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Rethinking University Branding through Customer-Based University Branding an Analysis of Gaps in University Branding Models

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Abstract:

This paper presents definition of branding, an analysis of gaps identified in the models of university branding namely: Ivy (2008)' model, Trapp et al. (2010)'s brand ecosystem, Mourad et al. (2010)'s model of branding a university and Hay and Van Gensen (2008)'s higher education branding framework. The paper is a theoretical study which analyzed university branding models gaps or weaknesses through a thorough analysis of literature. Recommendations on how management of universities can brand their respective institutions are also presented.

Keywords: *University branding, brand ecosystem, university marketing programmes, university communications, relationship management, university brand elements*

1. Introduction

Marketing experts throughout the world recognize the importance of branding as a strategy that can be adopted by almost any organization to differentiate themselves and their products from competition. very little research on university branding has been conducted. However, the few studies on university branding have their short comings or gaps which will be unpacked in this paper. It is believed that the analysis of gaps in the university branding models by the following researchers will help university managers to cover many aspects when branding their respective institutions and academic programmes: Ivy (2008)' Model; Trapp et al. (2010)'s brand ecosystem for developing a university brand; Mourad et al. (2010); Mourad et al. (2010) model of higher education brand equity and Hay and Van Gensen (2008)'s higher education branding framework.

2. Statement of the Problem

Several researchers on university branding have come up with models to brand universities, but most of the models have gaps or deficiencies, making it almost impossible for a university to completely rely on the individual model to build its university brand. This paper attempts to fill the identified gaps and come up with a holistic conceptual model that can be used to build university brands.

3. Contribution of the Study

The study has revealed that customer-based branding is a powerful strategy to build a university brand and enhance a university to compete effectively at local, regional and international level. The aim of this theoretical study was to assess gaps in models of branding universities and develop a holistic customer-based university branding framework. The theoretical study adapted the customer-based branding to come up with a refined model that can also be used by universities to build a university brand. The model can also help the Government of Zimbabwe and other countries, through the Ministry of Higher Education, to monitor the performance of state-owned universities in terms of their ability to attract foreign students by enforcing the establishment of identified variables in the model.

4. What is University Branding?

Branding, brand names and trademarks can be used interchangeably, but it is important to distinguish them because of the legal implications that each term has. Branding refers to the use of a name, term, symbol or design (or a combination of these) to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to distinguish them from those of their competitors (Dibb, 1997; Doyle, Saunders and Wang, 2010; Farquhar, 1989; Kotler and Keller, 2004; O'Malley, 1991). Other scholars (Keller, 2003; Keller, Parameswaran and Jacob, 2013) also concur in their assertion that whenever a marketer creates

a new name, logo or symbol for a product, he or she has developed a new brand. On the other hand, Seetharraman, Nadzir and Gunalan (2001) argue that a brand is a name, mark or symbol which distinguishes an organization from its competitors, and their definition emphasizes the associated tangible and emotional attributes. In some respects, a brand is not only about coming up with the name, logo or symbol of the organization. It should be recognizable to former, existing and prospective customers or students, in the case of a university. There must be an emotional attachment to the brand, so that every time studies are contemplated, a particular university becomes the most preferred choice.

Branding is necessary to attract students to and retain within a particular higher education institution (Bhayan, 2010). According to Bhayan (2010), the following are some of the factors that naturally draw students to a university:

- A historically-established university brand from which older and prominent people have graduated.
- Attractive facilities (campus) in attractive locations.
- Internationally-known faculties, degree programmes and professors.
- Positive public perception of the university. It is generally much easier to brand a well-known university.

A brand has a personality that has an emotional bond for the customer, which has perceived characteristics (Biel, 1990; Court, 1997; de Chernatony, 1996; King, 1991; Murphy, 1990; Mudambi, 1997). The Alumni of a particular university might feel that their university has helped to transform their lives by securing life-changing careers. So every time people are discussing universities, they tend to be supportive of the university at which they studied. Universities should strive to invoke positive emotions about their brands if they are to be able to continue attracting local, regional and international students. Some scholars (Young, Weiss and Stewart, 2006) assert that a brand suggests the best choice made by a prospective buyer. Universities therefore endeavour to ensure that their programmes are the most highly sought in the country or even at the global level.

