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The Influence of Corporate Branding on Students' University Choice in Kenya

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Abstract—**This article presents an exploratory study investigating the influence of corporate branding on the university choice of postgraduate students in selected universities in Kenya. The purpose of the research was to understand how internal, external, and service mix branding strategies shape students' perceptions and decisions. This study was significant as it sought to offer insights into the critical role of branding in the competitive higher education sector in Kenya. The study analyzed various branding strategies employed by universities, focusing on their effectiveness in shaping students' perceptions of academic excellence, reputation, facilities, and overall value proposition. Data was collected through surveys with postgraduate students, providing a comprehensive view of the branding landscape. The findings highlighted that effective corporate branding significantly enhances the perceived academic strengths and unique programs of universities. Correlation between strong branding and perceptions of prestige was largely positive, as it required careful management to ensure that the emphasis on branding complements and enhances the actual quality and inclusiveness of the education provided. The promotion of state-of-the-art facilities and comprehensive branding that communicated the overall value and benefits of attending the university, including career prospects and alumni success, positively impacted students' choices. The study concluded that corporate branding substantially influences students' university choices in Kenya. It recommends that universities invest in robust and consistent branding strategies that clearly communicate their strengths and unique offerings. The study recommends that universities use both traditional and digital media to enhance their brand presence and engage with prospective students. It suggests that universities continuously assess and adapt their branding strategies to stay competitive in the dynamic educational environment in Kenya.**

Index Terms—**Branding, Corporate Branding, choice of university.**

1. Introduction

In the increasingly competitive landscape of higher education, universities around the world are recognizing the critical role of corporate branding in shaping students' perceptions and choices (Balmer & Gray, 2003). In Kenya, where the demand for quality education is on the rise, understanding the impact of corporate branding on students' decisions regarding their choice of university of study is of paramount importance. Corporate branding encompasses the strategic management of a university's reputation, image, and identity, with the aim of creating distinctiveness and fostering positive associations in the minds of students, parents, and other stakeholders. Through branding initiatives, universities seek to communicate their unique value proposition, academic offerings, facilities, and overall student experience to prospective students (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007).

The significance of corporate branding in the higher education sector cannot be overstated. Research has shown that branding played a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions of universities and influencing their enrollment decisions (Prideaux et al., 2015). A strong brand can differentiate a university from its competitors, attract prospective students, and enhance its overall reputation and market positioning. In the global context, extensive research has been conducted on the impact of corporate branding in higher education, particularly in Western countries where universities have long utilized branding to attract students and enhance their reputation. Studies in these regions have demonstrated that strong branding efforts are correlated with higher perceptions of prestige and increased student enrollment (Melewar & Akel, 2005). However, there is a significant research gap in understanding how these strategies are applied and their effectiveness in African contexts, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Africa, research on corporate branding within higher education remains limited, with most studies focusing on traditional factors such as tuition costs, academic programs, and infrastructure (De Beer, 2017). While there has been some exploration of branding in South African universities, comprehensive research across the continent is scarce, especially in East Africa, where the educational landscape is rapidly evolving (Ng'ethe, Iravo, & Namusonge, 2012).

In the context of Kenya, where the higher education sector is expanding with both public and private institutions offering diverse academic programs, there is a pressing need for more focused research on the role of corporate branding in influencing student choice. The research gap lies in understanding how Kenyan universities can effectively leverage corporate branding to differentiate themselves in a crowded market where students have numerous options (Ndubisi, 2007). Additionally, there is a need to explore how

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branding strategies impact student perceptions and decision-making within the Kenyan context, which may differ significantly from other regions due to cultural, economic, and educational differences (Sifuna, 2010).

In order to bridge this gap the study sought to explore the complex dynamics of corporate branding and its impact on students' choice of university of study in Kenya. By examining the effectiveness of various branding strategies employed by universities and analyzing their influence on students' perceptions and preferences, to provide empirical evidence and actionable insights for university administrators, policymakers, and marketing professionals. By understanding the aspects of corporate branding and its implications for student decision-making, universities can optimize their branding strategies to attract and retain students effectively, thereby fostering institutional growth and excellence.

