# Qualitative Insights into Brand Management Practices of Universities in Emerging Markets: The Ghanaian Perspective

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**Abstract**

Increasing competition emanating from private sector participation in Ghana's higher education is redefining management practices of most universities. University brands in students' consideration set are those that offer easier recall and are inherently distinctive and appealing. A brand identified as such would signify quality and offer a strong sense of association for potential students to grasp what it is and what makes it special. This study examined brand management practices employed by Ghanaian Public and Private Universities to enhance university brand equity in the country. The study was conducted using in-depth interviews with Public Relations/Marketing Directors of five (5) public and private universities. The study showed that universities use different brand elements and devices to differentiate their brands. Various activities are also carried out including PR audits and feedback on lecturer evaluations to measure customer perceptions of the brand. Universities however had little or no budget for brand building activities.

**Key Terms:** University, Higher Education, Brand Management, Ghana

**Introduction**:

The study of brands and brand management has attracted a great deal of interest among practitioners and academics for the past two decades. Today, competition is fierce in the tertiary education sector due to the threat of new entrants and many existing rivals in the market. For universities to outperform their competitors and grab a greater share of the market, an appropriate brand management strategy is necessary. Branding is a concept in the marketing field which can play an important role in differentiating a university's brand from other competitors. It is therefore important that universities develop and put to use brand management practices which will make them stand out in order to attract a group of loyal consumers better than the competition.

Although many universities have become conscious of managing their brands by developing vision statements, impressive signages, and core values among others, there is a paucity of research on branding higher education (HE). A review of existing literature on branding universities indicates that most of the researches were done in the  developed world and these researches investigated general branding policies in universities and also in particular  institutions (Belanger et al. 2002; Chapleo 2004; Judson et al. 2006). For example, studies by Bulotaite (2003); Gray et al. (2003) focused on the learning environment, reputation, graduate career prospects, destination and cultural integration as factors that can be used in positioning a university. Other researchers such as (Argenti 2000; Jevons 2006; Bunzel 2007) to a large extent focused on promotions and brand identity elements.(Waeraas and Solbaak, 2008) also investigated how branding efforts  were carried out  in some universities and the challenges faced as a result of defining the university, strategic marketing (Balwin and James, 2000; Reindfleisch, 2003), positioning and branding (Gray et al., 2003), marketing communications (Klassen, 2002; Mortimer, 1997), marketing models (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009), market planning (Maringe and Foskett, 2002)  and whether universities can have successful brands (Chapleo 2005). Although (Mupemhi, 2013) acknowledges that few researches for example have been conducted on corporate brand management  in the USA (Harvey, 1996; Curtis et al., 2009; Pinar et al., 2011), corresponding studies are almost negligible in Africa and even non – existent in the western part of the continent. Researches in Africa are few and scattered with  studies on brand management  conducted by (Mourad et al, 2011) in Egypt and recently in Zimbabwe by (Mupemhi 2013). However none of them extended their investigations into the brand management practices in higher education. It can be seen from the literature that there is a lack of studies on brand management practices for services including universities with an emerging market perspective. This study has become important and is positioned to fill the gap in research on brand management practices of universities in a developing country like Ghana.

In this study, we present and analyze the brand management practices of five public and private universities in Ghana operating in an increasingly competitive environment. The study is significant in a number of ways. The study is timely given the favourable democratic and current economic climate in Ghana which has made it a source of attraction for many potential students in the sub–region seeking to have university education in the

country. Brand management is an essential concept in marketing which can help universities develop their brands and uniquely position them in the minds of potential consumers as well as get favourable placement in world rankings. In addition the study will ginger interest to investigate branding issues by other researchers in tertiary education. Lastly the study will ensure the documentation of standard brand management practices to be implemented by universities to improve the image of most institutions and strengthen their ability to recruit more potential students.

