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Brand Equity Influence on the Adoption of Professional Learning Courses: A Case of BA ISAGO University

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ABSTRACT

The study examines both the cognitive psychology and economics philosophies of the influence of brand equity on the adoption of professional learning courses in education and training providers (ETPs), using BA ISAGO University as a case study. A stratified sampling technique was applied to collect data from a sample of 114 respondents. The results show that there is “no or negligible relationship between brand equity (BE) and adoption of PLC in BIU during the given half a decade era. The study concludes that failure to attract students for PLC might be influenced by other extenuating factors apart from brand equity thus recommends development of stand-alone marketing campaign activities for professional learners and desists from combining marketing campaigns for PLC with those for home-grown programs as was the current case with BIU. Further studies could be done to evaluate pricing and or entry modes as an inducer for the uptake of PLC within tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Brand Equity (BE), Adoption of Professional Learning Course (APLC)

INTRODUCTION

BA ISAGO University (BIU) is a renowned indigenous private tertiary institution in Botswana that was established in 2002. BIU has experienced tremendous growth in terms of student enrolment numbers, number of programmes offered, its accreditation status, as well as transformation from a college into a fully-fledged University within a two-decade period. Of all the programmes within the Institution, apart from professional courses, positive growth was chronicled over a five-year period (2013 to 2018) of the study period. The anomaly posed major concerns to BA ISAGO University (BIU) thus, prompted the researcher to examine the extent of the correlation between brand equity and consumer adoption. The professional learning courses (PLC) in concern include Botswana Institute of Chartered Accountants (BICA), Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA), Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supplies (CIPS), Foundation In Accountancy (FIA)– Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), PASTEL, CISCO and lastly International Computer Driving License (ICDL). This study sought to shed more light and answer the following question:

- To what extent is BIU’s high brand equity perception shared by the market?

All these concerns come at the backdrop of Botswana’s slow economic growth, sluggish employment creation, changing market needs, as well as dwindling government coffers, the significantly declined number of students sponsored by the government and the annual increase in the number of unemployed graduates. While education and training providers (ETPs) are divided into Universities, University colleges, Institutes and Schools, to the ordinary Motswana, the significance of the categorization is lost. What also worsens the lack of comprehension is the poor or complete lack of understanding of the criteria for accreditation by the Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA). Therefore, there is no clarity on the value proposition in the market about private tertiary institutions such as BIU. With the public doubting BIU’s quality and credibility on professional courses, particularly in comparison to competitive public counterparts, the researchers sought to ascertain BIU’s brand equity perceptions and advise strategies it could use to cut through the clutter, differentiate and position itself to attract professional learners. The study applied Aaker’s Brand Equity model (ABE) as a theoretical framework to ascertain the strength of the relationship of BIU’s brand equity and its affect to consumers adoption of professional course. Brand equity refers to the value of a brand. The model combines brand

