 2023).

### B. Statement of the Problem

While CVI has been extensively studied in the context of private, profit-making organisations, its influence on brand recognition and recall within public institutions, such as universities, remains underexplored, particularly in the African context (van den Bosch, de Jong, & Elving, 2005). This issue is particularly pertinent in Kenya, where public universities compete with private institutions and international universities for student enrolment and funding. Despite the growing importance of visual branding, the influence of CVI on brand recognition and recall within Kenyan universities has received

\*Corresponding author: [nndiege@mmu.ac.ke](mailto:nndiege@mmu.ac.ke)

little academic attention. A 2023 audit by the Commission for University Education (CUE) revealed that over 60% of public universities had inconsistent CVI application across their digital and physical touchpoints, leading to stakeholder confusion (CUE, 2023). Brand management scholars argue that a lack of effective CVI strategies in public universities may result in diminished visibility, reduced enrolment rates, weaker stakeholder engagement, and missed opportunities for funding and partnerships (Jabbar, 2021). This study addresses this gap by examining the influence of CVI on brand recognition and recall specifically within the context of public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

### C. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to assess the influence of Corporate Visual Identity on Brand Recognition and Recall of Public Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

#### 1) The specific objectives were

- i. To determine the influence of Brand Logo on Brand Recognition and Recall.
- ii. To establish the influence of Brand Colour on Brand Recognition and Recall.
- iii. To assess the influence of Brand Graphics on Brand Recognition and Recall.

## 2. Literature Review

### A. Theoretical Framework

Several theories help explain the relationship between corporate visual identity and brand recognition and recall. The following three theories guided this study.

#### 1) Visual Rhetoric Theory

Visual Rhetoric Theory, pioneered by scholars like Sonja Foss and Charles Hill, argues that images possess rhetorical agency—meaning, they can intentionally convey messages designed to elicit specific responses from an audience (Foss, 2004; Hill & Helmers, 2004). The theory is built on key tenets: symbolic interaction, human intervention, audience interaction, cultural context, and persuasive function (Foss, 2005; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). For this study, the theory provides a lens to analyse how public universities use their logos, colours, and graphics rhetorically to persuade stakeholders of their value, prestige, and unique identity, thereby influencing recognition and recall.

#### 2) Visual Semiotic Theory

Visual Semiotic Theory, accredited to Ferdinand de Saussure and expanded by Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes, provides a framework for understanding how signs and symbols communicate meaning (Saussure, 1916/1983; Peirce, 1998; Barthes, 1977). Its core tenets include the concept of the sign (signifier/signified), arbitrariness, types of signs (icons, indices, symbols), and denotation/connotation. For this study, semiotics provides a tool to deconstruct how the visual elements of a university's brand are encoded with meaning and how that meaning is decoded by various stakeholders, directly influencing their ability to recognise and recall the brand (Henderson & Cote, 1998; Hagtveldt, 2011).

### 3) Signal Theory

Signal Theory, initially introduced by Michael Spence (1973) in economics, offers a framework for understanding how information is communicated between parties when there is asymmetry of information. Its fundamental tenets include Information Asymmetry, Observability, and Costliness (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). In the context of CVI, Signal Theory explains how visual identity acts as a credible signal of a university's quality and attributes. A well-designed and consistently applied CVI is a "costly signal" because it requires significant investment, a commitment that lower-quality institutions might not afford or maintain (Bergh, Connelly, Ketchen, & Shannon, 2014).

### B. Empirical Review and Critique of Existing Literature

Globally, scholars emphasise the strategic role of CVI in creating a consistent and cohesive brand identity, which enhances brand recognition and recall across different market environments (Melewar & Bassett, 2006; van den Bosch et al., 2005). Studies indicate that universities with well-defined CVIs are perceived as more prestigious and reputable, a perception that directly and positively influences student enrolment decisions and alumni support (Raposo et al., 2022). In the African and Kenyan context, studies by Waithaka, Kibera, and Munyoki (2020) highlight a direct correlation between strong CVI elements and tangible outcomes like improved student enrolment. However, research also identifies persistent hurdles Kenyan universities face, including outdated design elements and a lack of cohesive branding strategies (Nyakundi et al., 2023). While these studies provide a foundation, a noticeable gap exists in research focusing on how specific CVI components (logo, colour, graphics) impact the branding outcomes of public universities in Nairobi County. This study fills that gap by providing a detailed, multi-faceted analysis.

