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Customer-Based University Branding as a Survival Strategy Used by State-Owned Universities in Zimbabwe in the Face of Foreign Competition

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Abstract:
Customer-based branding is a critical branding approach for almost any organization. This is also true for state universities, particularly those in Zimbabwe. State-owned universities in Zimbabwe do not receive adequate funding from the Government of Zimbabwe, which is financially challenged owing to performing national economy that has been performing poorly for close to fifteen (15) years. Against this background, state-owned universities find themselves increasingly obliged to compete for students in order to raise revenue to finance their daily operations as well as capital expenditure. The aim of this study was twofold: to investigate the impact of customer-based branding as a survival strategy to be used by state-owned universities in Zimbabwe in the face of foreign competition and to develop a model to brand universities. The study was a quantitative research conducted among one thousand students selected from four (4) state-owned universities using probability sampling as a sampling method and random sampling as a sampling technique to select the respondents.

Keywords: Branding, custom-based brand equity, brand elements, marketing strategy, marketing communications, relationship marketing, brand equity

1. Introduction

In today's highly competitive university sector, universities engaged in aggressive marketing as they compete for students and funding from their respective governments. Some universities are even spreading their markets into foreign countries in order to grow their 'businesses' in terms of market share and to grow their revenues. In this highly competitive environment, branding has become, according to Kotler and Armstrong (2010), a fundamental matter for universities and other educational institutions. Several scholars (Aaker, 1991; Doyle, Saunders and Wang ,2010; Farquar, 1989; Keller, 1993; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Kotler and Keller ,2004; Laforet, 2010; Rosseti, 2005) define branding as the use of a name, term, symbol or design, or a combination of these, to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to distinguish them from those of competitors.

State-owned universities in Zimbabwe are distinguished by different names, terms, logos, symbols or other designs, which make it easier for prospective and current students to identify them and their degree programmes. Most academic work has focused on the advantages of brands in relation to product marketing in the corporate world, and not much research has been done specifically in the area of customer-based branding of universities. Most researchers have focused mainly on marketing planning within the context of the university sector (Brookes, 2003; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). On the other hand, some researchers have focused on marketing communications (Klassen, 2002). Others still have focused on positioning and corporate identity (Gray, Fam and Llane, 2003; Melewar and Akel, 2005). Scholars such as Beerli Palacio, Diaz Meneses and Perez Perez (2002); Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton (2004) have focused mainly on university selection requirements and student satisfaction. Since the early 1990s, there has been a steady increase in the number of universities in Zimbabwe from only one (1) university in 1980 to the current fifteen (15) universities. Nine (9) of them are owned by the state and the other six (6) are privately owned. Before the country had many universities, most high school students in Zimbabwe nurtured the dream of enrolling with the only university at that time, the University of Zimbabwe, which for a long time enjoyed monopoly over university education in Zimbabwe. However, the situation changed in the mid-1990s, when new universities entered the university market.

Despite a phenomenal increase in the number of universities in Zimbabwe, many Zimbabweans opt to study outside the country.

By adopting customer-based branding as a strategy to market itself, a university is likely to enjoy a considerable return in terms of its increased market share of local, regional and international students. However, state universities in Zimbabwe have not fully embraced the concept of customer-based branding as a marketing tool that can enable them to survive stiff competition emanating from foreign universities.

2. Statement of the Problem

This study was motivated by the fact that State-owned universities in Zimbabwe are losing students annually to foreign universities, with an adverse impact on the Zimbabwean university sector. Although state universities do engage in some form of branding, it appears that their branding focuses mainly on promotion and identity, including logos, mottos, promotional materials and advertising (Elbilbaisi, 2012). According to several scholars (Argenti, 2000; Bunzel, 2007; Jevons, 2006; Pinar et al., 2011), branding in the university sector appears to be on promotion like mottos, logos, names and advertising without a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a university brand. Accordingly, this study sought to establish how state universities could brand their programmes from a customer-based perspective, in the face of intense competition from foreign universities.