5. Models of Branding Universities

This section discusses models of branding universities developed by researchers, as well as theoretical gaps identified in these models. Which include?

5.1. Higher Education Branding Models

According to Elbilbaisi (2012), very few studies have attempted to establish students' behaviour when deciding which university to study with. Elbilbaisi (2012) further notes that Ivy's (2008) study, for example, came up with 25 statements that evaluate student attitudes and perceptions when deciding a business school to study with. According to Ivy (2008) cited in Elbilbaisi (2012), the most prominent factors identified included prominently program, prospectus, price, premiums and people.

In a similar, Price et al (2003) discover that the quality of university facilities has an immense influence on the student's choice of university. Warwick and Mansfield (2003) also establish that the quality of academic staff, reputation of the university and the quality of majors are the most important aspects considered by prospective students and their parents.

5.1.1. Identified Gaps in Ivy's Model

Ivy (2008)'s model places emphasis on the importance of ensuring the quality of the programme(s), prospectus, price, premiums and the people. While the model captures some of the important aspects that help in building a university brand, it does not tackle the importance brand elements such as the name of the university, signs, logos, symbols, amongst others. Ivy's model also does not indicate how the university will market its programmes, although the need for a university marketing strategy can never be ignored. The management of university communications is very important in building a university's brand, and tools such advertising, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, electronic commerce, sales promotions should never be ignored when a university wants to build a brand that is known locally, regionally and internationally. A university would also need to invest some time and resources in order to establish meaningful relations with its former and existing students as way of building student loyalty towards it.

5.2. Brand Ecosystem for Developing a University Brand

Coming up with a university brand is indispensable, particularly nowadays if a university is to be able to attract enough students to sustain its operations. To buttress the need to develop a university brand, Trapp, Girard and Boyt (2010) came up with a framework which they call a brand ecosystem framework for a college or university.

