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Exploring the Understanding of University Brand Equity: Perspectives of Public Relations and Marketing Directors

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Abstract:
In recent years increasing competition in the Higher Education (HE) sector has attracted attention to marketing, particularly branding activities. A crucial ingredient for the survival of universities is attaining appropriate enrolment numbers. To achieve the desired student population there is the need for a thorough management understanding of university brand equity to identify the factors needed to create sustainable value and differentiation for potential enrolees. This study examined university management understanding of the brand equity concept. An interpretivist research paradigm was employed in the study involving in – depth interviews of Public Relations and Marketing Directors of three/3 Public and three/3 Private Universities in Ghana. This included unstructured interviews of all the research questions. The results of the study highlight a better understanding of brand equity by management of public universities compared to their private counterparts and various brand equity dimensions such as course suitability, physical facilities, library facilities, academic instruction among others were used to position university brands. In addition university awareness was created using promotional tools such as university websites, banners, word of mouth by alumni and church announcements. The implications of the study include the fact that management should get more insight into their sources of brand equity as they provide the basis for attraction of potential students. The study highlights the significance of management understanding of brand equity to improve the competitive positions of university brands.

Keywords: *Brand management, Brand equity, University, Ghana, Positioning, and Management*

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I. Introduction:

Several researches associate effective brand building by firms with competitive advantage and increasing stakeholder value (Wilies, Morgan & Rego, 2012). It is evident in the literature that brand equity plays a strategic role in helping management gain competitive advantage. The Resource – Based View (RBV) theory of the firm posits that a firm's hard to copy resources will make it possible for businesses to develop and maintain superior advantages (Wennerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). Increasingly it has been realized that an appreciable understanding of the brand equity concept by university management can help identify the factors which adds value to their brands for strong positioning on the market. (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Duesterhaus&Duesterhaus, 2014). It therefore behooves on university management to have a better appreciation of their brand equities for attracting students and faculty. However it is intriguing that there is little or no published work on management understanding of university brand equities. Specifically, very little is known about the concept considering the brand management scholarship in emerging markets.

(Horan, O'Dwyer&Tieman, 2011) posited that although understanding brand equity is an evolving aspect of the literature up till now it has been explored from the perspective of customers but not from management. Even more importantly, a search through the literature shows that a developing country research work in the service sector, specifically, the University setting is still scanty. This paper is thus positioned to fill the gap in literature. Studies conducted in the developing country context, shows publications such as exploring the benefits of branding (de Heer and Tandoh , 2016), qualitative insights into the brand management practices of universities (de Heer, 2015), factors influencing choice of a university by students (Mupemhi, 2013) , brand equity in HE (Mourad, Ennew & Kortam, 2010). Similar studies in the developed world include branding policies and brand architecture (Baker & Balmer, 1997; Chapleo, 2004; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007), international branding of universities (Gray, Shyan & LIanes, 2003),do universities have successful brands (Chapleo, 2005),and university brand equity dimensions (Pinar, Trapp & Boytt, 2014). In all these researches, the amount of work done shows that management understanding of brand equity has not received much focus. This current study therefore questions: management understanding of brand equity and investigates their knowledge of the brand equity construct, how university brands are communicated to potential students and elements that contribute to the value of university brands. Specifically the following questions will be investigated:

1. To what extent is the brand equity concept understood in universities?
2. How does management create awareness of the university brand and programs?
3. What factors contribute to build university brand equity?

The current study is significant and timely for academicians and practioners given the turbulent environment universities operate and the on- going upgrading by the Ghana Government which is likely to turn all polytechnics and many diploma awarding institutions into universities, further worsening the already turbulent environment. The study is therefore crucial for developing winning strategies and also illuminates new research pathways. Furthermore, this study responds to calls for more studies in Higher Education (HE) brand equity and offers deeper insights into management understanding of brand equity in the public and private HE sector..

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the initial section addresses the introductory aspects of the paper. A literature review and underlying theories for the study are then presented. This is followed by a detailed description of the methodology. Analysis and discussion are presented. The final section focuses on the study conclusions and offers recommendation for future managerial practice.