## Literature Review
### What is a Brand?

A brand may be defined from the consumers' perspective and/or from the brand owner's perspective. In addition, brands are sometimes defined in terms of their purpose, or by their characteristics (Wood, 2000). The most widely used and classical definition of a brand has been the one developed by The American Marketing Association (AMA, 1960) which states that a brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of them used to identify the goods and services of a seller and to differentiate them from the competition. Other researchers (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993 and 2008; Kotler and Armstrong, 2007) have used this definition in their studies. Essentially, the definition indicates that brands make use of attributes to identify a product and to differentiate it from its competitors, through the use of a name, logo, design or other visual signs and symbols. Although the AMA's definition is popular, it is often criticized as concentrating too much on the product and the features that are seen (Crainer, 1995), too mechanical (Arnold, 1992), "deconstructionist" (Kapferer, 1992), reductionist and restrictive (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a). Similarly, de Chernatony (1993) criticizes that the notion of a brand in this definition is likened to a name and a visual identity, which is subsequently interpreted to mean a logo. Generally, the contentious areas of branding as mentioned in the literature include the numerous definitions offered for the brand construct and establishing the relative importance of tangible versus intangible brand elements.

Furthermore, the literature makes a distinction between a small 'b' brand and a 'B 'brand. The small 'b' brand, similar to the traditional definition refers to the ability of the firm to differentiate itself by the use of a name and a visual identity, enabling consumers to make a distinction between brands (de Chernatorny, 1993). In this sense the logo of a university can be seen as the brand.

A big 'B' in the literature sees a brand as a complex entity and value system and not ordinary visual identity. This was affirmed by (Gardner and Levy, 1955) that a brand name is more than a logo or symbol used by firms to distinguish a firm's goods from other competing brands and to differentiate it from other manufacturers. Thus a brand is a set of complex ideas and attributes. Similarly, Kapferer (2008) acknowledged that a brand provides the vision or identity that guides the creation of products and services bearing that name. Thus the vision of a university, which includes their core values is called identity. Similarly (de Chernatony and McDonald,2003) extends the argument of the big 'B' notion by defining a successful brand as an identifiable product, service, person or place, perceived as relevant with unique added values which match their needs more closely

In spite of the above debate in literature Keller (2002), indicated that one of the most valuable assets for most organizations is the value endowed to their products or services as a result of the brand name, thus brand equity because it offers them significant returns. This is in support of the resource-based view theory, an important economic theory developed by (Penrose, 1959; Barney, 1986; Grant, 1991; Petraf, 1993) which stipulates that firms are heterogeneous in terms of their resources and internal capabilities. The resources can assist the firm gain competitive advantage if they are strategically valuable, rare, durable, inappropriable, imperfectly imitable, and imperfectly substitutable. Brands are intangible assets of a company and if they meet the above criteria and are properly managed can offer superior advantages.

The concept of competitive advantage has been exhaustively discussed in the brand management literature and explains that a differentiated product attracts more loyalty. The historical evolution of brands has shown that brands initially have played the role of differentiating between competing items, offering consistency of quality and providing legal protection. Today's market is flooded with new and old brands and branding is therefore necessary to isolate products with distinctive qualities for purchase by consumers.

**Brand Management Practices**

According to Schatzki, (2002), a "practice" consists of hierarchically organized bundles of activities or basic actions. Practices are consistent patterns of activities, performed in the organization through several interconnected behaviours that are grounded in and guided by particular collective structures undertaken by a group of people. (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 249-250; in Jarventie- Thesleff et al., 2011). Similarly, Zollo and Winter (2002) define a practice as a specific routine aimed at fulfilling the purpose of the firm therefore activities that are not repetitive, or are not being rehearsed constantly, cannot be referred to as a practice. The management of brands must be approached strategically (Wood, 2000) with detailed plans and processes that permeates the university at every level.  Subsequently, brand managers' activities have emerged as the most important top management priority as far as developing an effective marketing strategy is concerned (Marketing Leadership Council, 2001). Madden et al., (2006) emphasized that brand management activities have to demonstrate that a portfolio of strong brands create value for the shareholders.

