Full Length Research Paper

Factors influencing choice of a university by students in Zimbabwe

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This paper discussed factors that influence choice of a university by students in Zimbabwe. A cross-sectional qualitative design involving the use of focus groups is used. The research revealed that choice of a university brand is influenced by a number of internal factors such as the quality of programmes offered by the institution, the brand name of institution, state of facilities, location of university, level of tuition fees, relationships and networks with stakeholders, and university visibility through communications. The implications are that universities should be treated as brands. The management focus should be on those attributes that form the core, tangible, augmented and potential components of the university brand.

Key words: Brand, corporate brand management, university brand, brand attributes.

INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest growing sectors in Zimbabwe over the past one and a half decades has been higher education. The country has managed to establish at least a state university, teacher training college, a polytechnic and a vocational centre in each of its ten provinces. Although the number of aspiring students is high each year, the competitive terrain appears to be getting rougher and rougher as these institutions are now competing with other private and international institutions for better students and staff. Institutions now need to differentiate themselves on a number of attributes for them to be perceived as better 'brands'.

This study will build and contribute work in corporate brand management with specific focus on higher education. Although studies in corporate brand manage-ment focusing on commercial entities have been extensively carried (Abratt and Mofekeng 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003; De Chernatony et al., 2004; Hulberg, 2006), there has not been an extended study of the same in higher education. Little research in corporate brand

management in higher education was carried in the USA (Harvey, 1996; Curtis et al., 2009; Pinar et al., 2011), Australia (Gray et al., 2003) and the UK (Chapleo, 2010). In Africa, the only known research in brand management in higher education was done in Egypt (Mourad et al., 2011). No known research has been done in sub-Saharan Africa in brand management of higher education. As such this study will provide insight into the brand management issues of universities in Zimbabwe. This work will contribute knowledge on critical branding issues that managers of universities would need to pay attention to if they are to gain a sustainable competitive advantage on the market place.

Research objectives and questions

The objectives of this research are to explore the factors associated with a good university brand that students look for when choosing a university to study with, and, to

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further debate and inform on issues surrounding university branding. The main question which this research is going to answer is, "what are the factors that influence the choice of a university to study with by prospective students?"

To achieve these objectives, literature review on general corporate brand management and university branding was undertaken. Furthermore, a qualitative research involving focus groups was carried.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of branding started around 1550 BC when marks were put with a hot iron on beasts for purpose of differentiation (Jevons, 2008). Since then commercial organisations have used branding as 'the creation of a corporate identity and reputation' (Pinar et al, 2010) and is viewed as a source of competitive advantage.

A brand is a name, term, symbol, design or a combination of these or any other feature that identifies one seller's good/service as distinct from others (Doyle, 2001; De Chernatony and MacDonald, 2000; Kotler, 1997). This definition is criticised for being product oriented instead of communication oriented and does not address intangible components (Jevons, 2008). Aaker (1991, 1996) and Keller (2008) in closing this gap, then define a brand as the firm's intangible assets which function as powerful differentiator for the business and its customers. Ries (1998) brings the idea of a brand being a singular idea or concept that a product owns inside the mind of the prospect buyer and a seller must thus provide a cluster of value satisfaction. What is common in these definitions is the differentiation role that branding plays.

The organisation itself is a brand and corporate branding involves establishing differentiation and preference at the level of the organization rather than individual product or services (Curtis et al., 2009). Knox and Bickerton (2003) define corporate brand as the visual, verbal and behaviours of an organisation's unique business model expressed through its mission, core values, beliefs, communication and culture. This means that universities are brands and have features that make them different from one another. These include their offering, distinctive identity and added values (Chapleo, 2010). Therefore, a brand becomes a significant influence on the selection of a university (Mourad et al., 2011) in this increasingly competitive higher education environment (Chen, 2008).