2. Statement of the Problem

The higher education landscape in Kenya has become increasingly competitive, with more universities offering a wide range of programs to attract students. Corporate branding has been recognized as a strategic tool for universities to differentiate themselves from competitors and create a positive image in the minds of prospective students (Chapleo, 2011). However, despite the importance of corporate branding in attracting students to universities, there still remains a gap in understanding the extent to which it influences the choice of university among students in Kenya. Previous studies have shown that corporate branding can influence consumer behavior, including students' choice of university (Brandt, 2009; Brown, 2011).

However, most of these studies have been conducted in developed countries, and there was a need for research that examines the relationship between corporate branding and students' choice of university in a developing country such as Kenya. The limited empirical research on the influence of corporate branding on students' choice of university in Kenya presents a significant challenge for university administrators and marketing professionals. Without a clear understanding of how corporate branding affects student behavior, universities struggle to create effective branding strategies that attract and retain students. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between corporate branding and students' choice of university of study in Kenya (Malim, 2014; Mwangi, 2013; Schulz, 2013. The study examined the impact of different dimensions of corporate branding, such as brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty, on students' decision-making process when choosing a university.

A. Study Objective

The specific objective of this study was to establish the role of corporate branding in influencing students’ choice of University of study in Kenya.

3. Literature Review

This study was mainly guided by Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory. Which states that the power of a brand lies in the minds of consumers and what they have experienced and learned about the brand over time. The Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory is a central framework for understanding how branding influences consumer behavior, making it highly relevant to this study, which explores the role of corporate branding in influencing students' choice of universities in Kenya. The theory, as proposed by Keller (2001), posits that the power of a brand lies in the consumer's mind, shaped by their experiences, perceptions, and learned associations with the brand over time. This perspective is crucial for educational institutions, where branding not only attracts prospective students but also influences their long-term loyalty and engagement with the university.

In the context of this study, the CBBE model fits seamlessly as it provided a structured way to analyze how students perceived and interacted with university brands. Kenyan universities, such as Multimedia University of Kenya (MMU), the University of Nairobi (UoN), Strathmore University, and United States International University Africa (USIU), are in a competitive market where students have multiple choices. The study investigates how these institutions can differentiate themselves by building strong brand equity, which, according to the CBBE model, involves creating positive and lasting impressions in the minds of students. By applying the CBBE model, this study examines how these universities are shaping students' thoughts and feelings about their brands through various branding strategies, such as emphasizing academic excellence, strong research capabilities, and industry connections. The model helps to understand the elements that contribute to brand equity in the educational sector, such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty.

For instance, if a university like UoN is perceived as a leader in research and innovation, it enhances its brand equity, making it a more attractive option for students who prioritize academic excellence. The CBBE model also underscores the importance of consistent brand communication and delivering on brand promises, which can lead to increased student satisfaction and retention. Thus, the CBBE model is instrumental in this study as it guides the analysis of how Kenyan universities can strategically build and maintain strong brand equity, ultimately influencing students' choices and ensuring long-term success in a competitive educational landscape.

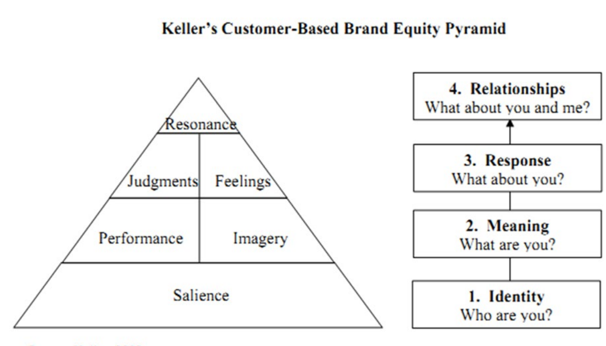

Fig. 1.

Consumer Based Brand equity by Keller's four-level pyramid demonstrates that building strong consumer-based brand equity is a step-by-step process, where each level builds on the one before it. For universities, this means that successful branding efforts must start with a strong foundation of identity and meaning, followed by positive consumer responses, to ultimately achieve the highest level of brand loyalty and engagement. The first Layer at the bottom is brand salience which is conceptualized as the degree to which customers think of your brand when they are in the middle of a purchase decision. According to Keller (2001), it may sound the same as brand awareness, but it is not. Brand salience does involve brand awareness, but it is much more effective at generating new customers. That's because brand awareness can happen anywhere in the marketing funnel, whereas brand salience occurs at the bottom of the funnel — where the transaction happens.

