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Branding Higher Education: Exploring Strategic Resources for Sustainable College Enrollment

Bright Da-Costa Aboagye, EdD[1]

[1] School of Education, College of Education and Human Services, Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Horrabin Hall 117 Macomb, IL 61455 USA; bd-aboagye@wiu.edu; +1 850-800-6337.

ORCID iD:

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4716-0944

Address for Correspondence:

Bright Da-Costa Aboagye, School of Education, College of Education and Human Services, Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Horrabin Hall 117 Macomb, IL 61455 USA. (bd-aboagye@wiu.edu)

Abstract   The decrease in the college-going population, along with the deregulation of the higher education sector has contributed to the consistent decline in undergraduate enrollment in several American universities and colleges. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in 2019 reported that the total enrollment of college students in the United States has decreased for 8 successive years (2011–2019), resulting in the closure or merger of some higher educational institutions. Scholars and strategic management professionals have proposed the use of strategic resources to help institutions achieve sustainable enrollment growth. Using a qualitative case study approach and the resource-based view theory as a theoretical framework, the study explored how select administrative stakeholders in a public university leverage brand reputation as a valuable resource in enrollment management in the Southeastern United States. Eight participants were purposefully selected and interviewed. Findings from the study revealed that the administrative stakeholders employed several brand strategies including creating consistent brand messages, exploiting visual identity, and focusing on core values to ensure sustainable enrollment. This study can inform higher educational leaders on how to strategically re-align their brand reputation management strategies to achieve enrollment growth and institutional sustainability.

Keywords   brand reputation, enrollment growth, institutional sustainability, resource-based view theory

1. Introduction

The decline of the traditional-age student population, along with the increased competition for students among institutions of higher learning has created several challenges for American universities and colleges. Both public and private universities and colleges face a consistent decrease in undergraduate enrollment despite the positive growth outlook by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; Brown, 2018). A report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSC Research Center, 2019) revealed that the enrollment of college students in the United States has decreased for 5 consecutive years. The total undergraduate enrollment declined by 1.7% in 2015, 1.4% in 2016, 1% in 2017, and 1.8% in 2018 (NSC Research Center, 2019). Community colleges noted a 3.4% decrease rate in undergraduate enrollment, while 4-year public institutions logged a 1% decrease rate. By states, Alaska, Florida, Illinois, North Dakota, Hawaii, and Kansas showed the highest percentage declines (NSC Research Center, 2019). Further, surveys conducted by both the Gallup Poll and the Pew Research Center in 2017 revealed that public opinion about colleges in the United States has been declining, mostly among the working class (Brown, 2018). In the 2 decades that follow, the decline is projected to worsen. Moody's, a reputable American credit appraising bureau, foresees future enrollment declines that will result in a 25% closure rate of mid-sized and less competitive universities and colleges (Horn, 2018; Selingo,2018).

BUniversity (pseudonym), the case selected for this study, is ranked among the best-performing universities in the state where it is located. Publicly available information indicates that over the past 3 years, BUniversity has received several awards and recognitions for its quality of education and experiences provided to students, offering the university a competitive edge over other institutions in the state. The university has gained recognition in state and national athletics competitions and has been acknowledged at the national level for its dedication to diversity and inclusion programs and the promotion of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education. Based on these acknowledgements, BUniversity could possess competitive superiority over similar institutions in the state.

Although BUniversity has received both state and national recognition, the phenomenon of decreased undergraduate enrollment is prevalent at the university. Data from the SUSF indicate that the total undergraduate enrollment by classification of instructional programs at BUniversity has been declining over a period. According to the State University System of Florida, the total undergraduate enrollment in 2015 was 9,787. This number declined to 9,640 in 2016, then 9,549 in 2017. Correspondingly, headcount enrollment by fall term in BUniversity's undergraduate programs has been declining over the past 5 years. The fall term headcount was 10,202 in 2015, 10,064 in 2016, 9,954 in 2017, 9,721 in 2018, and 9,517 in 2019. Since undergraduate students constitute about 75% of the entire BUniversity student population, a persistent decrease in undergraduate enrollment could affect the university's income stream and ultimately affect its socioeconomic sustainability. In other words, with a continuous decrease in student numbers, some undergraduate academic programs may become nonviable leading to poor performance metrics, thus, affecting the university's performance-based funding model. The decrease in revenue and discontinuation of nonviable academic programs could lead to job losses for employees and other stakeholders of the university (Selingo, 2018). In this light, there is a need for BUniversity administrative stakeholders to identify and utilize tactical resources and capabilities to improve and maintain the university's undergraduate enrollment.