Since the 1980s, corporate branding of universities in the UK and USA has become increasingly important as competition for students, faculty and staff escalated (Malmelin, 2009; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Hemsey-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Durkin et al. (2012) have observed that as competition increases, the use of marketing theories and concepts which have been effective in the business world is being gradually applied to many universities in the world. In studies done in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA and the UK, Mazzarol (1998) has observed that image and resources as well as coalition and integration are the major sources of competitive advantage in corporate branding of universities. Alreck and Settle (1999) also have noted that university preference is influenced by six customer values namely dependability, longevity, convenience, aesthetics, frugality and simplicity values. This competition has spread to other continents such as Asia (Khatri and Sharma, 2011; Gray et al., 2003), Africa (Mourad et al., 2011) as universities try to move from product branding to corporate branding for sustainability.

Reasons for branding in higher education

Branding of products is common in consumer and industrial markets. Little has been done on the branding of services and more so, higher education. However, in today's increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment, universities have to turn to branding as a solution to the highly competitive marketplace. The universities need branding as a tool for differentiation, (Aaker, 1991; Gabbott and Hogg, 1998), to give consumers confidence in product choice (Erdem and Swait, 1998), to provide promise to the consumers about the service, (De Chernatony and MacDonald, 1998). The other reasons for branding of state universities are to improve image and reputation in light of public funding, to attract high quality students and staff in the midst of competition from well funded private universities and to instill sense of institutional pride.

Conceptualization of a brand

Kotler (1997) conceptualised a product to have four key components. These are the core product, tangible product, augmented product and potential product. The core product is the part of the product which explains the reason for using the product as it is the one that satisfies the need. The tangible product is the part which makes the core product 'visible'. In other words it 'tangibilises' the core product. Examples include the brand name, symbols or the aesthetics of the product. The augmented product includes the 'after- sales' activities such as follow-ups to determine customer satisfaction after the product purchase and consumption. Finally, the potential describes that part of the product which prolongs the life span of that product as it protects the product from effects of competition. Included in this component is product differentiation and quality, legal protection of the product through patents and copyrights and strategic alliances with competitors.
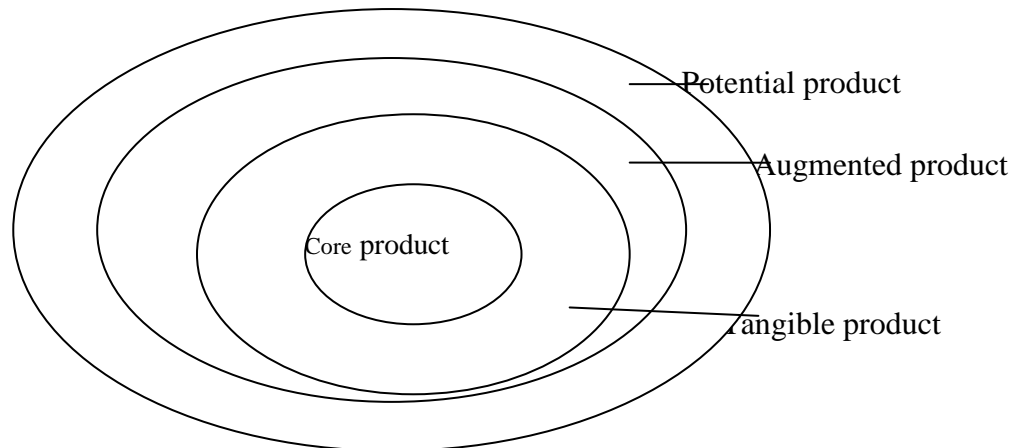
Figure 1. Product anatomy (Kotler, 1997).

Kotler's (1997) product anatomy model (Figure 1) puts the core product at the centre to show that it influences the rest of the components.

As brands are products, so the product anatomy components identified by Kotler (1997) also apply to brands. This means that universities as brands have the core product attributes, tangible product attributes, augmented product attributes and potential product attributes which if managed properly lead to satisfaction with the offering thereby influencing reputation, image and ultimately choice by students.