The second level is brand performance and brand image; whereby a company has adequate brand meaning created by means of a solid, optimistic and one of a kind brand association. The third stage is brand responses where companies are to work towards eliciting positive, accessible brand responses. Feelings are in two forms as well; a positive response after using the desired brands and they meet expectations or positive feedback from those who have already used the brand in question encouraging the consumer to purchase the brand. The final level at the top of the pyramid is resonance. At this level the company seeks to know if as a result of the previous three steps, a binding bond among the consumers and the brand has finally been achieved. It is expected that if a brand successfully goes through the three levels, brand equity is the automatic result (Keller, 2001)

CBBE theory provides a standard for the brands to assess their success in efforts to build identities as well as a marketing research guide. Studies supporting CBBE based on the assumption that customers bring about brand equity include those of; (Aaker, 1991) and (Yoo & Donthu, 2011). Their independent studies came up with the same conclusions of the brand equity elements being influenced by consumer behaviour. Critics of the theory such as (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009) and (Nam, Ekinci, &Whyatt, 2001) argued that the application of Kellers (1993) CBBE model is limited and displays poor validity when it comes to the service sector because of the essential traits of services.

Branding Higher Education Institutions (HEI) provides the community and the prospective students with an easier way to identify and distinguish them from other institutions. In order for an institution to attract prospective students, it is essential that they stand out against the competition. This is achieved through branding; a process, which highlights the institutions distinguishing, features (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Branding is a marketing communication concept that has gained popularity in higher education institutions over the last few years. In the face of increased national and international competition, universities and colleges in all parts of the world have begun a search for unique definition of what they are in order to differentiate themselves and attract students and academic staff (Chapleo, 2004; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Concepts of branding, corporate communication, identity and reputation have emerged in academia, making higher education institutions more aware of the link between what they "stand for" in terms of values and characteristics and how they are perceived. Competition has also resulted into employment of standard marketing practices in higher education institutions. University managers are increasingly focused on marketing techniques such as targeting and communicating with the market segments (Rindfleish, 2003). If the identity of a university is not recognized, students are unlikely to select that institution (Lockwood & Hadd, 2008). In many countries worldwide, universities generate revenue from students' tuition fees, making students customers or consumers of the university (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). The fees paid in higher education can vary significantly; for example, in Kenya, private universities tend to charge higher tuition fees compared to public universities (Mutegi, 2013).

In Kenya's public universities, there are two main categories of students - those who are sponsored by the government and admitted through the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS), and self-sponsored students. Despite being in the same university, these two groups of students are charged different tuition fees. KUCCPS-sponsored students enjoy an advantage as their tuition fees are lower due to government subsidies and full funding from the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) (Mwirigi & Indoshi, 2019). Since there are many private universities competing for customers, university management boards have come up with ideas on how to cope with tough competition for the consumers. This is done through ensuring that tuition fee is set at a standard level with other institutions or either slightly low or high above the standard level.

For universities whose tuition fees are slightly high, they have diverted the attention to their strongholds, "what people know them for" – brand and reputation). For example, United States International University – Africa (USIU) is well known as the Africa's School of Business Administration, School of Arts and Sciences offering eleven programs at both undergraduate and post graduate level, all of which are fully accredited in Kenya and the United States, the tuition fee for these programs are very high compared to other universities that offer the same degree courses. As the university does its advertisements, it showcases prominent international students, prominent people and entrepreneurs' who have studied there. This being the case, many prospective students opt to study there regardless of the high fee required. Therefore, the huge amount of money the institution spends on advertising is recovered through increased students' enrollment (Cheslock, 2006).

4. Methodology

The study employed a survey design to collect data because surveys are an effective method for gathering information from a large and diverse population, making them particularly suitable for understanding trends, preferences, and opinions among a wide group of respondents. In this case, using a survey allowed the researchers to capture the perspectives of a significant number of students across different universities in Kenya, which provided a comprehensive understanding of postgraduate students in selected Kenyan universities were influenced by corporate branding. This aimed to obtain descriptive and self-reported information and determine the strength of relationships between variables (Sekaran, 2004).