3. Purpose of the Study

The overall aim of the study was twofold, namely: to analyze the impact of customer-based branding as a survival strategy to be used by state-owned universities in Zimbabwe in the face of foreign competition and to come up with a conceptual framework for branding state universities.

4. Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the impact of customer-based university branding as a survival strategy to be used by state-owned universities in Zimbabwe in the face of foreign competition. The primary objective of the study was supported by the following secondary objectives:

- To assess the impact of customer-based university branding as a strategy used by state owed universities in Zimbabwe in the face of foreign competition.
- To determine the extent to which customer-based university branding enables a university to be known regionally and internationally.
- To assess the extent to which Zimbabwean state-owned universities are currently marketing themselves regionally and internationally.
- To examine ways in which ways universities can enhance their brand equity.
- To give recommendations on how customer-based university branding can be employed by universities.

5. Research Hypotheses

Collins and Hussey (2003) posit that a hypothesis is an idea or position which can be tested for association or causality by deducing logical consequences which can be tested against empirical evidence. The underlying hypotheses were as follows:

- H1o: There is no relationship between university brand elements and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition.
- H2o: There is no relationship between university marketing programmes and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition.
- H3o: There is no relationship between the management of university communications and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition.
- H4o: There is no relationship between relationship management and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition.

6. Significance of the Study

- Existing studies on university branding have tended to focus mainly on the concept of university branding from the narrow perspective of establishing names and logos, neglecting a holistic approach to university branding through the adoption of the customer-based branding. The latter approach could significantly contribute to the frontiers of knowledge particularly in the area of university branding.
- The study came up with a university branding conceptual framework which could help managers of state universities to brand their institutions.
- The study will make recommendations on how to handle branding within the service sector that is the university sector.

7. Ethical and Legal Considerations

It is always imperative to observe the rights of research participants/respondents to privacy and confidentiality. In this study, participants were fully appraised about the intention of the research as well as the procedures and risks (if any)

involved in participating in the research. Respondents were never forced or made to feel obliged to provide data under any circumstances (Saunders et al., 2009). The findings of the study were finally reported comprehensively without misrepresentation and prejudice to the respondents and other stakeholders indirectly involved.

8. Delimitation of the Study

The study focused on four state universities in Zimbabwe: one (1) based in Harare, one (1) based in Bindura, one (1) based in Gweru and one (1) based in Chinhoyi. The population under investigation was university students, who are university clients or customers.

9. Literature Review and Research Conceptual Framework

9.1. Definition of Branding

Branding, brand names and trademarks can be used interchangeably, but it is important to distinguish them because of the legal implications that each term has. Branding refers to the use of a name, term, symbol or design (or a combination of these) to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to distinguish them from those of their competitors (Dibb, 1997; Doyle, Saunders and Wang, 2010; Farquhar, 1989; Kotler and Keller, 2004; O'Malley, 1991). In Zimbabwe, all universities have a name and logo to clearly distinguish themselves from others.
 According to (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003; Keller, 2003; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Laforet, 2010; Rosettit, 2005), a brand is a basket of functional and emotional benefits that offers discreet and welcomed promise.