Brand Equity

(Aaker,1991) explained that brand equity can help a customer interpret, process, store, and retrieve a large quantity of information about products; shape the buyer's confidence in the purchase decision; and augment a consumer's satisfaction for products and services of a company. Subsequently, the literature is made up of a plethora of definitions which have become a subject of debate by many researchers (Keller, 2002). For example (Farquhar, Han & Ijiri, 1991) unambiguously defined it as the added value endowed by the brand name; it is also the difference between overall brand preference and multi-attributed preference based on independently measured attribute levels (Park & Srinivasan, 1994); and the purpose to choose a brand (Agarwal & Rao, 1996). Generally the most popular and widely accepted definition of brand equity is the one given by (Aaker, 1991) which defines it as a set of assets (and liabilities) associated with a brand and symbol that add to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product or service to the firm.

According to (Cobb-Walgren, Beal & Donthu1995; Keller, 1993) a brand is said to be of value when it is meaningful and offers value to customers. (Keller, 1993 p.2) consequently defined the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand." The author also added that CBBE results in greater sales revenue, lower costs, increased profits, higher premiums, effective marketing communications, successful brand extensions and customers enthusiasm to look for new distribution channels.

Basically the brand equity concept has been studied from five major perspectives - the consumer, financial markets, the firm, employees and the channel of communication perspectives (Kim, Kim&An,2003;Va´zquez, Del&Iglesias 2002; Supornpraditchai, Miller &Jonmundsson.,2007). From the consumers perspective, brand equity is based on the relationships consumers have with the brands they buy, from unresponsiveness to close affinity. In contrast, the second brand equity paradigm is based on a brand's financial value, and is seen as a separate asset on the balance sheet which represents the ability to create future earnings/cash flow for the company (Shocker & Weitz, 1988; De Chernatony & McDonald, 1998); Kim ,et al. 2003). Likewise from the firm's point of view brand equity refers to attributes such as lower financial risk, incremental cash flow, higher rent, higher entry barriers, lower marketing and distribution cost for extensions and protection from imitation via trade marking (De Mooij, 1993). Lastly employee-based brand equity (EBBE) focuses on the employees' perception of the organization's brand.

From the above definitions we can affirm that brand equity is a multidimensional concept and a complex phenomenon. (Keller ,2002) conceptualized brand equity that it is made up of two/2 components: awareness and association whilst (Aaker,1991; 1996) outlined five/5 dimensions: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association, and other proprietary brand assets such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships. The first four dimensions of (Aaker, 1991, 1996) outlined above symbolize customers' evaluations and response to the brand that can be readily understood by consumers (Barwise, 1993; Yoo & Donthu, (2001). As a result it has been used by many researchers to measure customer-based brand equity. Thus, a strong university brand equity means that students and other stakeholders have high brand awareness, a favorable brand image, perceive that the brand is of high quality, and are loyal to the brand.

As this study investigates management understanding of brand equity in HE the focus of the literature review will be on customer – based brand equity. This current study used a modified version of the conceptualization by (Aaker ,1991 and added variables identified in the literature which influenced choice of university: course suitability (Al-Fattal2010), academic instruction (Gatfield et al, 1999), and also HE brand equity, including student – faculty interaction (Ivy, 2008), library facilities (Gray et al 2003),emotional environment (Duarte, Alves & Raposo, 2010).The dimensions of consumer - based brand equity as prescribed by (Aaker, 1991) are discussed in the next section:

Aaker's Brand Equity Dimensions:

Perceived quality: This refers to the potential buyer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of the product (or service) with respect to its intended purpose, relative to other alternative brands (Zeithaml, 1988). Thus high quality means superiority of the focal brand over others and influences consumers positively to make a purchase allowing the brand to differentiate itself from its competitors, charge a premium price, and to establish a strong basis for brand extension (Aaker, 1991). Perceived quality has increasingly been recognized as an important dimension in brand decisions (Morton, 1994).