The target population consisted of master's students from the University of Nairobi, Multimedia University of Kenya, Strathmore University, and United States International University, totaling 14,029 students. A sample of 385 students was selected using simple random sampling since the study aimed to obtain a sample that is representative of the broader student body across the selected universities, thus providing insights that are generalizable to the larger population. This involved dividing the population into strata and selecting a random sample from each stratum, ensuring homogeneity within and variability among strata (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

Data was collected through structured questionnaires randomly distributed to first-year postgraduate students. The questionnaires included closed-ended and open-ended questions, facilitating both quantitative and qualitative data collection. This structured format enabled easy analysis using statistical methods and provided deeper insights into respondents' perspectives. The questionnaires covered personal information, academic background, resource availability, research process, and supervision. To ensure the research instruments were effective and reliable, a pilot study was conducted with 20 postgraduate students from Africa Nazarene University. This preliminary study aimed to test the questionnaires and make necessary adjustments to improve clarity and relevance. Feedback from the pilot study allowed for refinements that enhanced the precision of the questions and ensured they accurately captured the information needed for the main study. Data collection was managed by the researcher along with trained assistants to maintain consistency and reliability throughout the process. The use of SPSS software facilitated comprehensive data analysis, enabling the researcher to handle complex data sets efficiently and accurately.

Confidentiality was a key priority, with identifying information excluded from the data to protect respondent privacy. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of their involvement and the academic purpose of the study, which helped foster an environment of trust and openness. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, including obtaining necessary permissions from relevant authorities and ensuring that respondents felt safe and respected throughout the study. The pilot study also played a crucial role in validating the reliability of the research instruments, which were assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Values above 0.6 indicated high reliability, ensuring that the instruments would provide consistent and credible data for the main study.

5. Study Findings, Discussion and Analysis

The study reveals several key insights into the demographic profile and preferences of postgraduate students across various universities in Kenya. Notably, the majority of respondents were relatively young, with 76% being under the age of 36. Specifically, 28.9% of the respondents fell within the 31-35 year age range, indicating a significant representation of mid-career professionals seeking to enhance their qualifications and advance their careers. This trend underscores a broader shift towards lifelong learning and professional development, driven by the need to stay competitive in today’s rapidly evolving job market.

In contrast, only 23.9% of the respondents were aged 20-25 years, while another 23.9% were in the 26-30 year age bracket, and a smaller 23.9% were over 36 years old. This distribution suggests that younger individuals are increasingly opting for postgraduate studies, motivated by the desire to gain specialized knowledge and skills that could offer them a competitive edge in their careers. The prevalence of younger students also reflects a growing recognition of the importance of continuous education and professional development. The preference for public institutions was predominant among the respondents, with 82.5% choosing to pursue their postgraduate programs at public universities. This preference is largely attributed to the lower tuition fees and the availability of financial aid such as scholarships and grants, which make public institutions more accessible to a broader range of students.

Public universities often offer superior resources and facilities, such as research labs, libraries, and academic support services, which significantly enhance their appeal to students (Anderson & Wilson, 2021). The availability of government funding plays a crucial role in this advantage, as it allows these institutions to invest in advanced facilities that support both higher education and research activities (Garcia & Martinez, 2018). This financial support helps public universities maintain

Table 1
How recognizable is the logo or visual identity of your university?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Extremely	195	83.3	83.3	83.3
	Moderately	39	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	234	100.0	100.0	

Table 2
Do you associate any specific colours, symbols, or design elements with your university?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	221	94.4	94.4	94.4
	No	10	4.3	4.3	98.7
	3.00	2	.9	.9	99.6
	4.00	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	234	100.0	100.0	

and upgrade their infrastructure, contributing to their attractiveness among prospective students.

The table 1 highlights how recognizable the university's logo or visual identity is among students. The findings reveal that a substantial 83.3% of respondents perceive their university's logo or visual identity as "extremely" recognizable. This high level of recognition indicates that the university's branding efforts have successfully established a strong visual identity that resonates well with the student body. Conversely, 16.7% of respondents view the university's logo or visual identity as "moderately" recognizable. This suggests that while the majority of students are highly aware of the university's branding, there is still a segment for whom the visual identity may not be as prominent or impactful. Overall, the data underscores the effectiveness of the university's branding in creating a memorable and recognizable visual identity, which plays a crucial role in reinforcing the institution's brand presence and influencing students' perceptions.