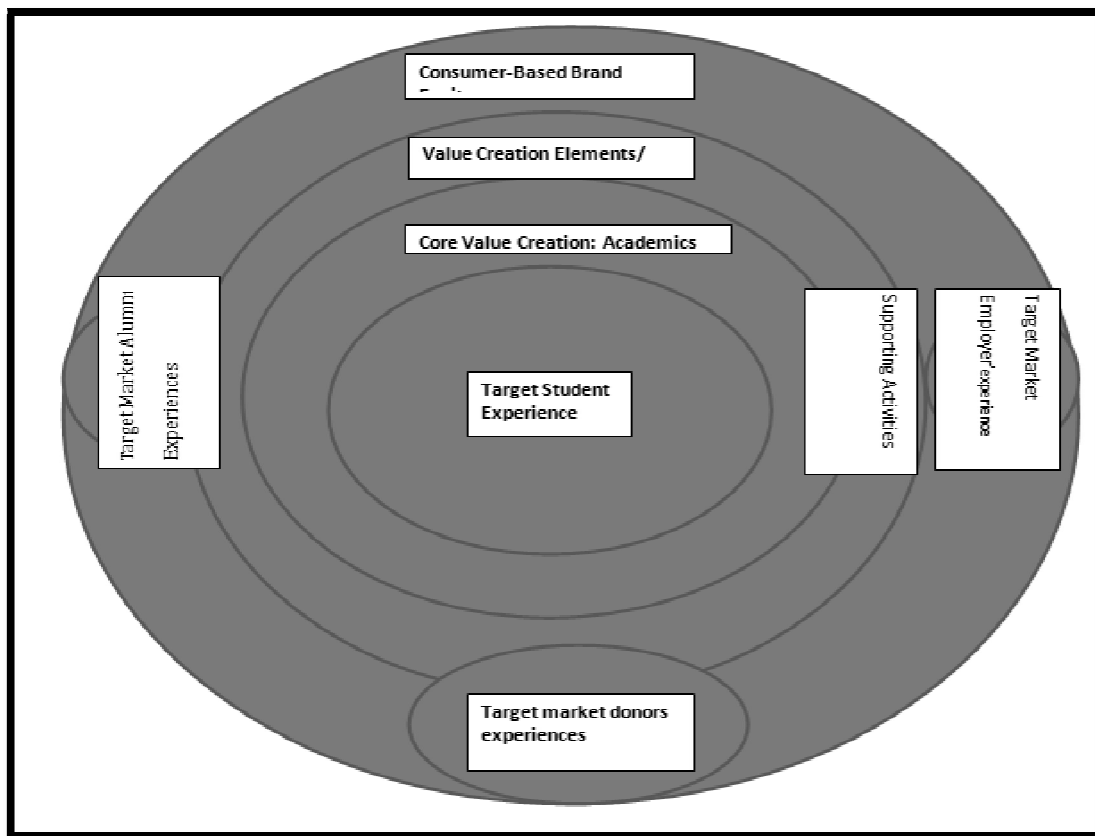


Figure 1: University Brand Ecosystem
Source: Trapp, Girard and Boyt (2010)

Trapp, Girard and Boyt (2010) suggests in their framework that when building a university brand, university management needs to have an understanding of the key educational needs of students and the value that their degree programmes will offer to their students upon graduating from a university. In creating a brand that will stand stiff competition, there is need for universities to first establish the practical needs of students, their customers, by conducting market surveys. According to (Mupemhi ,2013; Ng and Forbes, 2008 and Trapp, Girard and Boyt, 2010), students are fundamental in formulating degree programmes and experiences because they are the very reason why universities are established in the first place. Universities must also consider the interests of other stakeholders such as employers, parents and the government when developing academic programmes, university accommodation, and library facilities including Wi-Fi facilities. The brand ecosystem presented by Trapp, Girard and Boyt (2010) further suggests that because the student is the customer of higher education, it is therefore critical that institutions of higher learning ensure that students are satisfied in the consumption of a university experience. For Trapp, Girard and Boyt (2010), the supporting value creation activities of student life, including sports and community activities, is the next important aspect which should be considered when developing a university brand. Some students and parents place high premium on the opportunity to enjoy good sporting facilities and interact with an 'acceptable' community of people. Trapp, Girard and Boyt (2010) further observe that the brand ecosystem also includes employers, alumni, and donors, who naturally may have direct and/or indirect influence on student learning experience and on the university brand image. These scholars opine that the education experience as a process is the total of many encounters including student-faculty, student, administration (staff) and student interaction, each of which has the capacity to influence education quality, students' university experience, and ultimately an institution's brand.

Ng and Forbes (2008) aver that additional services such handling of the application process, payment of fees, campus facilities, and student accommodation all play a role in facilitating the core service experience. According to Ng and Forbes (2008), the core cannot function effectively without the ancillary services, and the two combine dynamically (directly or indirectly) in the development of the university experience.

Gray, Fam and Llanes (2003) are of the view that if universities wish to attract foreign students they would need to adopt standardized or adapt brand strategies. It may be difficult for a university, particularly an underfunded state university in a developing country to attract foreign students without engaging in an aggressive branding exercise. (Gray, Fam and Llanes, 2003) further argues that universities need to understand the exact education needs of foreign students if they are to create acceptable globalized brands. In concurrence, Gatfield et al (1999) postulate that in order to be competitive in the global context, universities need to link appropriate corporate and marketing strategies to address different consumer segments.

As a follow up to the argument (Gray, Fam and Llanes, 2003 and Mupemhi, 2013) suggest that recognition (reputation) of the institution's programmes, academic instruction (quality of lecturers and resources), life on campus (added features) and guidance (how to access services) are the most fundamental promotional features.

According to Bennet and Ali-Choudhury (2009) cited by Schofield, et al (2013), 'in order to attract students to an institution, it is essential that it stands out against competition; this is achieved through branding'. These authors further argue that branding in the higher education sector can be segmented into three distinct components namely: covenant, quiddity and representation. The authors asserts that the covenant is composed of the intangible core values that are communicated to the outside world, whereas the quiddity reflects the distinctive features in the university's offer (including location, values, make-up of the student body and the types of programmes offered). Finally, representation comprises aesthetic aspects such as the logo and communication channels such as the prospectus and websites.