Brand awareness: Brand awareness is an important dimension of brand equity. (Aaker, 1991) defines it as the ability of a potential buyer to recognize or recall that a brand forms part of a certain product category under different conditions. For firms, particularly universities to create brand awareness they have to give their product an identity. Universities create brand awareness, especially recognition by increasing the familiarity of the brand through visible promotional tools used to ensure repeat exposure to potential students. Thus, the more potential students see, hear it, or think about the brand, the more likely the brand will be registered in the mind. Thus, all the brand's elements for example, the university logo, crest, brand – name, signage among others which causes consumers to remember the brand are critical in building awareness.

Brand recall is also critical to achieve the dominant position or "top of mind" within the target market. According to (Keller, 1997) a brand that easily can be recalled has greater brand awareness than a brand that can only be recognized.

The advantage of high brand awareness in developing brand equity according to (Keller, 1997) can be explained using the consumer buyer decision process. Potential customers in the buyer decision process have a consideration set of brands, and a higher level of awareness will influence brand choices. It is therefore critical for university management to connect their brands to a positive association. The next section will thus discuss the concept of brand association and how it adds value to the organization.

Brand association: This is defined as anything "linked" in memory to a brand (Aaker, 1991). (Farquhar & Herr,1993) indicate that there are different types of associations including product attributes, related customer benefits, product categories bearing its name or just a usage situation. These associations also have strength and are even made stronger if it is based on many experiences rather than very few. Brand association gives meaning of the brand to consumers. Thus, university brand elements can be points of association in the minds of potential students. A brand image therefore consists of a set of associations. The significance of brand associations in marketing is that it creates value for the firm and its customers by helping to process/ retrieve information, differentiate the brand, create positive attitudes or feelings, provide a reason to buy, and provide a basis for brand extensions (Aaker, 1991). Therefore, (Keller,1997) explains that brand associations can be classified in to three different groups, thus attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are the product or a service feature and determines the level of a product's performance (Keller, 1997).The second category which is benefits, is made up of functional benefits, symbolic benefits and experiment benefits. Generally, benefits of a product refer to the personal value consumers will get from the product and service attributes. This is what the consumers believe the product will offer in terms of performance (Keller, 1997).

Brand Loyalty:

(Aaker, 1991) defined brand loyalty as the bond a customer has with the focal brand. (Oliver,1999, p.392) thus defined brand loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to re - buy or re-patronise a preferred product or service consistently in the future, deposit situation influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour." Brand loyalty therefore tend to have a strong influence on brand equity which basically originates from three brand equity dimensions of (Aaker ,1991) - brand awareness, brand association and perceived quality (Tong & Hawley, 2009). It is therefore seen as an important dimension of brand equity. (Aaker, 1996) argues that firms enjoy a lot of value as a result of customer loyalty. Ensuring repeat purchase is very important in building brand equity.

Other Factors that Create University Brand Equity?

Studies by (Ivy, 2008) identified seven factors that influenced the choice of a business school by potential students. These factors included the program offered (choice of majors, electives), university reputation, tuition fees paid, prospectus or communication by direct mail, students' interactions with faculty, staff, and other students, promotion using public relations and e-media, and premiums (mixture of various offerings). (Price, Matzdorf, Smith &Agahi, 2003), in their studies identified factors such as physical facilities processes and equipment used in service delivery (Cowell, 1982; Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke &Sims,

995); academic instruction and learning environment, campus life, reputation, and career prospects for graduates (Gatfield, Barker &Graham, 1999; Gray, Shyan & LIanes, 2003; Mazzarol,1998). The current study will investigate management understanding of university brand awareness, course suitability, physical facilities, brand loyalty, emotional environment, perceived quality of faculty and academic instruction which contribute to brand equity.