The table 2 examines whether students associate specific colors, symbols, or design elements with their university. The results show that a significant majority, 94.4% of respondents, affirm that they associate certain colors, symbols, or design elements with their university. This high percentage indicates that the university's branding incorporates distinct visual elements that are strongly linked to its identity in the minds of students. On the other hand, 4.3% of respondents do not associate any particular colors, symbols, or design elements with the university. Additionally, 0.9% and 0.4% of respondents provided specific responses denoted as "3.00" and "4.00," respectively, suggesting a very small portion of respondents had unique or less clear associations. The data highlights the effectiveness of the university's branding strategy in embedding recognizable visual elements into the student experience, reinforcing the institution's brand identity and making it more memorable for its audience.

6. Conclusion

In this conclusion, the section consolidates the study's key findings, focusing on the specific objective of assessing how corporate branding influences students' choices among selected universities which rely on branding efforts to generate revenue by attracting students to enroll in their institutions. This revenue was instrumental in enhancing the infrastructure and overall development of the universities. The corporate communications departments, under the guidance of Corporate Affairs Managers, are responsible for ensuring that each university admits 2,000 or more students annually to maintain a surplus budget (Jones & Brown, 2019). This goal is crucial for balancing the budget and sustaining financial health, allowing the institutions to invest in infrastructure and academic programs.

Success of these higher education institutions heavily depends on the development of effective branding strategies, overseen by brand management consultants and personnel. These strategies were crucial for ensuring recognition by potential students and the wider community. Lockwood and Hadd (2008) emphasized in the Gallup Management Journal the significance of students feeling a sense of belonging to the university community, as it significantly influenced their decision to remain associated with the institution. Students who felt a strong connection were more likely to stay, graduate, and actively participate in school activities, thus contributing to the institution's brand promise. Alumni engagement was vital for sustaining the universities' brand and revenue streams. Alumni who felt a sense of belonging were more inclined to stay involved and become donors, thereby supporting the universities financially. If an institution's identity was not well-established, it may struggle to attract students, leading to limited enrollment and reduced revenue. These universities derived revenue from various sources, including student tuition, government funding, donations, and revenue-generating activities such as patents and sporting events.

The findings of this study highlight the pivotal role of branding in influencing student choice and institutional success at Multimedia University of Kenya (MMU), the University of Nairobi (UoN), Strathmore University, and the United States International University Africa (USIU). The study revealed that a significant proportion of prospective students are drawn to universities based on their strong academic reputation and research capabilities. Specifically, the emphasis on academic excellence and research, as indicated by 65.1% of respondents, aligns with the importance of branding in shaping perceptions and attracting students. The preference for public institutions, where 82.5% of respondents were enrolled, underscores the impact of affordability and resource availability on student choices.

This finding points to the effectiveness of branding strategies that emphasize financial accessibility and resource richness in attracting students. The study also highlighted the importance of a robust online presence and user-friendly application processes in enhancing student engagement, further underscoring the necessity of modern branding approaches. Additionally, the study's results showed that effective branding strategies not only influence enrollment but also contribute to the universities' revenue generation and overall reputation. For instance, the focus on creating a strong sense of belonging and showcasing unique institutional qualities were identified as key factors in maintaining student and alumni engagement. This aligns with the findings that students value universities with a strong sense of community and a commitment to excellence. In conclusion, the study confirms that effective branding is essential for MMU Kenya, UoN, Strathmore, and USIU. These universities must continue to refine their branding strategies to emphasize their unique strengths, improve online engagement, and foster a strong sense of community among students and alumni. By doing so, they can enhance their appeal, support sustained growth, and ensure long-term sustainability.

7. Recommendations

The study recommended that universities expand their branding strategies beyond conventional methods. By exploring innovative approaches such as market differentiation and relationship branding, institutions can better attract prospective students. Additionally, universities should enhance their online presence, focusing on improving website design and functionality. Simplifying online application processes can also boost student engagement and enrollment.

Furthermore, the study suggested that universities and researchers should invest in comparative studies to assess the effectiveness of different branding strategies across various types of institutions. Comparing public and private universities, as well as established and newer institutions, can reveal best practices. Incorporating both quantitative data and qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, can offer deeper insights into student motivations and decision-making processes.

8. Suggestions for Further Research

There needs further research on a broader scale in Kenya since the study employed a case study approach of only two public and two private universities within Nairobi County. In determining key measurable indicators under each study's variable qualitative research was used. Further research can be conducted to test and validate the research findings using a quantitative approach.

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