10. Customer-Based Brand Equity

The Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model developed by Keller (1993) presents the primary ingredients for constructing brand equity as follows:
- The initial choice of the brand elements that make up a brand.
- Marketing activities and the designing of the marketing programmes
- Leveraging of secondary associations that link the brand with other aspects such as a university, geographic region, another brand, person or event.
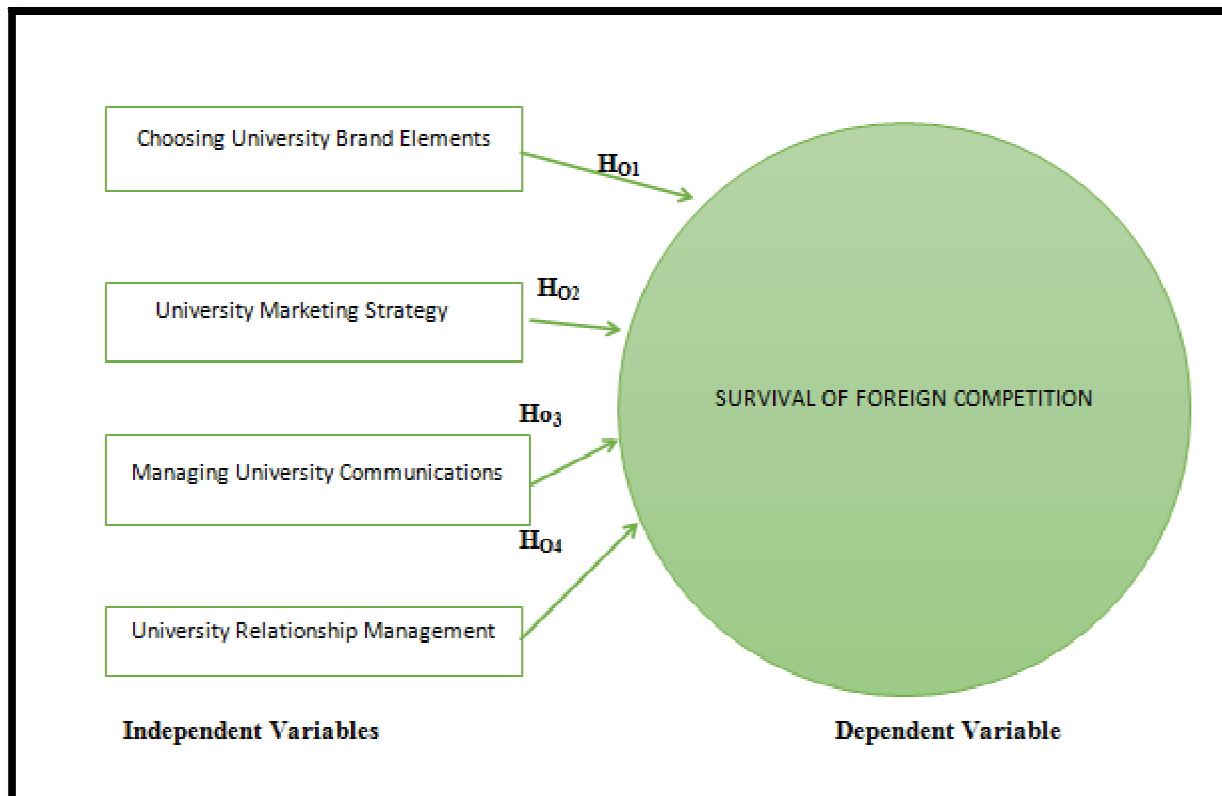
11. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Customer-Based University Brand Building Conceptual Framework
Source: Summary by Researcher from Literature Review

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

11.1. Choosing University Brand Elements
According to several scholars (Kapferer, 2004; Keller, 2004; 1998; 1997;1993), the main elements of a brand are brand names, logos, symbols, characters, spokespersons, slogans, jingles, packages and signage. The CBBE model recommends that marketers consider those brand elements that enable brand awareness, enhance the formation of strong, favourable, and unique brand associations. Several scholars (Ghodeswar, 2008; Gray et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2003) argue that the university brand name is another factor that usually influences the choice of a university in situations where prospective students have never had any meaningful contact with a particular university. Keller (1993) posits that when choosing brand elements, it is important that those responsible for coming up with an organisation's brand elements should adopt the following criteria, namely: memorability, meaningfulness, likeability, transferability, adaptability, and protectability.

11.2. University Marketing Strategy
According to Kotler et al. (2009), a strategic plan defines an organization's mission statement and objectives. A state university could enhance its market position by coming up with a marketing strategy. This strategy could include aspects such as the quality of its degree programmes (product offerings); tuition levels (price) to ensure that its prices are competitive and fair; a well thought out promotional strategy to cater for aspects such as advertising, public relations, sales promotion activities, direct marketing, personal selling and web based marketing (promotional mix).