In the literature, several scholars have explored organizational resources that can improve performance and create sustainable growth (Aghaz et al., 2015; Ali et al., 2015; Garry &Harwood, 2017; Pinar et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2010; Wilkins & Huisman, 2013). A study by Resnick (2004) and corroborated by Smith et al. (2010) explained that physical resources or assets, including people, processes, and structures held by an organization, have a weighty effect on organizational performance. However, recent scholars (e.g., Garry & Harwood, 2017; Pinar et al., 2014) have argued that the sustainable performance of organizations is no longer restricted to physical resources as noted by the previous scholars. The pursuit of organizational sustainability has reached the field of nonphysical resources such as communication skills, brand reputation, organizational culture, and managerial expertise (Pinar et al., 2014). Brand reputation, which refers to stakeholders' perception of an institution's brand, is considered one of the most substantial resources to achieve this success (Garry & Harwood, 2017).

Moreover, although some scholars have explored brand reputation in the performance and sustainability of corporate organizations, particularly in the financial sector (e.g., Ali et al., 2015; Rose & Thomsen, 2004; Smith et al., 2010), research exploring the role and contribution of brand reputation in the sustainability of higher educational institutions is scarce. This study, therefore, explores how select administrative stakeholders at BUniversity utilize the university's brand reputation as a strategic resource to maximize undergraduate enrollment opportunities to achieve sustainable enrollment growth. The study expands the existing body of knowledge and improves practice relative to

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brand reputation and sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth. Using the resource-based view theory (RBV) as a theoretical lens, the study investigated how administrative stakeholders of BUniversity utilize brand reputation in marketing, recruitment, and enrollment management to achieve sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth. The study explored one research question, which derived from the first construct (i.e., valuable) of RBV (VRIO framework) to address the study's problem and purpose:

RQ: How do select BUniversity administrative stakeholders leverage the university's brand reputation as a valuable resource to achieve sustainable growth in undergraduate enrollment?

2. Theoretical Framework

The RBV served as the theoretical framework for this study. Birger Wernerfelt developed the RBV in 1984 to augment Penrose's work on strategic resources and management in organizations. Wernerfelt's inspiration for developing the RBV was based on his dissatisfaction with the academic materials for his class at the University of Michigan (Ambrosini, 2003). Wernerfelt observed that the content of the academic materials had fundamental flaws. The existing literature he was supposed to use for the class illustrated that threats and opportunities of business organizations are utilized only through the firm's market positioning. In other words, the literature suggested that internal resources had no role to play in a firm's success. Wernerfelt opposed this argument. He argued that when organizations focus on market positioning instead of internal resources, they may be developing strategies that are ubiquitous and cannot yield competitive advantage. Wernerfelt, thus, proposed that exploring organizational performance from the perspective of unique internal resources and capabilities can contribute positively to the growth of the organization. Wernerfelt's (1984) main idea was to establish that the sustainability of an organization in a competitive environment is based on its unique resource endowments (i.e., relative advantage).

Although Wernerfelt (1984) was the original proponent of the RBV, Barney's (1991) intellectual work borne the constructs of RBV.

Barney's viewpoint was grounded in the notion that organizational resources should be heterogeneous and must have (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) inimitable, and (d) non substitutable (VRIN) attributes. Barney (1991, 2003) argued that resources that possess the VRIN attributes could create a sustainable competitive advantage and high-level performance for an organization. These attributes are considered constructs of RBV (Barney, 1991, 2003). Consistent with Barney (1991), a resource is valuable if it allows an organization to create strategies that enhance organizational efficacy and effectiveness. Similarly, Rao (2014) noted that the value of an asset or resource is described in the context of organizational strategy and the external milieu in which the organization operates. Thus, the value of a resource is defined by how the resource creates benefits for an organization in the external environment.