### C. Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by a conceptual framework (Figure 2.A) that shows the interaction between CVI and recognition and recall among public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

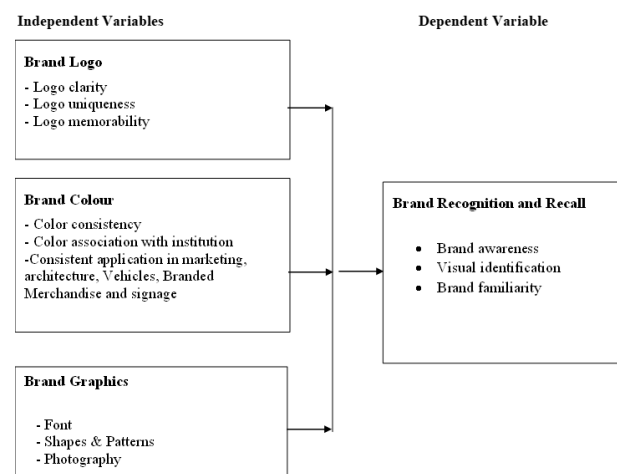


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

### 3. Research Methodology

#### A. Research Design

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design. This design facilitates the simultaneous collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, with the intent of comparing or combining the results to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The choice was justified by the complex nature of the research problem, allowing for the quantification of patterns and the qualification of meanings.

#### B. Study Site and Target Population

The study was conducted in four public universities within Nairobi County, Kenya: the University of Nairobi (UoN), the Technical University of Kenya (TUK), the Multimedia University of Kenya (MMU), and the Co-operative University of Kenya (CUK). The target population consisted of current students enrolled at the undergraduate degree level and university staff (members of university management boards, Registrars of Academic Affairs, Communication Managers, and Communication Officers).

#### C. Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample size for the student population was calculated using Cochran's formula for a large population, aiming for a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. This yielded a minimum sample size of 384 students. This sample was apportioned proportionately to the size of the student population in each university. A purposive sample of 24 staff members was planned, with 6 participants from each university. Ultimately, 17 interviews were successfully completed. Stratified random sampling was used for selecting students, with each university treated as a stratum. Purposive sampling was used to select staff members based on their specific knowledge and responsibilities related to university branding.

#### D. Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Three primary methods were used:

1. *Structured questionnaires*: Administered to 384 selected students. The questionnaires included closed-ended questions based on a 5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions.
2. *Semi-structured interviews*: Conducted with the 17 selected university staff members.
3. *Qualitative content analysis*: A desktop-based analysis of the universities' digital platforms (websites and social media) during a six-week period of peak communication (July 2 – August 18, 2025).

#### E. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the 301 completed questionnaires were cleaned, coded, and analysed using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means,

standard deviations) were used to summarise the data. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software. Content analysis data was scored against a codebook, and compliance percentages were calculated for each university and for each CVI element.

#### F. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all data was stored securely. Approval was obtained from the Multimedia University of Kenya Postgraduate Studies directorate and a research license was secured from the NACOSTI (License No. NACOSTI/P/25/4173528).

### 4. Research Findings, Analyses and Discussions

#### A. Response Rate

Of the 384 questionnaires distributed, 315 were returned. After data cleaning, 301 questionnaires were found to be complete and usable for analysis, yielding a final valid response rate of 78.4%. For the qualitative component, 17 out of the 24 targeted staff interviews were successfully completed, resulting in a response rate of 70.8%.

#### B. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample was slightly male-dominated (53.8%) and majorly consisted of young adults aged 18-24 (82.1%), reflecting the typical undergraduate demographic. A majority (73.4%) were government-sponsored students.