Emotional Environment:

The emotional environment refers to the friendly environment of a university, which can influence the students' perceived university image (Duarte et al, 2010; Gray et al., 2003; Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003).University campuses are communities made up of people with different cultural backgrounds and this impacts on the overall learning experience of students. As a result of the long term socialisation students in some cases are able to form long term relationships like marriages. Thus universities must ensure good socialisation by creating appropriate services capes (Bitner, 1992). Studies by (Aggrey & Lampadan, 2014) indicated that a safe and friendly environment will influence potential students in the selection of institutions of higher learning.

Library Facilities:

(Smalley, 2004), posited that high school libraries assisted students to excel in higher education.(Maringe,2006) also posited that the availability of libraries was a key dimension which influenced potential student selection of universities.Furthermore,(Whitmire,2001), studies indicated that students who made effective use of their library facilities had higher self-reported information literacy skills.

Course Suitability:

(Al-Fattal2010) studies revealed that there is a positive relationship between courses offered and the institution, as it establishes its identity. (Gibbs & Knap, 2002) also explained that such identity positions the institution uniquely in the mind of potential students and influences how they will respond to what is being offered. The researchers therefore suggested that a needs identification is key in designing courses which will attract the enrolment of potential students.

Academic Instruction:

Quality teaching and learning is important for educational institutions because that is the main purpose of enrolling in a university. This was affirmed by studies by (Gatfield et al., 1999) which used Australian natives and international students and investigated pre – enrolled and enrolled students' perceptions on quality factors. The study revealed academic instruction as one of the critical dimensions for university selection.

Physical Facilities

(Price et al. 2003) found that good physical facilities influence students' selection of universities. According to (Palmer, 2001), physical facilities refer to all the tangible items an institution makes available to students including buildings, furniture, and other infrastructure. The intangibility nature of a service such as education makes it important to offer good infrastructure like buildings and sports facilities among others to attract potential students (Jobber, 2004).

Physical facilities make a service more tangible, especially because in an institution like a university there is not usually much to be seen or touched, in terms of the quality of education before purchase (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Hence (Al - Fattal, 2010) posited that University management must offer attractive facilities and serviscapes to entice potential students.

Underlying Theory:

The effect of management understanding of the above factors on university brands can be supported by the customer - based brand equity theory. Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is achieved when the consumer has a high level of awareness, is very familiar with the brand and holds some strong, favourable, and unique brand associations in memory (Keller, 2008). In other words, CBBE can be defined as how much a customer likes the brand and how much this liking of the brand influences purchase behavior. It is the amount of self-confidence consumers place in a brand relative to other competing brands that results in the willingness to pay a premium price for that brand (Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma 1995). The literature indicates that the power of the brand lies in what resides in the minds of consumers. Consumers usually will have different opinions of a brand based on brand knowledge which results from their past experiences, marketing activities and word of mouth. Management of universities must ensure that their customers have the right type of experiences with their brands and accompanying marketing programs so that they illicit the desired feelings and perceptions.

The amount of satisfaction a customer receives will influence the level of brand equity (Vukasovič, 2015). University management must understand these factors which increase their brand equity to be able to attract and recruit the desired number of students. Brand equity is the goal of branding and how much brand equity a university has depends on how well brand management activities are conducted.

II. Methodology

Three/3 public universities thus University of Cape Coast (UCC), University of Professional studies, Accra (UPSA) and Ghana Institute of Management and Productivity (GIMPA) and three/3 private universities, Valley View University (VVU),Ghana Christian University College (GCUC), Central University (CU) were selected for the study based on visibility and relative experience. According to the Ghana National Accreditation Board (GNAB, 2016) UCC was established in 1962, UPSA 1965, GIMPA 1961, VVU 1979, and CU 1978.

The study was conducted at the premises of the respondents so the familiarity of the physical environment ensured effective interaction and objectivity. As the purpose of the research was to explore university management understanding of brand equity, a qualitative research approach was used to collect data. This approach was chosen because of the nature of the research questions. Qualitative studies provide a richer and offer more detailed information of the situation under investigation (Creswell, 2002). Thus individuals with rich experience (Public Relations and Marketing Directors) who can discuss the phenomenon and give detailed information were interviewed.