The major thrust of the university brand ecosystem model is presented by the educational experience that a university intends to provide to its identified target students. The model resonates well with Gray et al (2003), who conclude that when building a university brand, it is important for universities to closely examine and understand the primary educational needs of university students as well as the perceived value of the programme offerings.

5.2.1. Gaps Identified In Trapp Et Al. (2010)

The models advanced by Trapp et al. (2010) and Ng and Forbes (2008) place emphasis on the importance of catering for interests of stakeholders such as students, employers, parents and the government in order to build a university brand. Their models could not address how that would be done. By way of example, a marketing strategy enables university authorities to consider their degree programmes, the target market, the pricing of degree programmes, and promotion through advertising, public relations, personal selling, direct marketing, sales promotions and internet marketing. The model also left out university communications, which are key to creating the necessary awareness among the stakeholders of a university. The importance of coming up with acceptable brand elements such as the university name, logos, and symbols can never be overemphasized. Student and other stakeholder loyalty, which is very important for the long-term survival of the university, can be achieved by establishing and managing relations with its stakeholders.

5.3. Mourad's Brand Equity Model in Higher Education

In a study on higher education undertaken by Mourad et al (2010), it was concluded that consumer attributes, brand awareness, and brand image are the most important factors which influence the brand equity of a higher education service. According to these researchers (Mourad et al, 2010), consumer attributes are of primary focus since they directly affect the overall experience gained by the student as he or she engages with the brand. In their model, they highlight the following as consumer attributes representing factors that are strongly related to the student: academic qualification, occupational interest, motivations and the previous experience with service, etc.

Mourad et al, (2010) postulate that after testing the model, it emerged that image-related variables are the strong drivers of brand equity, whilst consumer-specific attributes had minimal impact on brand equity ratings. These revelations prompted suggestions that universities should consider paying more attention to the different attributes on brand equity in line with the rankings of a brand in the consumer's consideration set, which could be established using surveys and during orientation or induction days (Mourad et al, 2010).