Barney (1991) further explained that a valuable resource is sustainable if its attributes are rare. He stated, "A firm enjoys a competitive advantage when it is implementing a value-creating strategy not simultaneously implemented by large numbers of other firms" (Barney, 1991, p. 106). According to Barney, organizational resources that are common do not possess unique and valuable features to generate competitive advantage. With common resources, organizations can only achieve competitive parity. From the author's viewpoint, an organization without rare resources is only able to achieve an equal position comparable to other competitors (Cao et al., 2014). The concept of inimitability augments the previous construct of RBV (i.e., rarity). Barney (1991) noted that if the development of a resource has negligible or no possibility for imitation, the resource will maintain its rarity. Valuable and rare resources enable an organization to realize above-normal success in the short- and medium-term (Barney, 2003). However, the inimitable nature of resources makes it challenging for competitors to imitate the strategies of organizations, thereby creating long-term sustainable performance (Barney, 1991, 2003).

Non substitutability is the final attribute that makes an organizational resource a source of sustainable performance and growth. Barney (2003) noted that an organizational resource should possess characteristics that make it impracticable for other organizations to find substitutes with the same benefits provided by that resource. Barney (2003) remarked that strategic resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable as well as no substitutable to deliver sustainable competitive advantage.

Barney (1995) refined the RBV by replacing the fourth construct, "no substitutability," with "organize." In his later work, "Looking Inside for Competitive Advantage," Barney (1995) called this new concept, the VRIO (i.e., valuable, rare, inimitable, organize) framework. Barney's argument for this refinement centered on the idea that if an

institution is not well-organized to exploit resources and capabilities, that institution is not structurally positioned to take advantage of the VRI-part of its resources. According to Barney (1995), a capability or resource that meets all four criteria, rare, valuable, inimitable, and organize, can generate superior performance and sustainable growth for the organization.

I chose the RBV because of its applicability to the study's purpose and research problem. The research problem that warranted the need for this study is the issue of persistent decline in undergraduate enrollment at BUniversity. In such challenging situations, the effective use of organizational resources is considered critical to improving performance (Kong & Prior, 2008; Rothschild & White, 1993). By applying the VRIO framework, as proposed by Barney (1995), I was able to explore how the administrative departments at BUniversity leverage the university's strategic intangible resources to achieve sustainable growth in undergraduate enrollments. I used the first construct of RBV (i.e., valuable) to frame the research questions. This question yielded detailed information about how the selected departments utilized the university's brand reputation as a strategic internal resource to address the declining trend in undergraduate enrollment.

3. Methodology

I adopted a constructivist philosophical orientation for the study. The idea for assuming this philosophical paradigm was to explore the subjective meaning participants assign to issues or objects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These subjective meanings inspired the exploration of the complexity of perspectives about the research problem instead of confining meaning into a few ideas or categories. I assumed a relativist ontology, subjective epistemology, and balanced axiology. Based on this philosophical orientation, a qualitative methodology was suitable to explore the study's purpose and address the research questions.

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that a qualitative research approach is used by researchers to explore an in-depth understanding of human or social phenomena within a natural setting. One essential advantage of using qualitative research methodologies is its strength to operate within flexible structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers can use unstructured approaches to elicit specific as well as detailed data from participants. However, this approach uses a limited sample size, which affects the generalizability of findings (Merriam, 1998). Further, I employed a particularistic case study design (Merriam, 1998) as the appropriate methodological subtype to address the study's purpose and research questions.

Particularistic case study means "the case study focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). The specificity attribute of particularistic case studies makes it a good methodology for investigating practical problems. As Merriam (1998) noted, adopting a case study research approach offers comprehensive and holistic descriptions of the phenomenon, whereas a particularistic case study design narrows the focus of the phenomenon. A particularistic case study method was apposite because it focused the study on how a particular group of people within the university dealt with the problem under investigation. This methodological approach also provided a more in-depth and holistic inquiry into the operations of BUniversity's administrative departments responsible for managing the university's brand reputation.

The participants included in the study comprised officers in two administrative departments at BUniversity: the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and the Office of Institutional Communication. I adopted the critical case sampling technique to select eight participants (Patton, 2002). This technique involved the process of choosing participants who could "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p. 236). Data derived from interviews with selected administrative stakeholders as well as documents. I developed and field-tested an original interview protocol for the data collection. I employed Merriam's (1998) conventional content analysis approach to analyze the data. This process began with data preparation, which included transcribing the interview data, jotting down ideas, and re-reading the transcript to make sense of the data. Then, I created codes to identify categories and performed constant comparisons of categories until patterns or emergent themes evolved (Merriam, 1998).

4. Data Analysis and Discussions

As indicated earlier, the study included eight purposefully selected administrative stakeholders from two departments at the research site. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants. Gender, age, race, and other demographic data were omitted because they were not relevant to the study. The table

includes pseudonyms used to anonymize the participants as well as the participants' years of experience at the research site.