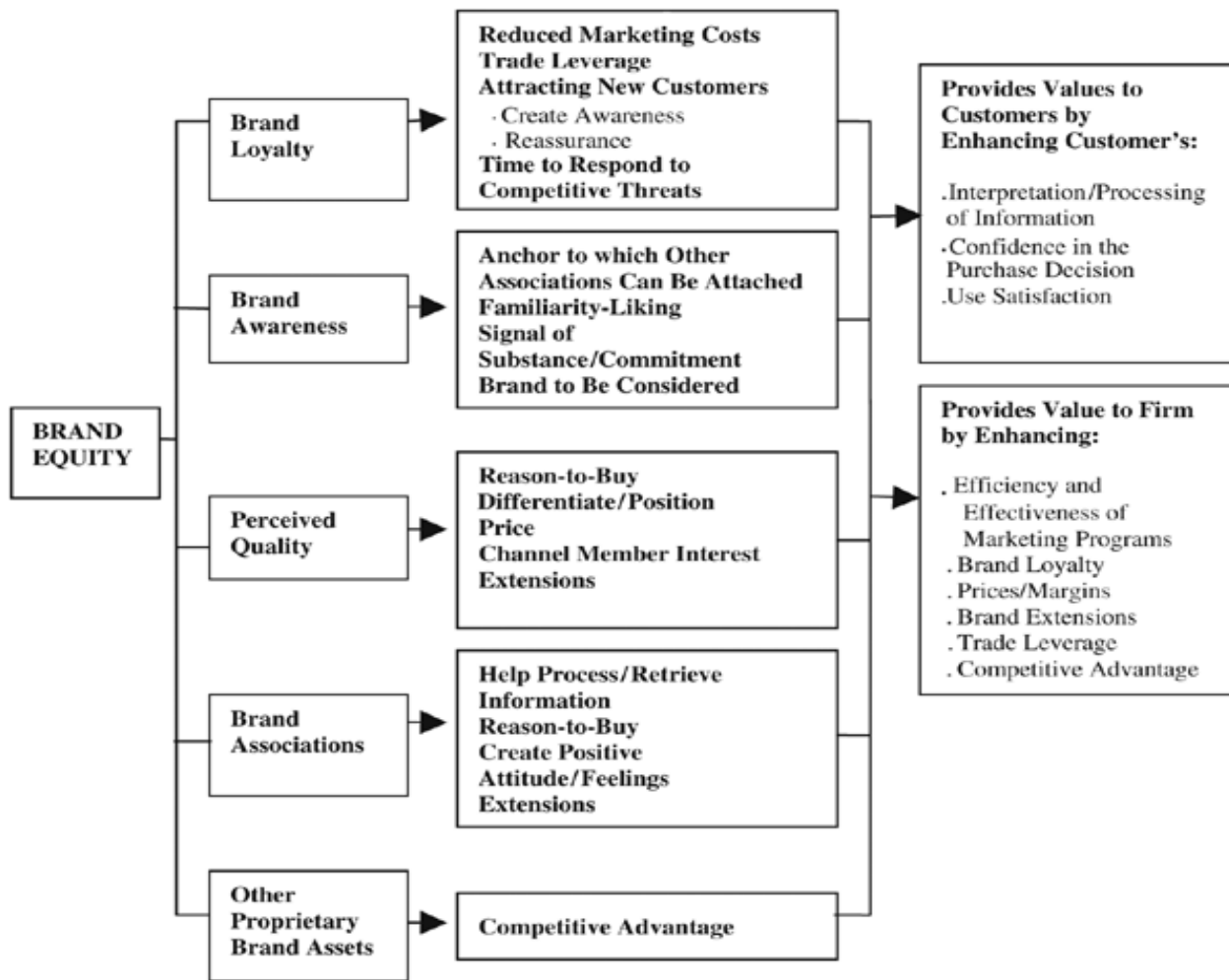


Figure 1. Aaker's Brand Equity Model

loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other proprietary brand assets, to offer enough value to customers and build confidence that could influence consumer's adoption process. The foundation of ABE is premised from the fact that if BE is positive then consumers easily adopt its new products by associating the new products with the existing well-known successful brand. The motive of the ABE model is to help in making a brand compromise of various brand components in order to illuminate, separate and advance a brand from its rivals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Equity

Aaker (1991) defines brand equity (BE) as a set of five interrelated categories namely Brand loyalty, Brand awareness, Perceived quality, Brand associations and Other proprietary assets that add up to give a product or service its value. Keller and Kotler (2013) elaborate that BE is the effect a product has on the consumer's response to marketing activities associated with such a product. Thus, from a consumer's point of view, BE represents attributes such as better product performance, stronger risk reduction, lower information costs and a positive image of the product. Therefore, in this study the use of BE in ETPs hinges on two

dimensions which are the core and supporting activities that are relevant for creating a university's brand value. The core value creation factors are part of the aspects considered in consumer decision making. These focus on the cognitive psychological process which influences consumer choices such as the four constructs in ABE namely brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality and brand association. The supporting value-creation factors emanate from economics philosophies that relate to "Other proprietary brand assets" in the ABE model. These include student experience with career services, physical facilities such as classrooms, laboratories, library services and others, that make the consumer do repeat purchases if satisfies with the previous experience. Alhaddad (2015) highlights the several advantages that strong brands with positive brand equity bring such as higher margins, brand-extension prospects, increases marketing communications effectiveness, and great loyalty. Thus, this research seeks to elucidate the influence of institutional BE on the choice of ETPs used to study professional learning courses.

Theoretical Framework

See Figure 1.

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is the positive feelings consumers have toward a product, the dedication to purchase the same product

or service repeatedly now and in the future. A powerful brand enjoys behavioural response tendencies towards it such as positive word-of-mouth, attachment by consumers towards that brand, regardless of competitor's actions or changes in the environment (Kocoglu, 2015; Hossain and Sakib, 2016; Hasan, and Khan, 2017). Any institution's brand loyalty stems from consumer's awareness of that product and this forms the basis of building strong and mutually beneficial relationships with clients. Astute organisations craft and carefully manage their brand messages and consumer's experiences with their products in order to achieve a competitive advantage in recruiting, retaining and fostering loyalty.