Other scholars such as Mourad et al. (2011) conceptualised a brand as having **symbolic attributes** (brand personality, social image and brand positioning), **service attributes** (price, perceived quality, after-sales services) and **provider attributes** (location of service, historical image and relationship between service providers and service consumers). The challenge with this model is that it does not clearly show the relationship or the interdependence that exists among the various brand attributes.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology involving a single case study, the Midlands State University, was used in this research. The qualitative approach was used in order to explore the emerging issues concerning universities as brands. An exploratory study was necessary to get an in-depth understanding of this new phenomenon in universities, 'corporate branding' since it was perceived to be inherent to for-profit organizations only (Whisman, 2009). A complex detailed understanding of the phenomenon was needed (Creswell, 2007; Sekeran and Bougie, 2009; Creswell and Clark, 2011). This detail could only be obtained by interacting with subjects of study and probing in a natural set up. The qualitative research allowed participants ' to be empowered to share their stories, hear their voices and minimise the power relationship that often exists between the researcher and the participants' (Creswell,

2007:40).

Drawing from the recommendations by Yin (2003), data for this study were collected from a variety of sources, including secondary sources (e.g. the university's documents and internet site), as well as interviews with current students. Three focus group discussions involving 9-10 students were held. An interview guide was used to start and direct the discussions. The questions in the guide covered four broad areas of brand attributes according to branding literature. These are core brand attributes, tangible brand attributes, augmented brand attributes and potential brand attributes. The average time for the discussion was 6 h. This allowed for the thorough examination of the issues.

The focus group discussions were recorded manually and using a tape-recorder. Then six hours after the last focus group discussion, the discussion was translated. The content was then coded and condensed to allow analysis through the various immerging themes. This approach was informed by (Creswell, 2007).

FINDINGS

After explaining the various brand attributes, the participants were asked to identify the factors that they regarded as core, tangible, augmented or potential brand attributes which they would consider when choosing universities to study with.

Core brand attributes

The participants considered marketability or quality of the programme and ability to complete the programme within the stipulated time as the core brand attributes.

On marketability of the programme, one participant said, "If I knew of a university that offers a programme that allows me to be absorbed by the job market as soon as I complete that programme, I would do everything to get the place and pay the fees". This statement was

echoed by all the participants in the group. A follow up comment was, "the reason why we are here is not to grow physically, but to acquire knowledge that makes us employable". It emerged clearly that in this highly competitive environment, the relevance of the curriculum to the needs of the industry and the country was key in positioning the programme of study and the university offering it.

The ability to complete the programme within a stipulated period of study was viewed to be comparably critical with marketability of the programme. A participant remarked, "There are institutions in this country and the region where students do not finish their programmes of study on time because of student or staff unrest or non-availability of the critical skills to teach the programme". It was clear therefore that students study the history of the university to understand the programmes offered before making a choice to study with the institution. These results are consistent with the findings from a study of Australian, USA, UK and New Zealand universities by Mazzarol (1998). He has observed that flexible courses, safety within the institution and excellent teaching staff constitute part of the critical learning environment of the university which students consider when making university choices.

Tangible brand attributes

The tangible brand attribute considered by the participants was the learning environment and consists of the quality of staff, physical structures (such as quality and availability of lecture rooms, student accommodation and sporting facilities, IT, laboratory and library facilities), level of tuition fees, location of the university and brand name of the university. Participants described these as "psychological cues" because they portray a cosmetic make-up of the institution and can easily attract potential students. "We research about the institution using websites, published yearbooks or make personal visits to the institution to assess the physical structures, quality of facilities or even qualifications of lectures and tutors who manage programmes of our interest." The participants observed that the provision of accommodation was a challenge for most universities in the country and region but indicated that where management makes arrangements with local communities for the provision of accommodation the problem is alleviated. As was observed by Ng and Forbes (2008) and Pinar et al. (2010), quality of facilities, accommodation, tuition fees and sporting facilities are the supporting value creation activities which generate the brand impressions. The core activities cannot function properly without these.