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

11.4. University Relationship Management Strategy
Relationship Marketing (RM), according to Zeithmal, Bitner and Gremler (2006: 177) 'is a philosophy of doing business, strategic orientation that focuses on keeping and improving relationship with current customers rather than acquiring new customers'. Lamb, Hair and McDaniel (2011: 10) postulate that relationship marketing is underpinned on the assumption that most consumers and business customers would rather have an on-going relationship with one organization than to continuously switch from one provider to another in search of value. According to Reichheld (1996) (cited in Moyo and Makore, 2013), many companies and customers are focusing on Relationship Marketing because it is cheaper to retain existing customers who may have become loyal to the organization and its products than to always be looking for new customers.
Relationship marketing may help the university to fend off competition and ensure student satisfaction. Groonroos (1994: 9 cited in Egan, 2008) 'argues that relationship marketing is a means by which an organization can identify and establish and enhance, and when necessary, terminate relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met and this is done by mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises'.

12. Methodological Framework

12.1. Research Design for the Study
The researcher found the quantitative research design appropriate for this study as the study sought to establish the impact of customer-based branding as a survival strategy to be used by state-owned universities in Zimbabwe in the face of foreign competition. Quantitative research design has the advantage of facilitating the comparison of data collected from large numbers of respondents, settings and times (Abawi, 2008; Sanchez, 2006).

12.2. Target Population and Sampling Method

In this study, the population consists of students from state universities in Zimbabwe. Students, being the main focus of the marketing and branding strategies of state universities, are the target respondent. For this study, university students were drawn from four state universities in Zimbabwe as follows: One state university (Coded University A) in Harare; one state university (Coded University B) in the Midlands Province; one state university (Coded University C) in the Bulawayo Province; and one state university (Coded University D) in Mashona land Central. The students were drawn across all levels of study that is from undergraduate, masters, and doctorate students. The total population of university students in Zimbabwean State universities stood at about64, 762 students.

This study employed the probability sampling method simply because it allowed enabled the researcher to make inferences from the information collected regarding the random sample to the entire population from which it was selected. The other reason why the researcher opted to employ probability sampling method was that each element of the population is given a known non zero chance of selection (Cooper and Schindler, 2008), thus eliminating bias associated with selection.

12.3. Data Collection Procedures

The researcher adopted structured questions to collect data owing to magnitude of this study; as a result, open-ended questions were not employed. The other advantage of a close-ended questionnaire is that it provides answers that are easy to collect tabulate and analyze and quantify (Churchill and Lacobucii, 2002; Leedy and Ormrod, 2006; Malhotra, 2004). Data gathering for this study stretched for a period of three (3) months: September to November 2016. 1000 copies of the questionnaire were self-administered, 700 were retrieved. The response rate was 70 percent for this study and the source of empirical data were university students enrolled with state universities in Zimbabwe.

13. Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations for this study were four state universities as follows: University A based in Harare, University B based in Bulawayo, University C based in Gweru and University D based in Bindura.

14. Descriptive and Inferential Statistics

In this study, descriptive statistics were adopted in the presentation of data relating to the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents about university branding as a strategy for surviving foreign competition.

15. Results and Discussions

15.1. Reliability of the Instrument

For this study, Cronbach's Alpha test was used to test the questionnaire for reliability and consistency before it was administered in the main study.   A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.801 which surpasses the minimum threshold of 0.7 recommended by Bryman and Bell (2015) indicated that the questionnaire had acceptable reliability and consistency levels and therefore the questionnaire was deemed suitable for distribution in the main study.