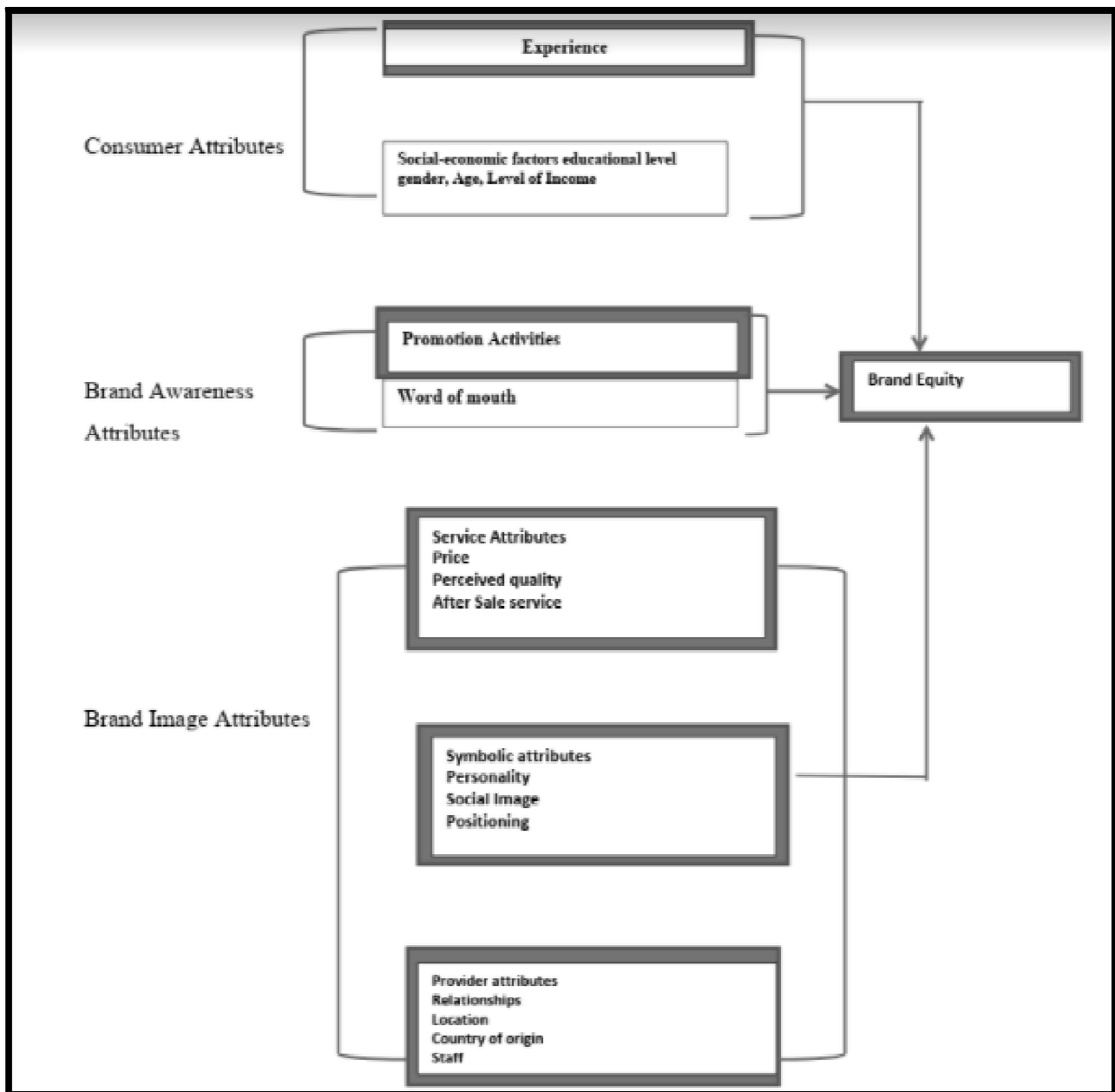


Figure 2: Mourad's Brand Equity Model in Higher Education
Source: Mourad Et Al (2010)

5.3.1. Gaps Identified in Mourad Et Al. (2010) Model of HE Brand Equity

Mourad et al. (2010) place emphasis on the importance of considering consumer attributes, brand awareness attributes and brand image attributes when building brand equity in higher education institutions. The Mourad et al. (2010) model does not state the need to come up with a marketing strategy so as to create products that will appeal to students in terms of the quality of degree programmes and other aspects such as pricing, promotion, processes, physical evidence and people. The model also did not capture aspects such as choosing brand elements, marketing strategy, customer relationship management and communications strategy.

5.4. Higher Education Branding Framework

Another higher education model was proposed by Hay and Gensen in 2008, which they called "higher education branding framework" is underpinned on three pillars namely: experience economy, relevance and external branding. Staff members are represented as advocates of the brand in the first pillar. According to Hay and Gensen (2008), it is imperative that a university fully optimize internal factors before the outward brand can shine. These authors argue that the model presents a picture of how possible it is for a university to create a positive experience. They further posit that having a cooperative and well-placed academic team that appreciates the brand value and the differentiation criteria that a university intends to focus on when dealing with students (customers). This leads to the third pillar, which focuses on the need for a

university to consider the value (relevance) that it should offer through its degree programmes that can enable it to achieve brand differentiation.