According to Gray (2006), the firm's brand (which includes a university) is strengthened as a result of increased communication between staff (internal communication) so that they can understand students needs better. In this wise, every employee of the university is key in ensuring an effective brand management including the Governing Council and the university management which form the top hierarchy as far as decision- making for the institution is concerned. In addition, top management, most importantly, must have a good brand orientation, so that they recognize brands as valuable assets and to a large extent centre strategy and activities on building a strong brand. Brand orientation in the literature has been identified as an organizational culture, shared by all members which propels the firm's strategy (Baumgarth, 2010; Wong and Merrilees, 2007; Baumgarth, 2010; Urde et al., 2013) in order to achieve superior marketing advantage over competitors. Culture involves sharing ideas and values among the members of a group using symbols and informal or formal communication, explicit information; its production by past actions of a group or of the members of a group; its capacity to be learned; its capacity to shape behaviour and to influence one's perception of the world (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Bridson and Evans, (2004) expanded brand orientation to include the behavioural aspects of the organization.

**Branding Higher Education (HE) Institutions**

Branding has gained increased popularity in higher education in many advanced countries in the last decade. McNally and Speak (2002) defined a higher education brand as perceptions or feelings that consumers hold about a particular institution. Ensuring sustainability in HE has meant a gradual shift in the promotional landscape of many universities from the use of traditional promotional tools as funding from various governments for universities and colleges dwindle to branding (Pinar et al, 2013).Although the concept is gaining increased popularity universities are seen as complex organizations having multiple brands (Stripling, 2010; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009). For example, for a particular institution different brands may exist for the following stakeholders: undergraduate students, graduate students, alumni, corporate recruiters, local community members, parents of students among others.  It is therefore emphasised that the  multiple brands (i.e. sub-brands) exist in the university, although there may be shared meanings and identity elements across the various brands which can be seen in the overall university brand.

Despite the questions that this issue pose the main purpose of brand management in firms is to establish a favourable disposition towards the organization by all its stakeholders. Two opinions have emerged with respect to HE branding. Some researchers have indicated that higher education branding has borrowed several good practices from the business environment, making it function like a corporation (Gumport, 2000). Others have said that higher education branding, is somehow different from the branding concept applied to the business environment.  Whichever opinion that people hold branding organizations such as universities involves a lot of complexities as compared to product branding. University brand management is concerned about people and their  attitudes, beliefs, and values are not  static or the same but  may vary considerably.  University branding can be likened to corporate branding where the   organizational culture for instance, can influence corporate brand to a much larger extent than product branding. It will also require total commitment to the corporate institution by all staff (Balmer, 2001).Effective brand management is needed to recruit high quality students, faculty members and attract funding. According to Chapelo (2011) the brand management practices of universities are determined by the main objectives of the branding concept. He therefore stipulates that the brand management practices of universities should indicate its mission and core values. Thus it  must show the purpose of its existence, "what" and "who" it is, and the core values and characteristics in other words "what it stands for" and what it is going to be known for; it must increase awareness and enhance reputation (Waeraas and

Solbakk, 2008; Chapelo, 2011).

Subsequently, brand management practices are multi-disciplinary, combining elements of strategy, corporate communications, and culture (Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Gylling and Linderg-Repo, 2006). Increased competition makes it imperative for universities and colleges to search for a unique identity and a definition of what they are in order to differentiate themselves and attract students and academic staff (Chapleo 2004; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007).One such brand management practice is the use of external visual executions like logos, taglines and advertising campaigns (Bunzel, 2007). For example according to Renelle Shampeny, Director of Marketing, SUNY Empire State College, advocated for institutions with poor awareness problem, to make use of strong visuals, taglines or slogans which are vividly displayed in publications, ads, billboards and university web sites to unify the programs and integrate the communications. In the last two decades many universities, especially in the United States of America and Canada have engaged in various activities of branding and rebranding themselves. Some of these universities include Arcadia University, Dickson College, New York University and Renessaler. For example, in the early 1990s Renessaler realised it was not well positioned to prospective students compared to its world - renowned rival, MIT or even schools such as Cal Tech, UC Berkeley and Carnegie – Mellon who offered exceptionally strong technical programmes and charged lower fees than private universities such as Rensselaer undertook rebranding. The increasingly intense competitive tertiary education market left Rensselaer in a positioning of no man's land. It therefore decided to change its strategy and after a thorough audit of its strengths and weaknesses Technological creativity became the hallmark of the institution, and the appealing tag line 'why not change the world' was adopted. The result of this was a major influx of talented students, increased financial support and a tremendous hike in the Institute's reputation. Today, Renessaler is thriving. Its most recent freshmen classes are the most qualified and talented in the last two decades (Van Auken, 2007).It can be deduced from the Renessaler example that a brand, that is not properly managed, leaves an organization with no protection to competitive market forces (Gregory, 2004). Aaker (2003) supports this view by outlining the benefits of a differentiated brand: added credibility, easy recall among consumers, more efficient and effective communication and a sustainable competitive advantage. From the foregoing discussions, the study sought to fulfil the following objectives:

> To identify the brand elements and devices used in differentiating university brands in Ghana.
> To determine the activities of staff and management in ensuring an organizational culture that helps in building a strong brand'
> To examine the procedures used in measuring customers perceptions of the university brand.
> To examine the extent that brand building is given consideration in annual budgets.

**Methodology**
Both primary and secondary data were collected for this study. Qualitative interviews were carried out using five (5) Public and Private Universities. These universities are Central University College, Ghana Christian University, Valley View University, University of Professional Studies and Accountancy (UPSA) and Ghana Institute of Public Administration (GIMPA). The selection of the universities for interview was made based on visibility (Ibrahim et al., 2013). Since we needed respondents with a large and accurate vision on the subject of study (Hise and Kelly, 1978; Dawes and Patterson, 1988), the brand management practices of universities, we chose respondents with a relatively high level of responsibility. The managers/ directors interviewed were mostly in charge of marketing or public relations of their respective institutions. Confidentiality of name of the respondents, and university was guaranteed. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and the period of the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes in duration. All interviews were done face-to-face and recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, the researcher not only initiated discussion of issues derived from the literature review and secondary data, but also allowed informants sufficient latitude for introspection and open reporting of their own experience and perspectives (Clandinin & Connelly,1994). These individualised recollections provided richness in the data and strengthened the research: by counteracting bias that may exist in the secondary data (Burgess, 1982); by adding matters of fact or detail that may only be recorded in individual memory (Samuel, 1982). We used literature reviews on brand management practices including brand orientation and corporate branding literature to develop a semi – structured questionnaire. The themes in the semi-structured questionnaire were comprehensive. Data collected were checked for clarity, organized and analyzed in line with the research objectives.

**Results and Discussions:**
Brand Elements and Devices Used in Differentiating University Brands:

All the universities interviewed used brand elements such as logo, taglines, brand names, signage, university crest and marques to differentiate themselves. According to the interviewee from university of Professional Studies:

UPSA uses a combination of logo, tagline, brand name, font, signage, University crest, marques, colors' and to some extent, the vibrant and evergreen leader Prof. Joshua Alabi, the current Vice Chancellor as a form of differentiation.

Activities of Staff and Management in Ensuring an Organizational Culture that Helps in Building a Strong Brand:

Management and staff of any organisation play a critical role in building, maintaining and promoting the brand of the organisation. Indeed the image of every organisation tells on its employees in dealing with people outside the organisation. For this reason, the study sought to investigate how staff and management of the various universities contribute to building their respective brands. For GIMPA, a series of activities put in place by the management of the school were given as measures used to enhance the brand of the university. They included:

> Qualifications of all GIMPA faculty members are published on GIMPA website.
> Program advisors are tasked to design and sell all programs to organizations, institutions and the general public.
> Academic calendar must be designed and given to all GIMPA staff and regular customers.

These instructions were seen as a conscious decision by management to give the school's brand some leverage on the market.

For Central University College, the positioning of the PR person at the top management level of the university is management's way of ensuring that a good and strong brand is built and maintained for the school. According to the interviewee:

I am a senior assistant director. I report directly to the president. I think this is the good thing...the president seems to have a good idea of what public relations is.