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	Number of Items
.801	.801	66

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

15.2. Response Rate

The percentage of respondents who respond to a survey is called the response rate. High survey responses help to ensure that the survey is representative of the target population (Hamilton, 2003). For the purposes of this study, 1000 questionnaires were distributed to the selected 4 State Universities in Zimbabwe.Raosoft (2010) postulates that the recommended sample size for a population greater than 20 000, at confidence level of 95 percent, is 377. In this study, a sample size of 1000 was used, which far exceeded the recommended Raosoft (2010) sample size of 377, this therefore justifies the suitability of the total sample size of 1000 students extracted from 4 (four) state universities. Out of a total of 1000 self-administered questionnaires, 700 (70%) of them were responded to and this validates the research study allowing the researcher to make deductions about customer-based branding as a survival strategy to be used by state-owned universities in Zimbabwe in the face of foreign competition.

University	Sample	Respondents	Response Rate
A	300	200	67%
B	400	300	75%
C	150	100	67%
D	150	100	67%
Total	1000	700	70%

Table 2: Response Rate
Key: A One Large State University Based in the Harare Province
B One State University Based in the Midlands Province
C One State University Based in the Mashonal and Central Province
D One State University Based in the Bulawayo Province

16. Data Analysis

16.1. Regression Analysis
In this study, linear regression analysis was used in order to examine the relationship that subsists between customer-based branding and survival by state universities of foreign competition.

16.2. Factor Analysis
Factor analysis was used to address objective one. It helped to identify the main dimensions of customer-based branding. During the analysis, 8 items on customer 'based branding' construct were run on SPSS. SPSS output 2 showed several parts of the output, namely the Kaiser-Meyen-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO statistic varies between 0 and 1 and a value of 0 indicates that the sum of partial correlations is large, relative to the sum of correlations, and this will indicate diffusion in the pattern of correlations (Kaiser, 1974). A value close to 1 indicates that patterns of correlations are relatively compact and so factor analysis will yield distinct and reliable factors. Field and Kaiser (2005) recommends considering values greater than 0.5 as acceptable, values between 0.5-0.7 as mediocre, values between 0.7-0.8 as good, values between 0.8-0.9 as great, and values above 0.9 as superb (Hutcheson and Sofroniou, 1999). A KMO measure of sampling adequacy stood at 0.845. This value falls within the range of great values and this made the researcher confident that factor analysis was appropriate for this data.

For factor analysis to work, there is need for some relationships between variables and this test should be significant (have a significance of less than 0.05). This tells us that the *R*-matrix is not an identity matrix, so there will be some relationships between the variables. For this data, Bartlett's test of sphericity is highly significant ($p<0.001$).

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.845
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1464.744
	df	28
	Sig.	.000

Table 3: Testing Conditions to Justify Use of Factor
Analysis (KMO & Bartlett's Test)

16.3. Hypotheses Testing
Hypothesis testing was done using linear regression analysis in order to examine the relationship that exists between customer based branding (Independent variable) and survival of foreign competition by state owned universities in Zimbabwe (Dependent variable). Regression analysis was carried out for three principal reasons: to establish the overall predictive power of the whole model in predicting the dependent variable, to determine the suitability of the model in predicting the dependent variable and to establish the relative power of the individual customer based branding elements in estimating the dependent variable. Therefore, the study hypotheses were tested and discussed as follows:

16.3.1. Hypothesis 1
There is no relationship between university brand elements and survival of foreign competition by state universities n=700

Coefficients[a]					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.488	.212		1.871	.000
Branding elements	.069	.037	.079	4.977	.000

Table 4: Linear Regression Analysis
a. Dependent Variable: Foreign Competition Survival
b. Predictors: Branding Elements

The results of this hypothesis indicate that there is a relationship between branding elements and survival of foreign competition by state universities in Zimbabwe (t=4.977, p<0.05).

16.3.2. Hypothesis 2
There is no relationship between university marketing programmes and survival of foreign competition by state universities in Zimbabwe

Coefficients[a]					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	5.813	.109		1.763	.000
University marketing programmes	.718	.043	.0382	.244	.003

Table 5: Linear Regression Analysis
a. Dependent Variable: Foreign Competition Survival
b. Predictors: University Marketing Programmes

The results of this hypothesis indicate that there is a relationship between marketing programmes and survival of foreign competition by state universities in Zimbabwe (t=.244, p<0.05). Since this value produced a significant difference at the 0.05 significance level, the researcher rejected null hypothesis 2 and accept alternative hypothesis 2 that there is a relationship between universities' marketing programmes and survival of foreign competition.