Geographic location of the university in the country and in the city appears to have an impact as well on choice of the university. The accessibility to the institution due to road networks and spatial position seems to give universities in the central regions and capital city a competitive advantage. One participant commented, "Holding other things constant, I would prefer a university closer to home, that I can get to easily without spending much money or being exhausted". It emerged also that the specific location of the university in the city can have a bearing on perception of the quality of programmes offered by the institution. Universities in the low density areas are perceived to be more business oriented due to the tranquility of their environment. Those in the high density areas are perceived to be operating in noisy environments but have more concern with student accommodation.

There was no consensus on the effect of tuition fees on decision to enroll with a particular university. The participants felt that the fees were generally the same for state universities due to regulation. However, some participants felt that if the level of fees is reflective of the quality of services offered, they would be prepared to pay more fees. Therefore, the fees are seen as value enhancing (Ng and Forbes, 2008)

The brand name of the university also appeared to be another factor that influences university choice particularly where students have never had contact with that university. A participant gave the example of CHINHOYI University, MSU and UZ indicating that the name UZ or MSU tended to positively influence choice compared to CHINHOYI. "Imagine CHI-NHO-YI. What does it mean to someone who hasn't been there? It scares me away..." remarked the participant. This finding supports the studies by Gray et al. (2003) on factors influencing choice of UK universities to study with by Asian prospective students, in which the university name appeared on 4th position out of 24 factors.

Augmented brand attributes

Relationships with stakeholders such as the industry, professional bodies and alumni networks were considered key augmented brand attributes.

The participants unanimously agreed that engagement of the industry and professional bodies was necessary to keep abreast with changes in these areas and improve the quality of the degree programmes. "Universities should go an extra mile to visit organizations where their graduates are working and assess the level of the company and individual performance. They should constantly get feedback from professional bodies because these have a big influence in the industry." The participants gave example of universities whose programmes are developed and reviewed together with the industry. Their graduates have very few challenges in getting placements or even moving up the ladder of the organisation hierarchy.
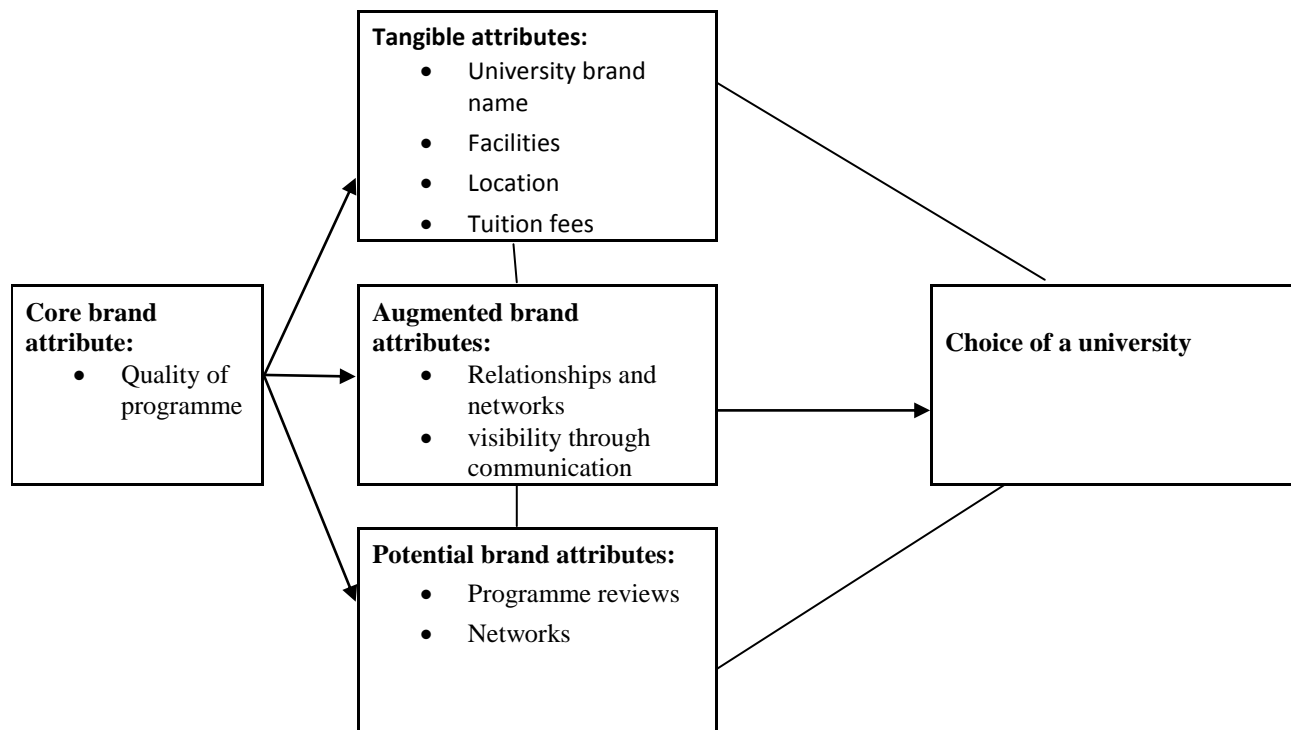
Figure 2. Model of factors influencing choice of a university. Source: Interview data.