Brand Awareness

According to (Aaker 1991; Kapferer 2012; Keller 2013; Kotler 2016) brand awareness is the measured extent to which a brand is known among the public that can induce enough desire to make a purchase. The concept is used to determine how valuable a brand might be based on the idea that firmly established and reputable brands are more successful. Thus, in a case where consumers are aware of the existence and competence levels of BIU's professional learning courses, then there should be positive enrolment figures in those programmes. A brand that consumers can easily recognise, remember or are aware of will most probably become the consumer's first purchase choice and if satisfied becomes a huge competitive advantage to the firm. Brand recall is the ability of customers to remember and choose a certain product for use from a product category (Keller, 1997). Keller emphasises the importance of customer's easy recall and consideration of purchasing your product. Usually in Botswana, students have a limited number of ETPs to enrol at for professional learning courses thus, BIU's brand recall and brand recognition could be a competitive tool if the institution has strong brand equity. Thus, it is BIU's duty to ensure that they advertise their professional learning courses in the correct media platforms and craft eye-catching adverts that will cut through the clutter when a consumer is choosing a university.

Perceived Quality

A brand's perceived quality emanates from perceptions that consumers have about the innovativeness and ability of a product to meet customer's expectations. In most cases, reliable brands are perceived to be of high quality. It is believed that consumers perceive products with well-known brand names as better performers than unbranded products. Thus, branded products may generate more money than those with less brand equity. In the workplace environment, employees may consider an organization as being of high brand equity if the employees are happy with the workplace. Customers on the other hand consider a brand as of high quality if it leaves up to its promises, has a strong reputation in the society and is financially performing well. An astute way of adding brand equity to BIU would be to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes so that a positive image of the Institution is ingrained in the minds of the consumers.

Brand Associations

Brand associations are images, symbols or attributes which come into the consumer's mind about a brand or its benefit

(Juneja, 1999). It relates to a known entity's perceived qualities. Positive brand associations of BIU can be formed in comparison to competitor's products only when the Institution can provide acquaintances and differentiation that is not replicable. According to (Juneja, 1999) brand association is anything which is deep-rooted in customer's mind about the brand. BIU's brand can be associated with something positive such as a positive community service. Aaker (1991) further explains brand association as the customers' ability to easily recognise and identify previous interaction with a brand and intuitively select those previously dealt with brands over completely new ones. Of late, university websites play a pivotal role of registering recognition, creating students' perceptions and decisions about the place they will study in. Recent studies indicate the importance of using online tools in student recruitment. The importance of the website content and overall university online presentation, including social media accounts seems to be rapidly increasing. According to Keller, (2012) universities need to adapt their marketing strategies in order to combine traditional recruitment methods with technological tools, emails, social and mobile marketing. A similar study by (Rutter, Roper, and Lettice, 2015) demonstrates that a strong social media presence can have positive effect on university student recruitment, especially when university interacts with students via their social media accounts and can promptly respond to questions and comments. Despite the disruptions of on-campus recruitment, many employers still use these traditional methods of recruiting students and recent graduates. However, these methods are no longer enough to recruit the best young talent, worse still candidates for professional courses who hardly have time to come on campus. Today's buyers are tech savvy and social media maniacs therefore, it is the proliferation of the social media network services in brand management and marketing that bring us to the attention of social media networks. Different kinds of social media networking services have emerged such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and Flickr. In fact, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube are the most common channels companies use in their online marketing for creating brand awareness or just engaging with the customers.

Other Proprietary Brand Assets

Market differentiation is simply standing out in a crowd, making your product stand apart from others in a meaningful way. The goal of market differentiation is not just to look different but to look appealing so that a consumer is more likely to act on a company's product instead of others that are equally available. Market differentiation requires persuasion, and the goal is to persuade the audience that BIU have a product that is both different and better than that of competitors. Market differentiation works well when a message is clearly articulated, carefully and purposefully delivered, and when the points of distinction are made clear to the audience between two similar products. The goal of marketing BIU is not to highlight everything good about the institution. It's about making the intangible both tangible and desirable. According to Soutar and Turner (2002) a number of attributes attract students to a particular institution such as attractiveness of the campus, recommendation by family members, and proximity to home, campus atmosphere and

Table 1. The Correlation between Brand Equity and Adoption of Professional Learning Courses

	BIU's involvement in branding	Perceived Quality	Other Proprietary Brand Assets	Brand Awareness	Brand Association	Brand Loyalty/ Students intention to enroll with BIU
BIU's involvement in branding	Pearson Correlation	1	.071	.095	.271	.417**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	114	114	114	114	114

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

academic reputation. Students appear to be more prepared to accept almost any level of the other attributes, as long as they enrol in their preferred course.