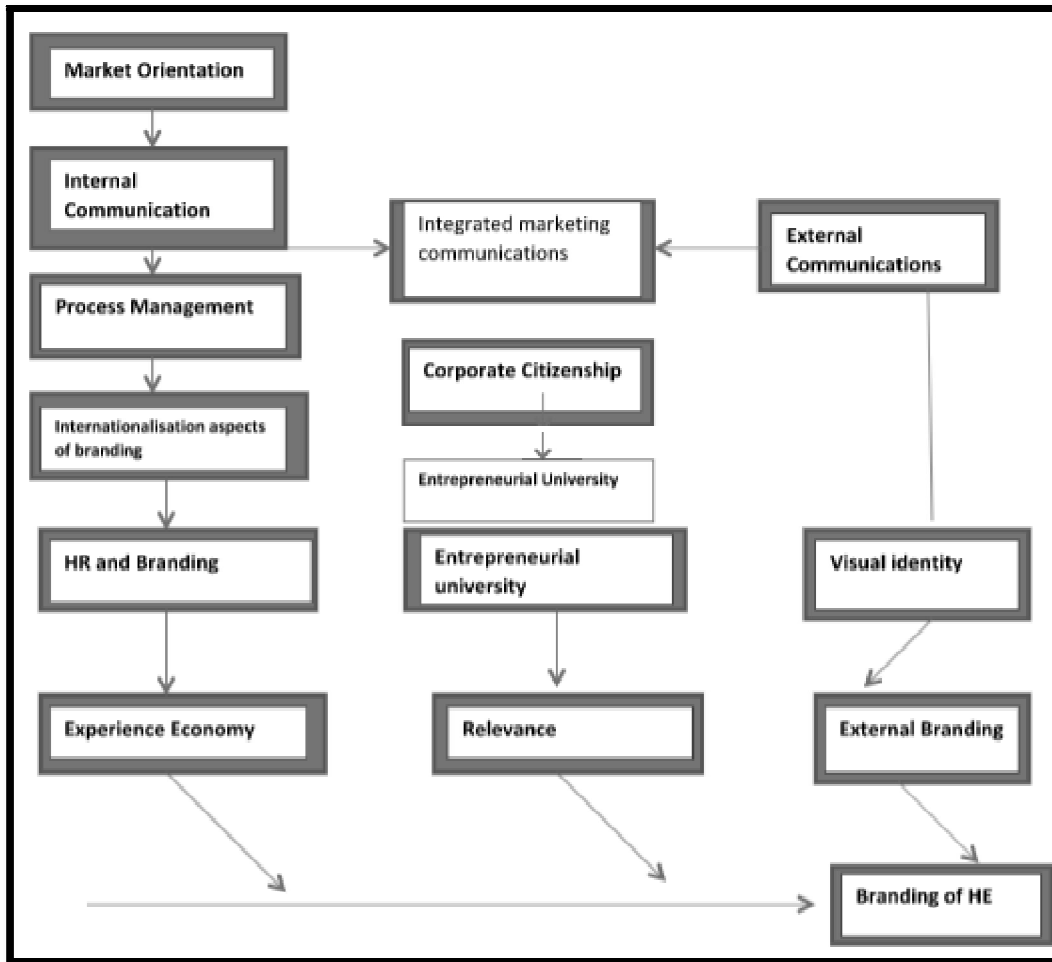


Figure 3: Higher Education Branding Framework
Source: Hay and Van Gensen (2008)

5.4.1 Gaps Identified in the Hay and Van Gensen (2008) Model

The Hay and Van Gensen (2008) model focuses on the following areas: internal and external communication, process management, human resources and branding, internationalization, corporate citizenship and relevance. However, it does not address how that would be done, for instance, in this study. It is imperative for a university to consider developing a sound marketing strategy that will help it to achieve all the stated variables in the Hay and Van Gensen (2008) model. Relationship management is also another important variable which is missing in the model. The need to develop suitable university brand elements like the name of the university itself, university logos, and signs can never be over emphasized.

6. Proposed University Branding Framework

Having analysed the above indicated university branding models, the author incorporated the major aspects which were considered important from models and come up with the following proposed customer-based university brand building conceptual framework.

Based on the literature review, the study proposed a conceptual framework for university brand building to enable state-owned universities to survive foreign competition. The conceptual framework has four major components namely: choosing university brand elements; university marketing strategy; university communications strategy and university relationship management strategy. The aforesaid components of the model are independent variables, which a university has to carefully manage in order to attain the brand equity necessary to survive foreign competition. University brand equity (Surviving foreign competition) is a dependent variable in this study.