Table 1. Demographic Description of Participants

Participant	Years of experience
P1	> 4
P2	≤ 2
P3	> 7
P4	≤ 17
P5	≥ 1
P6	≤ 8
P7	≥ 3
P8	≥ 2

The purpose of the study required collecting data from participants who have extensive knowledge in higher education branding, marketing, communication, communication, public relations, and recruitment and enrollment management. All participants included in the study described their roles at BUniversity as related to these knowledge areas. The first interview question after the demographic questions was generic, and it sought to explore participants' perspectives and general understanding of branding. The responses from all eight participants yielded two emergent themes. The participant's believed branding is (a) stakeholders' perception of an institution and (b) the visual identity of an institution. In describing branding as stakeholders' perception of an institution, P7 explained,

branding is more than just a set of colors or a logo or anything like that. It is more than just the visual aspect. Branding is how others perceive us as a university and what their personal interactions are with the university and the university community. It is more than what our graphics look like.

Correspondingly, P8 remarked that branding is "the perception formed about an institution when one sees or hears something about the institution." This perception derives from stakeholders' direct encounters with the organization and any brand components that describe the organization's actions in the market (Salamzadeh et al., 2016).

Several participants also described branding as the visual identity of an institution. For instance, P1 explained branding as "the essence of something, whether it is what you think of when you think of that thing, that individual, that corporation, and that institution." Similarly, P6 perceived branding to mean the holistic view of the organization. She described an organization's brand as "who the organization or company is." P6 further explained that branding encompasses a lot of different things, "advertising your customer service or promotion, your reputation, and even your logo and visual identity." The findings indicate participants understand branding as consumers' association with an institution based on their perception and visual identity of the brand. These findings align with the various definitional perspectives of branding as established in the literature, which validates my assumption that the study participants are knowledgeable of the phenomenon under study and can provide a thick, rich expert opinion on the subject matter. The findings from the research question are presented and analyzed in the subsequent subsections.

4.1. Emergent Themes Related to the Research Question

The research question explored how select BUniversity administrative stakeholders leverage the university's brand reputation as a valuable resource to achieve sustainable undergraduate growth. Barney (1991) noted that organizational resources can only create superior performance if they are valuable. A valuable resource in this sense refers to any resource that creates benefits for an institution in the external environment and enhances institutional efficacy and effectiveness (Barney, 1991, 2003). Thus, the value of a resource is described in the context of organizational strategy and the external milieu in which the organization operates. From the data, resources that were considered valuable to achieve sustainable undergraduate growth included BUniversity's core values, brand icons, geographic location, social integration campaigns, small class sizes, and human capital. Analysis of the data yielded four emergent themes. In other words, the participants unanimously revealed that they undertake the following four actions to ensure increased undergraduate enrollment: (a) exploit visual identity, (b) create consistent

brand messages, (c) incorporate core values in brand promotion campaigns, and (d) focus on personalized learning experiences. Figure 1 is a schematic presentation of emergent themes.

4.1.2. Exploit Visual Identity

The data revealed that visual identity, such as the university's brand icons and geographic location play a critical role in achieving undergraduate enrollment growth. As indicated by several participants, in recruitment marketing communications, the Department of Institutional Communications and the Office of Undergraduate Admission focus on BUniversity's physical resources and visual identity, including proximity to the beach, logo, colors, and other brand visibility objects to attract prospective students. P1 noted that from a visual perspective,

The quintessential branding icons would be the university's emblem, which is very important because it is a great way to segue into explaining why we believe in lifelong learning and progressive growth. People believe the emblem, which depicts a shell, never stops growing, and I think that is a really great way to describe us.

P1further noted that the emblem is essential to understanding the progression of the university, as well as honoring the experience behind it. The university colors are very helpful. The blue represents the ocean or the sea and then green represents the land that we live on or nature.

The existing literature supports P1's claim. For instance, Labrecque and Milne (2012) argued that brand logos and colors have a positive effect on key marketing constructs, including brand attitude and brand likeability.

Similar to P1's submissions, P5 explained that the university's brand icons and visual identity, such as emblem and signage give the university a lot of visibility. P5 indicated:

One of the main brand elements we have is the emblem, which represents the ever-evolving. So, it represents how our students learn, evolve, and adapt. I think it is good to have something that when they see, they know it and recognize it. So, when people are, for instance, walking down the streets in town and notice the icon, they can associate with it. This is part of the university efforts and campaigns; the different signages and stuff like that. It is just important to be able to recognize the brand icons and tie it to the institution.