Likewise at the University of Professional Studies and Accountancy (UPSA) the establishment of a seven – man Public Affairs Directorate under the leadership of a marketing expert charged with the responsibility to prosecute the university's marketing and communications plan gives a clear agenda of a university management which is eager to build a strong brand. On the part of Ghana Christian University the respondent said publicise all programmes, recruit qualified faculty and ensure a good environment for academic work.

Procedures Used in Measuring Consumers Perception of the Brand:

With regard to how the various universities measure people's perception to know whether or not they have high brand equities and subsequent reputation, the interviewee from Valley View University mentioned the use of PR audits as a tool for this exercise. However, she conceded that the data collected through these PR audits have not yet been analysed to assess the true level of the brand equity and reputation of Valley View University. For his part, the interviewee from the Ghana Christian University mentioned discussions with random people to assess the level of brand equity of the school. He said:

We are able to arrive at that qualitatively. Just by discussions with people. Not the university staff but with people we even meet on the street.

The respondent from GIMPA said they rely on feedback on lecturer evaluations in measuring their brand equity. From UPSA the respondent indicated the use of surveys to measure customer satisfaction and loyalty about the individual programmes and the corporate brand from students, alumini, employees and the general public.

What is the level of awareness as far as building the university brand is concerned?

> Branding issues form part of the general Marketing and Communications planning process in all the universities. For all the universities brand building is therefore handled at the strategic level. Awareness creation has not been very vibrant and they have mainly focused on advertisements for fresh students and signages. Although the interviewees mentioned the enormous revenues their respective institutions had accrued over the years from having good brands, they decried the lack of dedicated budgets for their branding activities. For example, according to the interviewee from Central University College, she had to go through the Finance Department as and when she needed financing for projects

undertaken by the PR Department. In Valley View the respondent said that in their case the only money management is willing to give is advert for admissions.

**Conclusion and Managerial Implications:**

This study sought to explore the brand management practices of five (5) public and private universities. Findings from the sampled universities indicated that all of them used brand elements and devices to differentiate themselves. This is in line with (Chapeleo 2004; Hemseley – Brown and Goonawardana 2007) indication that universities must search for a unique identity to attract students and faculty. The literature also emphasised that branding is necessary to isolate products with unique qualities for consumers to make a purchase decision.

 Staff and management of these universities also undertook several activities to enhance their brand which included the use of their websites to publicise the educational backgrounds of faculty and placement of the Marketing Director/PR person at the top level of university management structure. Procedures for measuring students perceptions of the brand differed ranging from qualitative discussions with students on the street, feedback on lecturer evaluations, customer satisfaction surveys The results in the study however suggest that universities used different procedures to measure customer perceptions of their brand including PR audits, random interviews, and course evaluation by students and customer satisfaction surveys. Furthermore, not all the universities set aside separate budgets for brand management activities. Most promotional activities for the brand were focused on student admissions.

Based on the above results the following broad recommendations for brand management are offered: The National Accreditation Board should establish standard guidelines for measuring customer perceptions of university brands in the country. This will ensure a uniform assessment of universities and data gathered can be used to build a league table for tertiary institutions in  Ghana. Universities must be encouraged to vary their programmes in addition to the brand elements used to ensure a market positioning which makes them unique and attractive to potential consumers. Promotion is key for effective brand management therefore universities must have adequate budgets for brand building activities. Promotions play the role of increasing brand awareness and this affects perceived quality of the service and subsequent brand equity**.**

**Future Research Directions**

The author indicates some limitations in this study and suggests possible directions for future research. This study is based on data collected from five universities in Accra, the capital of Ghana. This is limiting in scope and it is recommended that future research should use a larger sample and include other institutions located in the hinterland for more statistical power and a higher degree of representation.Furthermore the research was done by empirically investigating only universities. The study could be replicated in other tertiary institutions in order to bring out some potential organizational cultural differences in brand management practices

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