In this current study six/6 respondents were interviewed from the sampled universities. (Flick,1998 p.41) explained that in qualitative sampling, it is the respondents' "relevance to the research topic rather than their representativeness which determines the way in which the people to be studied are selected". Thus, (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Creswell, 2013) recommendeded the use of 3 to 10 participants in qualitative studies. An interview guide was developed for all the research questions investigating respondents in – depth understanding of the brand equity concept. Subsequently the interviews were recorded and transcribed upon completion and the researcher did a thorough check of the transcripts of the interview several times to ensure an error free content.

III. Results of Findings

This section discussed the responses of the interviews with university management or the PR/Marketing Directors according to the research questions.

1. What is University Management Understanding of the Brand Equity Concept?

This question investigated the meaning of brand equity from respondents interviewed. The respondent from GIMPA said brand equity in general can be referred to as higher student registration, attracting qualified faculty and increased revenue. At UCC the respondent said brand equity is the commercial value of their brand and the goodwill towards the brand. The UPSA respondent also explained that brand equity meant the university brand having a positive impact on admissions and job opportunities for graduates. However the respondent from VVU rather said the following:

I know a little bit...I know about branding but when you bring *in brand equity, I don't really have a firm understanding---------.*

At CU the respondent said:

– it meant value to the university and GUCG – the competitive advantage over others.

2. How does management create awareness of the university brand and programs?

This question sought to investigate the strategies used for creating brand awareness to potential customers: for CU it was Good signages, websites and banners to create awareness. This was supplemented with adverts in the national newspapers and television during admission period. GCUC also used banners, website, adverts and handbook. At VVU the PR explained that they advertised on radio and television and potential students knew all the courses they offer. She also added:

The university is for the Seventh Day Adventist church which is spread throughout Ghana. Awareness is created through announcements made in churches. Our students also perform well on the job so this also serve as an advertisement for us.

At GIMPA awareness of the university brand was created through website, word of mouth communication by students and adverts. At UCC the university made use of open days, exhibitions which were held annually, website and at public and inaugural lectures. At UPSA respondent indicated word of mouth recommendation, website and banners. The results show that the Private universities used several media and a few of them also used non – traditional promotional methods to create awareness.

3. What Factors Contribute to Build the University Brand Equity?

The factors that contributed to brand equity from the literature include: brand awareness, academic instruction, physical facilities, brand loyalty, emotional environment, perceived faculty quality, course suitability, library facilities, physical facilities, career development and university reputation. The respondent from UCC said their brand equity was derived from their location, student - lecturer relationship and green environment. Furthermore the respondent indicated that the university has gained reputation in the Bachelor of Arts degree, Education and other courses offered at their School of Business. This has resulted in increased enrolment numbers of these courses. At GIMPA the major elements that influenced their brand equity were student – faculty interactions, quality faculty and emotional environment. The UPSA respondent mentioned the location of the university which was not on the interview guide but attracted student enrolment, the reputation of the university as a former diploma awarding institution in accounting, brand awareness and academic instruction.

At GCUC the respondent said all the factors add to brand equity especially the perceived faculty quality, flexible study programs (week – end, evening and regular school sessions), serene environment. The respondent also mentioned the quick publication of results and release of final certificates which was not captured by the interview guide but influenced student enrolment. At VVU the respondent had this to say:

You notice our environment is serene and we are located far from the noise of the city so students can get to serious work on campus. We have a good library and a few reading rooms. When students enroll we ensure they get quality lecturers and other services including even organizing early graduations which is always indicated on our academic calendars so that students are assured of the completion of their courses right from the beginning.

The UCC respondent ranked the factors that contributed to build their brand equity in order of importance as follows: student – lecturer relationship, emotional environment, quality faculty, course suitability, physical facilities and academic instruction. GIMPA ranked it sources of brand equity as: location, course suitability, learning environment and student – lecturer relationship. At CU they were quality faculty, emotional environment and physical facilities. Similarly their counterparts in the private sector ranked the sources of brand equity for their individual universities as follows: CU – quality faculty, emotional environment, physical facilities and brand awareness; VVU – quality lecturers, good library, physical facilities, emotional environment and location; GCUC – quick publication of results and release of certificates, perceived faculty quality, student lecturer – relationship and serene environment.