During recruitment campaigns, P1 noted that her team stresses more on BUniversity's brand icons and their meaning. She stated, "The emblem is always a valuable talking point." She also added that anytime there is an opportunity to talk about the university's valuable resources, she uses the emblem as a strong talking point to get the attention of prospective students. She explained that the emblem.

Stands for a lot of things that are sentimental and meaningful to the university. Just looking at it makes you think about the beach, and when we are out on the road, not a lot of schools can say that they are only a few miles away from one of the world's most beautiful beaches. So, it is an instant talking point.

The participants believed the brand elements are essential to the long-term undergraduate growth at BUniversity. For instance, P8 and P5 agreed visible brand icons and signages create a positive impression in the minds of prospective students. People see the brand icons and signage and recognize the institution's presence in the community. P5 commented, I think it is one of those things where local kids in high school right now see the brand everywhere, and they are like where's that school from? What is that? What are they doing? It is interesting when they could tie that brand into the university. When they see more of that brand in their everyday life, they are going to be like, okay, the school is actually doing stuff. I want to see what they are doing. So, it is important for us to tie in the brand and emblem or the logos and all that into everything we can. So that way when people see it out, they can say, they remember that icon. It is BUniversity!

Further, in describing how participants exploit the university's brand icons during recruitment campaigns to achieve increased undergraduate enrollment growth, P1 proffered, when we are at college fairs, normally before the COVID pandemic, as a recruiter, not supervisor, I would make sure that any pictures of the university's emblem or the beach were prominent because people would want to know more about that, just on that basic level. So, when they find out they can go to school where most people go on vacation, it is a great way to bring them in.

Thus, P1 believed the visual branding elements have been extremely beneficial to undergraduate recruitment and enrollment campaigns. The essential brand icons and visual identity of the university are critical to overcoming threats from competitors. Some of the participants (e.g., P1, P5, P2, P6) argued that the university's brand is unique and has a valuable history. Thus, focusing on the brand icons and visual identity "gives us a little bit of an edge over

other institutions in the state," P1 remarked. P2 also mentioned that focusing on our visual identity helps us to stay true to who we are and what we represent in our values. Again, with the emblem as being ever-changing, I feel like we have adapted and learned. With the COVID pandemic, for instance, we really tried to connect and evolve. Even though we are one of the smaller universities in the state, I think, with our brand identity, people can recognize us as small but mighty.

The findings indicate that brand visual identity is of utmost essential to an institution's brand and relevant to increasing student enrollment. Using brand icons, institutions can display their desired identity and image and eventually create memorable perceptions in the minds of consumers. Several scholars have argued in support of using an organization's visual identity to influence the perceptions of a brand (Buttle & Westoby, 2006; Clardy, 2012; Glac, 2014; Japutra et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2010). Buttle and Westoby (2006) noted that organizations use visual identities, such as logos, symbols, emblems, graphics, and visual signs to distinguish themselves from competitors. The findings also confirm Walsh et al.'s (2010) claim that an organization's visual identity forms an essential constituent of brand aesthetics, which in turn informs consumers' perceptions and behavior toward the brand. The existing literature further supports the findings that the university's brand icons and visual identity, such as emblem and signage, give the university a lot of market visibility. Japutra et al. (2016) and Frank (2004) believed that visual identity increases institutional exposure and recognition in the marketplace.

Although these scholars argued that an appealing visual identity may create a favorable mental perception, Harsha and Shah (2011) argued that brand managers should focus on anthropomorphizing visual brand icons (i.e., assigning personality traits to brand icons) to build consistent brand images in the minds of consumers. Glac (2014) also had a different viewpoint on the positive relationship between brand and perception. Glac was of the view that institutional brand reputation is not absolute. Individuals form mental images of higher educational institutions with limited or inaccurate information. Thus, a negative stakeholder consciousness about an institution's visual identity may affect the chance of people joining the institution as students, staff, or faculty members. Munisamy et al. (2014) corroborated Glac's (2014) assertion and posited that a negative perception may ultimately affect the institution's growth and development.