METHODOLOGY

An institutional case study method was employed for this study. A quantitative research design employing a stratified random sampling technique was used to collect data from 114 respondents sampled out of BIU's Gaborone campus. A quantitative research method was used for data collecting. The method of data collection was based on questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed primarily using a range of established scales from previous studies. Quantitative data collected via a self-completion survey are used to test a model of brand equity. To increase internal validity and reliability, archival data and interviews with administration staff were conducted to add more insight into the study. The empirical data collected was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient "r" value was used as a measure of the linear correlation between X (brand equity) and Y (adoption of professional learning courses).

FINDINGS

Brand Equity's Moderating Variables Influence on Adoption of Professional Learning Courses

Before fully establishing the relationship between BE and the adoption of PLC, the researcher considered the influence of all the moderating variables of brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association and other proprietary brand assets.

Table 1 shows a significant positive relationship between BIU's brand association at a 2-tailed significant level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$, $r = +0.417$, $n = 114$). According to Creswell (2011) the closer the coefficient "r" is to +1 the stronger the positive relationship between the variables. This means that brand association contributes 41,7 percent of the adoption of professional learning courses. **Table 1** shows a significant positive relationship between BIU's brand awareness at a 2-tailed significant level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$, $r = .0271$, $n = 114$). This means that brand awareness contributes 27,1percent of the adoption of professional learning courses at BA ISAGO University. Although, this is in contrast to ABE's model, the findings of the study suggest that since branding is a significant influencer on the selection of a learning institution, creating and managing a strong university brand is still a vital marketing component though it might not act as a major

motivator for professional learners in BA ISAGO at the moment. **Table 1** shows a weak significant positive relationship between BIU's proprietary brand assets at a 2-tailed significant level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$, $r = .095$, $n = 114$). This means that proprietary brand assets contribute 9,5percent of the adoption of professional learning courses at BA ISAGO University. **Table 1** also shows a weak significant positive relationship between BIU's brand loyalty at a 2-tailed significant level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$, $r = .090$, $n = 114$). This means that brand loyalty contributes nine (9) percent of the adoption of professional learning courses at BA ISAGO University. **Table 1** shows a weak significant positive relationship between BIU's perceived quality at a 2-tailed significant level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$, $r = .071$, $n = 114$). This means that perceived quality contributes 7,1percent of the adoption of professional learning courses at BA ISAGO University. The research shows "no or negligible relationship" between brand equity and adoption of professional learning courses during the half decade period of study and suggests other more effective and efficient student recruitment techniques to continually thrive in a competitively dynamic educational marketplace (Chow, 2012). The study results shows that the failure to attract students for professional learning courses might be influenced by other extenuating factors apart from brand equity thus recommends development of stand-alone marketing campaign activities for professional learners and desists from combining marketing campaigns for professional courses with those for home-grown programs as is the case with BIU. The study also found out that the current BIU portal is obsolete and does not reflect current events happening in all of the institution's three campuses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found out that failure to attract students for professional learning courses at BIU is not influenced by brand equity. The study recommends that BIU should not only rely on traditional ways of recruiting students but may also increase the use of the institution's portal. Online course searches, downloadable application forms, up-loadable filled-up forms as well as potential student's personal documents, even online payments reach a huge and worldwide number of potential candidates at a cheaper price as opposed to campus recruitment. College and university websites are a primary means by which prospective students learn about institutions of higher learning and are essential to these organizations' marketing practices (Carnevale, 2005). BIU is encouraged to embark on serious web administration to include Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and regular updates of posted information. The world now