On alumni network, it emerged that students are interested in knowing who is where and doing what? Universities that have a strong alumni network allow former and current students to share information on developments in their fields, career prospects, etc. It is like an out of the classroom professional development programme. It emerged then that those universities that show alumni activities on their websites have a competitive advantage when it comes to choice of university by prospecting students.

General communication activities of the university with the various stakeholders such as prospecting students, current students, graduates, employers and prospective employers were deemed to have a positive influence on university choice as stakeholders are updated of developments within the university. This was seen to create a 'sense of belonging' to that institution.

Potential brand attributes

Every strong brand needs to have potential brand attributes for it to be able to stand the test of times, remain dominant and continue to contribute to the organisation's net profit value. Universities likewise should have their own potential brand attributes.

Continuous programme reviews and relationship with key stakeholders such as the industry and professional bodies were identified as brand attributes that prolong the brand presence and dominance. "A programme of study can only remain relevant if it is still contributing to the meeting of needs of the society (...) this happens through constant reviews with the stakeholders". This was a statement by one of the participants and was widely discussed. Brands lose market share due to competitors' activity. The competitors exploit gaps in the market when the market is underserved or unserved. Therefore, gaps can be closed by 'going to the market' and understanding that market, hence the need to meet the various stakeholders.

DISCUSSION

The results have shown that brand attributes that influence choice and consumption of a consumer goods are the same as for the service and in particular, higher education. The implication of this on university brand management is that if it is possible to manage powerful consumer brands so as to gain and maintain a competitive advantage, then the same can be done with universities. Therefore, the identified key factors from this study which influence choice of a university can be presented in a framework as shown in Figure 2.

These results are somehow consistent with the findings by Gray et al. (2003) in the study of Australian universities. They identified that the learning environment, reputation and graduate career prospects are key factors influencing choice of a university.

An understanding of this model will be useful to the university management in many ways. Drawing from Ng and Forbes (2008), management will be able to reduce the gap between what students expect and what the institution thinks students expect (expectation gap); between the delivery of a service and the institution's external communications,(communication gap) and the development of service standards and the actual delivery of service standards (service gap).

The results also show that creation of a powerful brand that meets students' expectations is a strategic issue in this competitive environment and so should not be left to the university's marketing and PR departments alone. Universities should invest more in creating and maintaining the determinants of a strong university brand.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper sought to explore the factors that influence the choice of a university by students. It can be concluded that there are a number of internal factors which influence university choice by students and at the core of these is the quality of programmes offered by the institution. The other factors are brand name of institution, state of facilities, location of university, level of tuition fees, relationships and networks with stakeholders, and university visibility through communications.

It is recommended that management treat branding as a strategic issue and that an organisation-wide approach to quality service delivery is needed if the university is to be perceived favourably by the students.

A single case study approach was used in this study, so it is recommended that this study be carried on a broader scale. Qualitative research has been used to identify the key variables that drive students' choice of a university. Further, research can be done to test and validate these findings using a quantitative approach.

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