4.1.3. Create Consistent Brand Messages

Most of the participants agreed that creating consistent brand messages is a valuable tool for achieving sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth. P3 was the first participant to acknowledge that messaging is one of the essential brand elements of BUniversity. She noted,

What we are saying and how we are saying it, and what those messages say about how we view our students, our community, or faculty and staff, and our brand experiences are essential to our growth as an institution. So, any encounter that someone has with BUniversity's brand, whether it is a campus visit, taking a swim class, the experiences of students, and then brand perceptions inform what that person will say about us? And that includes things like our rankings and word of mouth.

P6, P1, P8, and P7 agreed with P3 that brand messaging is critical for the success of BUniversity. P3 further indicated that brand messaging is essential because there is no other way to communicate the university's brand effectively to consumers. She remarked,

When you think of the aspects of branding that are more identity-oriented and more visual, they are things you could come up with many different versions of what that looks like, and they could be equally effective. But those core pieces that have to be solid, are how you communicate those visuals. Messaging of brand experiences and brand perceptions is critical because everything, especially today, is a brand. It is all about a brand experience. As long as I know, it is hard to admit that these things matter more than our visuals. These are the things that I think are always essential; there is no working around them. They have to be solid. They have to be right.

P1 also believed it is vital for the university to create consistent branding and brand messages in order for the university to make the perceptual impact it requires. She noted,

It is essential that we are consistent with our brand and whether we continue an existing initiative or launch a new thing, like the emblem went away for a while; we have to make sure that we make a big deal about bringing it back because consistent branding is how people remember us.

In explaining how consistency in brand messaging impacts the growth of BUniversity, P3 provided a clear analogy. She narrated,

If someone has a good experience with BUniversity, it creates a positive perception, and they tend to share that with other people. And then when we say something about ourselves, and that messaging is shared, it is either going to ring true or fall flat based on their perception of us, what they have heard about us, and that can increase or decrease the likelihood of someone taking part in a brand experience with BUniversity. So, our messaging has to resonate with people. It is not going to resonate if they do not find it to be true. If people have positive brand experiences, they share those, and they create positive perceptions that can impact growth.

P8 also explained that brand messaging contributes to undergraduate growth because people want to be a part of something that feels real and authentic and will help them achieve their goals. Thus, P8 believed that if the university's brand messaging is positively aligned with the brand experiences, then favorable brand perceptions will derive from the engagement with the university's messaging and brand experiences.

From an admissions and enrollment perspective, P8 added that positive brand perceptions mean increased enrollment in admissions. Most participants perceived consistency in branding as the winning formula for undergraduate growth because it ensures the cycle continues to work long-term. However, P3 believed that brand messaging alone does not account for the long-term growth in undergraduate enrollment. She argued that brand messaging "does not stand alone for sure, but it is definitely a big part of the picture and then maybe does not account for long-term enrollment growth as much as contribute to it." All participants who believed that brand messaging is a valuable resource for undergraduate enrollment growth performed similar administrative duties to ensure the valuable brand elements achieve continued growth in undergraduate enrollment. P1 explained her role to include ensuring that recruiters' email signatures are uniform and have the proper branding elements, like color and font in them. She explained the reason for doing that as basically "to ensure we are keeping it cohesive and consistent so that no matter where we are, our target markets are still seeing that same brand, they are still hearing that same brand." P3 also mentioned she creates audience-specific messages and ensures presentations have high aesthetic values so that they enhance rather than detract from the message. She explained this activity can be as minute as making sure the typography is appropriate so that the messages do not become distracting to the viewer. P3 had the following to say:

I make sure that everything contributes to message efficiency and that the message matches the institution's and the audience's voice so that it feels authentic. So even though I always have to adhere to the brand standard, there are also campaign standards and audience-specific voices. So, for example, if I am talking to a high school, senior audience, that voice is a little more casual than it would be for something that is going to an alumni dinner.

In addition to ensuring consistency in the messaging to consumers, some participants added that they provide brand promotion training to their subordinates. P1 remarked "So I provide proper training on how to communicate who BUniversity is to prospective students. And then I provide branding and promotional training for our recruitment team." P3 also added, I play a role sometimes in training. So, for example, I trained orientation leaders earlier this summer to manage their facial responses when interacting virtually with students, it reminded them that they might be offended by a question.

So, the training was about how to manage that response and have a plan for the appropriate way to react to the unexpected, so that people will still have a positive brand experience. Also, how they can continue to build that professional skill of controlling their face and managing their responses.