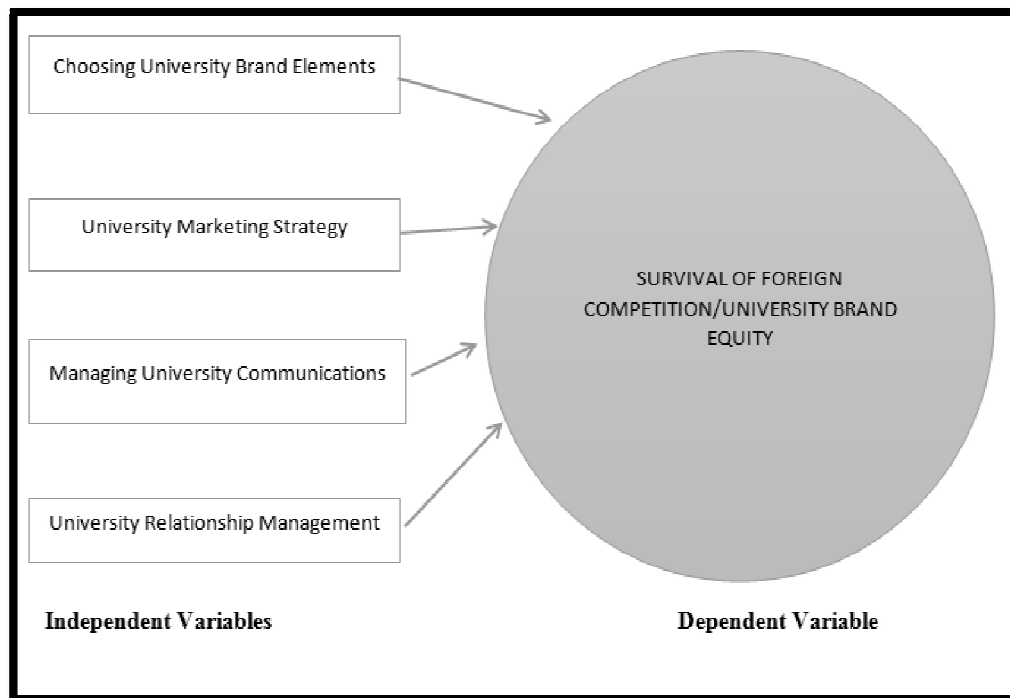


Figure 4: Customer-Based University Brand Building Conceptual Framework
Source: Summary by Researcher from Literature Review

6.1. Choosing University Brand Elements

According to several scholars (Kapferer, 2004; Keller, 2004; 1998; 1997;1993), the main elements of a brand are brand names, logos, symbols, characters, spokespersons, slogans, jingles, packages and signage. The CBBE model recommends that marketers consider those brand elements that enable brand awareness, enhance the formation of strong, favourable, and unique brand associations. Several scholars (Ghodeswar, 2008; Gray et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2003) argue that the university brand name is another factor that usually influences the choice of a university in situations where prospective students have never had any meaningful contact with a particular university.

6.2. University Marketing Strategy

According to Kotler et al. (2009), a strategic plan defines an organization's mission statement and objectives. A state university could enhance its market position by coming up with a marketing strategy. This strategy could include aspects such as the quality of its degree programmes (product offerings); tuition levels (price) to ensure that its prices are competitive and fair; a well thought out promotional strategy to cater for aspects such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion activities, direct marketing, personal selling and web based marketing (promotional mix). The university may also need to consider how its degree programmes will be accessed by foreign students. Students may be, for example, expected to come from their countries to a university to pursue degree programmes or a university could consider establishing associate colleges in foreign countries that will conduct degree programmes on behalf of the university or offering its degree programmes to foreign students via on-line platforms (distribution strategy). There is a close correlation between the strength of a university's marketing strategy and its ability to position itself as the most preferred university in the country, region and internationally. A university's objective should be to create the desired perception of its degree programmes and other offerings in the target student's mind. Aaker (1996) has observed that a brand position is actually part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands.