16.3.3. Hypothesis 3
There is no relationship between management of university communications and survival of foreign competition by state universities in Zimbabwe

Coefficients[a]					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.322	.116		2.276	.000
Management of university communications	.238	.018	.8432	6.970	.006

Table 6: Linear Regression Analysis
a. Dependent Variable: Foreign Competition Survival
b. Predictors: Management of University Communications

The results of this hypothesis indicate that there is a relationship between relationship management and survival of foreign competition by state universities in Zimbabwe (t=6.970, p<0.05). Since this value produced a significant difference at the 0.05 significance level, the researcher rejected null hypothesis 3 and accept alternative hypothesis 3 that there is a relationship between management of university's communications and survival of foreign competition.

16.3.4. Hypothesis 4
There is no relationship between relationship management and survival of foreign competition

Coefficientsª					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.664	.201		0.196	.000
Relationship management	.168	.017	.4817	.761	.001

Table 7: Linear Regression Analysis
a. Dependent Variable: Foreign Competition Survival
b. Predictors: Relationship Management

The results of this hypothesis indicate that there is a relationship between management of university communications and survival of foreign competition by state universities in Zimbabwe (t=-.761, p<0.05). Since this value produced a significant difference at the 0.05 significance level, the researcher rejected null hypothesis 4 and accept alternative hypothesis 4 that there is a relationship between universities' relationship management and survival of foreign competition.

17. Conclusions

All the four (4) null hypotheses were rejected, whereas all the alternate hypotheses were accepted. There is a relationship between university brand elements and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition. The literature review and empirical results in the study revealed that there is a positive relationship between university brand elements and survival by state-owned universities in the face of foreign competition.

There is a relationship between university marketing programmes and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition. The empirical results showed that there is a positive relationship between university marketing programmes and survival by Zimbabwean state-owned universities in the face of foreign competition. There is a positive relationship between the management of university communications and the survival of state universities in the face of foreign competition

There is a positive relationship between relationship management and survival of foreign competition. The research findings in this study revealed that there is a positive relationship between relationship management and survival of foreign competition.

18. Recommendations for customer-based branding as a strategy for surviving foreign competition by state-owned universities

Based on the findings, the following specific recommendations are therefore made:

19.1 Coming up with a university marketing strategy
Kotler et al (2009) emphasized the importance of any organization coming up with a marketing strategy in order to become more competitive.

18.1. University Communication Strategy

The importance of coming up with a university communications strategy can never be overemphasized.

18.2. University Relationship Management Strategy

State universities could also consider crafting and pursuing a relationship management strategy in order to be able to compete meaningfully at local, regional and international levels.

20. Contribution of the Study

The study has revealed that customer-based branding is a powerful strategy to build a university brand and enhance a university to compete effectively at local, regional and international level. The study came up with a conceptual model for building university brand equity, which is an easy to use road map that set out how a state-owned university can build its brand in order to be competitive.

21. Limitations of the Study

Each study has limitations and this particular study is therefore no exception. It was difficult for the researcher to get current statistics on the actual number of students enrolled by each state-owned university in Zimbabwe, as individual university reports which are supposed to contain such information were not accessible. The researcher therefore had to rely on internet sources. The study focused only on the state-owned universities due to financial and time constrains. Resources permitting, it would have been ideal to also include privately-owned universities in the study.

22. Areas for Further Research

This study has focused on the impact of customer-based branding as a strategy used by state-owned universities to survive foreign competition. However, it is prudent to note that research results of this study have highlighted some strong indicators of areas that require further research. The following areas are recommended for further research:

- The impact of customer-based branding as a strategy for expanding market share by privately-owned universities in Zimbabwe.
- The impact of university branding on the retention of academic staff: case of state-owned universities.

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