#### C. Influence of Brand Logo

A majority of students (76.5%) agreed that their university's logo was unique and easy to remember, and 75.7% agreed that it successfully created a strong association with the university's identity. An analysis of open-ended responses revealed three primary themes: Symbolism (e.g., "The atomic symbol, symbolizing technology"), Colour (e.g., "The distinct blue and red"), and Simplicity/Complexity (with some critiques that logos were "too busy").

Staff interviews reinforced this, describing the logo as the "primary visual cue" and a "covenant" representing the university's promise of quality. However, some informants noted critiques on complexity for digital scalability.

#### D. Influence of Brand Colour

Brand colour proved to be a highly influential CVI element. Nearly 80% of students found their university's colour scheme attractive and easy to recognise, and 74.1% felt the colours created a lasting impression. Analysis of open-ended responses revealed strong emotional and associative responses, linking colours to trust, professionalism, uniqueness, and pride. Staff interviews highlighted the strategic rationale behind colour choices, linking them to tradition, emotion, and differentiation. Colour consistency was rated as "paramount"

Table 1  
Student perceptions of university logo (n=301)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Agree
The logo is unique and easy to remember.	32.6%	43.9%	16.9%	5.3%	1.3%	76.5%
The logo creates a strong association with the university's identity.	28.9%	46.8%	19.3%	4.0%	1.0%	75.7%

Table 2  
Student perceptions of university colour scheme (n=301)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Agree
The colour scheme is attractive and easy to recognize.	34.9%	44.9%	14.6%	4.3%	1.3%	79.8%
The colours create a lasting impression.	30.6%	43.5%	20.3%	4.7%	1.0%	74.1%

Table 3  
Student perceptions of university graphics Style (n=301)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Agree
The graphic style is consistent and visually appealing.	24.9%	39.5%	25.9%	7.3%	2.3%	64.4%
The graphic style helps differentiate the university.	22.6%	40.9%	27.6%	7.6%	1.3%	63.5%

Table 4  
Brand recognition and recall among students (n=301)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Agree
I can recognize this university's branding without its name.	40.2%	42.5%	12.6%	3.7%	1.0%	82.7%
This university comes to mind when I think of public universities.	37.5%	44.5%	14.0%	3.0%	1.0%	82.0%

and "non-negotiable," with inconsistency seen as the fastest way to dilute the brand.

#### E. Influence of Brand Graphics

Agreement was positive but notably lower for graphics style compared to logo and colour. Only 64.4% agreed on consistency and visual appeal, and 63.5% on its power to differentiate. The higher neutral responses (around 26%) suggest that students are less consciously aware of this aspect of CVI or that its application is less consistent. Staff interviews revealed the challenges: internal fragmentation and a lack of enforcement, leading to a gap between central brand guidelines and departmental execution. The use of authentic photography was identified as a key differentiator.

#### F. Overall Brand Recognition and Recall

Over 82% of students expressed confidence in recognising their university's brand without seeing its name, demonstrating strong brand recognition. Furthermore, 82% stated that their university is top-of-mind when considering public universities, indicating strong brand recall.

A final open-ended question asked students to identify specific memorable elements. The logo was the most frequently cited element (50.0%), followed by the colour scheme (20.0%), and the university name/signature (12.1%). This demonstrates the synergistic effect of a cohesive CVI system.

#### G. Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis of 172 digital items revealed a clear hierarchy of CVI sophistication and consistency across the four universities. UoN demonstrated the highest CVI compliance on both its website (92.1%) and social media (89.2%). MMU showed good compliance (83.0% website, 80.6% social media). TUK and CUK recorded lower compliance rates (75.7% and 71.0% on websites; 72.6% and 68.3% on social media, respectively). This correlation suggests that universities with higher overall CVI compliance likely benefit from stronger brand recognition and recall, framing CVI consistency as a strategic investment and a credible signal of institutional quality (Spence, 1973; Bergh et al., 2014).