6.3. University Communications Strategy

A university should endeavor to promote its brand or communicate it so as to generate the much-needed awareness from prospective students, which will hopefully translate into actual registration for a particular degree programme. The communication activities of a university, particularly with its stakeholders such as prospective students, graduates, current students, prospective employers and existing employers, have a positive influence on university choices, as stakeholders are always kept updated about developments taking place in a particular university (Certin, 2005; Chapleo, 2007; 2004; 2003; Mupemhi, 2013). It is imperative for a university to have an appreciation of the students' needs and wants. According to Hemsley-Bown and Oplatka (2006), there is normally an information gap between what potential students expects and what is offered by a university, primarily with regards to teaching and timetabling. In concurrence, Kapferer (2008) postulates that

communication is basically the main tool used to achieve effective branding. Communication alone has the capacity to unveil what is invisible in that it can sustain loyalty towards a brand (Kapferer, 2008).

A university brand should naturally be able to carve a vision of how that brand should be perceived by its prospective/target students. Ghodeswar (2008) has observed that positioning a brand helps when considering communication objectives regarding the type of message, brand differentiation as themes and slogans which appeal to the target consumers. Universities should consider investing in advertising because advertising that is innovatively executed can help the university to break the clutter and impact strongly on the target market.

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) argue that through communication, wrong perceptions of a brand can be effectively changed and positive attitudes towards a brand can be reinforced. The major tools of brand communication used to position the brand(s) in the minds of consumers are advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, sponsorships, endorsements, public relations, the internet and integrated brand communications.

A university can build a successful brand through the creative repetition of themes using various types of media. Ghodeswar (2008) has noted that the use of emotive adverts that appeal to the hearts or minds of the people is likely to result in an emotional relationship with customers. Keller (2000) cited in Ghodeswar (2008) posits that successful brands usually keep up with competitors by coming up with points of parity in areas where competitors have an obvious advantage while simultaneously attempting to create points of difference in order to achieve advantages over competitors in other areas. A university needs to develop and implement a sound integrated communication strategy that clearly demonstrates the brands value to the target students. This can be achieved effectively if the message being communicated to the target students is in tandem with the brand value, brand personality and other brand identity dimensions. Strong brands help a university to position and extend its brand and may strongly influence the student's decision to register with the university. Advertising has a fundamental impact on whether a university's promotional message reaches its target audience (Chung, 2010). Since traditional print media such as magazines, newspapers and brochures are not very effective, there is need for a university to also intensify television, word-of-mouth; alumni in order to be able attract potential students (Chung, 2010). A university may also consider using open days and education fairs to enable it to avail critical information to prospective students. According to Hall (1976), this form of communication provides the prospective student with an opportunity for social interaction. Chung (2010) posits that open days are very important for a university to communicate its programmes to prospective students. Universities can also piggy back on sponsorship (scholarships advertisements from sponsoring companies) in order to carry across their promotional messages to these students (Chung, 2010).

Lovelock et al. (2011) posit that it is imperative to select a mix of cost-effective communications once an understanding of the target audience and specific communications objectives has been gained. The communications mix consists of personal communications, advertising, sales promotion, publicity and public relations, instructional materials and corporate design (Lovelock et al., 2011).

6.4. University Relationship Management Strategy

Relationship Marketing (RM), according to Zeithmal, Bitner and Gremler (2006: 177) 'is a philosophy of doing business, strategic orientation that focuses on keeping and improving relationship with current customers rather than acquiring new customers'. According to Reichheld (1996) (cited in Moyo and Makore, 2013), many companies and customers are focusing on Relationship Marketing because it is cheaper to retain existing customers who may have become loyal to the organization and its products than to always be looking for new customers.

Likewise, a university will enjoy immense opportunities by sticking to its students and its alumni. Existing students and the alumni of a university might encourage people to enroll with a particular university without significantly investing a lot of money in marketing communications. A university can develop a successful brand if it appreciates the importance of establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with its students. Relationship marketing may help the university to fend off competition and ensure student satisfaction. Groonroos (1994: 9 cited in Egan, 2008) 'argues that relationship marketing is a means by which an organization can identify and establish and enhance, and when necessary, terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met and this is done by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises'.

7. Conclusions and Implications

A university brand can successfully be built if university managers consider the following aspects: coming up with sound and meaningful university brand elements, designing a university communications strategy, coming up with a university marketing strategy and coming up with a university relationship strategy.

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