IV. Discussion

This paper investigated the understanding of brand equity by university management. It was evident from the responses that brand equity has different interpretations. This finding is consistent with literature. For example (Aaker, 1991) opined that, brand equity is the set of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds value to a firm and /or that firm's customers and (Marinova, Shiu, Cui & Marinov, 2011) pointed out that it is the increased utility and value endowed to a service by its brand name.

Furthermore, all the public universities interviewed had a better understanding of the brand equity concept as compared to private universities who had a fair understanding. The private universities referred to brand equity as having a competitive urge over the competition, value that puts a university ahead of the competition and one university said it had little knowledge about the concept. This findings provide support for (Yussof, 2003)'s studies which used students of private and public universities and opinions shared from the two groups differed.

On the second research question as regards students' awareness of the various university brands and programs offered most of them said awareness was mainly through websites, word of mouth, church announcements, outstanding performance of their quality alumni and brand elements like university logo. Previous studies are consistent with the results of the current one. For example (Martina, 2011) in a research at Brno University of Technology identified the sources of information for potential students as websites and advertisements in newspapers. Earlier on (Kneblová, 2009) in a similar study revealed university websites, open days, fliers, fairs, articles, the use of media (especially advertising) as major promotional elements used to create awareness.

As regards the factors which contribute to build the university brand equity all the institutions interviewed mentioned brand awareness, course suitability, physical facilities, brand loyalty, emotional environment, perceived faculty quality, academic instruction, university reputation and career development. Thus the current study corresponds with the research work by (Allam & Malik,2016) who argued that quality of education and physical infrastructure influence brand equity. Studies by (Kurz, Scannell & Veeder, 2008) also revealed that student-faculty. In addition, the findings concur with current research work by (Chahal & Bala

2012; Nath & Bawa, 2012) that perceived quality is an important dimension that have direct effect on service brand equity.

Limitations:

The study has some limitations. First, the sample was small, - the researcher focused on six universities in Ghana. The study therefore can only be generalized with caution but this is often the case with qualitative research. However the study used judgmental sampling methods to ensure that the researcher collected in - depth data from people with the needed information in the study institutions. Another limitation is that the study should have encompassed different individuals within the universities. Thus, more appealing findings would have been found if other audiences (students, faculty members) were interviewed and their views were compared. Different stakeholders in some studies have held different perceptions of an organization (Carmeli, Gilat, & Weisberg, 2006). In spite of these shortcomings the results provide avenues for further research in the field of education. Future research, could focus on more universities and include interviews with students and faculty members to explore some of the issues that emerge from the interview with management.

V. Conclusion and Managerial Implications

This study sought to explore the university management understanding of the brand equity concept in Ghana by assessing university management's own definition of the brand construct, the level of awareness of their brand, and the factors that contributed to build brand equity

The study found out that the public universities had a better understanding of the concept and are using several variables that contribute to their brand equity. This finding therefore provides enough grounds to say that Ghanaian universities understand the brand equity concept. Findings with regards to how management creates awareness shows a preponderant use of websites, radio, TV and word of mouth communication. All sampled institutions made use of factors such as physical facilities, reputation, emotional environment, perceived faculty quality, student – lecturer relationships at varying levels to attract potential students. This finding indicates the extent to which universities in Ghana understand the need to use certain devices and variables to build their equity.

In spite of the research limitations it can be concluded that the brand equity concept would be understood better by university management with this study. This is because there is enough evidence in this study that with the exception of a few, many universities understand the brand equity concept and can be applied to gain competitive advantage. As part of the recommendations for the study management of universities should build small institutional advancement/marketing teams involving staff with marketing and non – marketing backgrounds. The mixed team will over time ensure university management understanding and appreciation of factors that add value to their brands and enforce its implementation.

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