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

#### A. Summary of Findings

The study found that all three CVI elements—logo, colour, and graphics—significantly influence brand recognition and recall, but to varying degrees. The logo emerged as the most consciously recognised and remembered element. Brand colour proved to be the most immediately salient element, evoking strong emotional associations. Brand graphics were perceived positively but had lower salience and higher perceived inconsistency. The synergistic effect of a cohesive CVI system was demonstrated by the high overall brand recognition and recall rates (82%). The content analysis provided a correlational insight, showing that universities with higher CVI compliance (UoN, MMU) likely enjoyed stronger brand recognition.

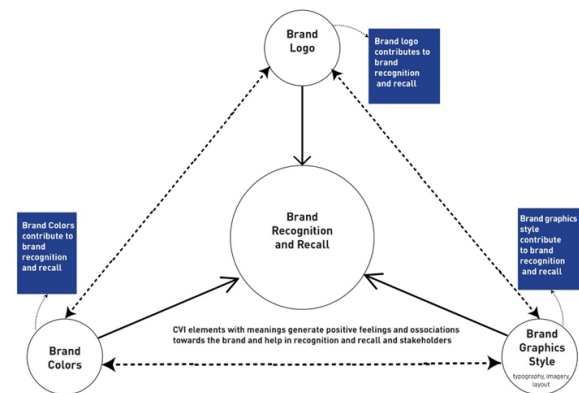


Fig. 2. CVI-Brand recognition and recall model

The above model has been generated from the results presented in this study. This model provides an overview, in visual terms of the brand logo, colour, graphics style and their collective contribution to brand recognition and recall among stakeholders. From the model, it can be deduced that logo and colour function as primary identifiers—the essential, non-negotiable anchors of the brand. They are the elements most easily recalled and are crucial for instant recognition. The graphics style (typography, imagery, layout), however, operates as a secondary, yet vital, reinforcing element. It may not be the first thing a stakeholder names, but it fundamentally shapes the *feel* and perceived modernity of the institution. Inconsistency in



graphics may not prevent recognition entirely, but it dilutes brand equity and projects an image of disorganisation, ultimately weakening the overall brand impression. This hierarchy suggests that universities should prioritise resources accordingly: ensuring absolute fidelity and consistency in logo and colour application first, while simultaneously working to improve the governance and enforcement of the broader graphic system.

### B. Conclusions

The study concludes that a strategically managed, consistent, and cohesive CVI is a significant determinant of competitive advantage for public universities in Nairobi County. It operates as an integrated system where visual rhetoric persuades, semiotic signs convey meaning, and costly signals communicate quality and stability. This system collectively reduces information asymmetry for stakeholders, enabling quicker, more confident decisions. Ultimately, a strong CVI transcends its marketing function to foster a profound sense of identity and belonging.

### C. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. *Logo Optimisation*: Universities should develop simplified, scalable versions of their logos specifically for digital applications.
2. *Colour Strategy*: Develop and strictly enforce brand guidelines that specify exact colour codes (Pantone, CMYK, RGB) for all use cases. Conduct accessibility audits of colour palettes.
3. *Graphics Standardisation*: Develop detailed brand manuals that comprehensively cover typography, image style, iconography, and layout principles. Create easy-to-use templates for departments.
4. *Strategic Brand Governance*: Conduct annual brand audits to assess CVI consistency and periodic brand tracking studies to assess awareness and perception among stakeholders.
5. *Stakeholder Engagement*: Involve students, staff, and alumni in any major rebranding processes and conduct internal branding campaigns to educate all staff on the importance of CVI.

### D. Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could explore:

- Longitudinal Studies on the long-term impact of CVI consistency on metrics like student enrolment rates.
- Comparative Studies between public and private universities in Kenya.
- Cross-Cultural Analysis of CVI perception among different stakeholder groups (e.g., prospective students vs. employers).

Research aimed at quantifying the economic Return on Investment (ROI) of investing in professional CVI management.

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