operates in a digital world where social media has become mainstreamed, especially in the lives of younger generations. Prospective students mainly learn and research on courses offered by different universities through print and online media. Universities appealing websites, investment in new systems to monitor enrolment and brochures play an important role as effective strategies in student enrolment. Online marketing also encourages dialogue between prospects and the university than traditional media. Chow (2012) eludes that review of online literature confirmed modern and effectiveness recruitment practices. Alumni of the university may be encouraged to act as ambassadors to sell the institution's good will. In order to manage student adoption and brand equity, there is need to improve the customer engagement and build brand awareness. This implies that organizations should ensure that they promote the use of up-to-date professional learning courses and ensure that they comply with the set standards and governing regulations. The study also recommends that BIU develops a stand-alone professional learning courses (PLC) advertisement rather than combining them with their conventional courses since readers may miss the important parts. Chow (2012) posits that universities should also ensure public availability of information including all costs to complete a programme rather than simply producing a summary enrolment and tuition figures alone. This appears to be the case with BIU currently. Deploy rich media push notifications, SMS, and emails in an integrated communications strategy that engages accepted students with information about campus initiatives. Being accepted into college is exciting. Student retention efforts start before students even set foot on campus. Making accepted students feel like they're already a part of the campus community will pay dividends later. Just as push notifications can help students stay on track with deadlines, they can also communicate exciting updates. Showing student care, making them feel comfortable and confident on campus increases the sense of community and aids retention. Further studies could be done to evaluate pricing and or entry modes as an inducer for the uptake of professional courses within tertiary institutions.

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APPENDIX A

“The effect of brand equity on adoption of professional learning courses at BA ISAGO University”

The information collected shall not be used for any other purpose rather than compiling the project. Your feedback will be most useful for successful completion of the study.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please tick (✓) the appropriate box

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

1. Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐ Other _____
2. Age range: Below 20 ☐ 20 – 40 ☐ 40 – 60 ☐ 60 and above ☐
3. Social Status: Employed ☐ Unemployed ☐ Self-employed ☐ Student ☐

Other Specify _____

4. What is your education level? Certificate ☐ Diploma ☐
Degree ☐ Masters ☐
5. Type of Sponsorship: Government sponsorship ☐ Self-sponsored ☐

SECTION B: KNOWLEDGE ON BA ISAGO UNIVERSITY

6. How did you get to know about BA ISAGO University?
- Television & Radio adverts ☐ Marketing activities ☐
Social Media ☐ Correspondence ☐
7. What attracted you to BA ISAGO University?
- Physical Appearance ☐ Reputation/ Image ☐
Affordability ☐ Proximity to place of work/home ☐
8. Do you think BA ISAGO University uses branding to attract customers?
- Yes ☐ No ☐

9. On a scale of 1-5 (1 being Not Important at all, 5 being Very Important), rate which of the following communication channels do you feel is most important when BIU is engaging with students:

	Not Important at all	Not Important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
Word of mouth	1	2	3	4	5
Social networks	1	2	3	4	5
Phone	1	2	3	4	5
Text message (SMS)	1	2	3	4	5
Emails	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION C: ROLE OF BRANDING IN THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

Please tick the box that best describes the following;

10. How satisfied are you with BIU's information dissemination on its portal?

Extremely satisfying	Satisfying	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SECTION D: BRAND EQUITY ON ADOPTION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COURSES

Allocate a number to the preferred response box

1=SD-Strongly disagree 2=D-Disagree 3=N-Neutral 4=A-Agree 5=SA-Strongly agree

QUESTIONS	SD	D	N	A	SA
Brand Loyalty					
11. Branding has put BA ISAGO University in the same competitive level with other private universities in Botswana.					
12. BIU is my preferred choice for further studies.					
13. BIU courses are affordable and within my reach.					
Brand Awareness					
14. BIU comes at the top of my mind whenever I want to enroll for professional learning courses.					
15. BIU is the first brand recalled by consumers concerning professional learning courses.					
16. BIU is the first brand recalled when the professional learning course providers are mentioned to the customer.					
Perceived Quality					
17. Service quality perceived from BIU prepares me to pay premium prices for certain services.					
18. BIU offers dynamic, innovative and market driven programs to its customers					
19. BIU campuses are conveniently located to study at.					
20. I look forward to receive competitive professional learning and service from BIU once I register for their professional courses.					
Brand Associations					
21. BIU premises are appealing to the customers making them to confidently enroll with the institution.					
22. I view BIU's website enrolment process as complex and none-user friendly					
23. I consider BIU as an elegant brand that I would be proud to relate with.					
24. I would give positive recommendations for someone to study at BIU					

25. Are you planning to enroll in the professional learning programmes in BIU? Yes ☐ No ☐

26. State your reason in question _____

27. Do you wish to receive a scholarship when studying at BIU? Yes ☐ No ☐

28. How do you intend to finance you studies at BIU?

Scholarship ☐Self-sponsor ☐Company-sponsored ☐Others ☐

If other specify _____

Thank You