Using consistent brand messaging as a valuable resource to overcome market competition involves comprehensive market research. Another finding about brand messaging is adapting the designs of the best institutions in the state to create unique brand messaging campaigns. Because all institutions in the state have a common target market, institutional brand communication needs to be unique rather than generic. In this light, P3 noted that she compares designs to make sure BUniversity's physical and digital materials stand out in a positive way and the messages are among the best. For instance, she explained,

There was a statewide admissions fair for first-time-in-college students. And for that, each institution had the opportunity to add only one slide to the presentation. So, I got to see everybody else's and just to make sure ours looks like one of the best in the deck so when they see it, they say, oh, that is a high-quality brand, just based on the visual alone.

The existing literature supports the use of consistent brand messages to create positive brand perception and eventually long-term growth (Castañeda-García et al., 2020; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Kheiry et al., 2012; Luxton et al., 2017). In a study, Castañeda-García et al. (2020) examined the effects of consistent brand messages on branding positioning. The authors found that consistent brand messaging across different communication channels positively affects brand positioning and brand equity, and as Pike and Page (2014) noted, brand equity is equivalent to competitive advantage. Several authors (e.g., Luxton et al., 2017; Naik & Raman, 2003) have also established that the congruence of brand messaging across different communication tools and channels has a positive effect on consumer perception and performance. The findings from this study indicate that consistency in brand messaging is critical for undergraduate growth because consistency ensures the cycle continues to work long-term, as noted by the participants. As the data revealed, consistency in brand communication can be achieved through departmental and individual collaboration. Thus, the contribution made by the present study to existing literature lies in the collaborative approach used by administrators to ensure consistency in brand messaging creates a competitive advantage for mid-size public universities.

4.1.4. Incorporate Core Values in Brand Promotion Campaigns

The third theme emerged from various participants' responses that deemed BUniversity's core values as a critical brand factor. As Gray and Balmer (1998) noted, the nature, function, and role of an institution's core values are considered a central foundation of an institution's brand. Core values are critical for credibility, continuity, and consistency in a value-creating process (Gray & Balmer, 1998; Yoganathan et al., 2018). The role of core values in higher education institution development is to create a link between an institution's brand and the added values provided by academic programs and services.

In support of this argument, P2 believed that BUniversity is thriving because of the core values that form the basis of the university's brand. He asserted,

I honestly believe our essential branding is really built around our core values. Those core values of caring, collaboration, creativity, entrepreneurship, inclusiveness, and innovation. I just believe that those areas really empower our university. If you know anything about our value statement that we have here at the university, we operate with integrity in all matters; doing the right thing for the right reason.

P2 further explained that BUniversity is unique in different areas because the university embraces one or more of those values to create an experience for each student as well as faculty and staff. Specifically, BUniversity's core value, inclusiveness, is regarded as one of the main values that can provide long-term growth for the university. P2 maintained that

We are in a time in America and in this world that people want to go somewhere where they feel welcomed, where they feel respected and celebrated, and it doesn't matter about your background, it doesn't matter about your economic status, it doesn't matter about your sexual orientation, or beliefs, rigid religious beliefs. People want to be known as a person and respected as a person. And I think we try to do a wonderful job of creating an inclusive environment here at BUniversity.

P6 added that branding is a big aspect of growth. Thus, part of branding is incorporating the university's mission statement, vision statement, and core values into the strategic plan. She established, that making this effort will ensure "everything we do ties back to our values, which are caring, collaboration, creativity, entrepreneurship, inclusiveness, and innovation. So, our job at BUniversity is everything that we say and do at the university should represent that consistent brand." This finding aligns with previous studies.

For instance, Aaker (2003) posited that the development of core values reflects the development of the brand. Aaker (2003) argued that since core values are unique and describe an organization's "reason for being," brand managers and marketers should incorporate core values in marketing strategies and campaigns to ensure sustainable growth. Li (2019) further noted that in the higher education sector, which has been hyper-competitive lately and service and program offerings are marginally distinguishable, it is essential that brand managers incorporate core values into marketing campaigns to create a differentiator for their institutions.

Creating a brand promotion campaign that focuses on core values helps grow the university in many ways, not just in enrollment but in terms of maturing the university, P6 added. This finding validates the existing literature that core values contribute to a more consistent brand, which enhances an institution's presence in the public domain and ultimately yields the growth it requires (Luxton et al., 2017). Branding theorists and strategic management scholars

have also made arguments in favor of this core value approach to branding. As noted by Yoganathan et al. (2018), an effective brand embodies the sense of what an organization stands for in the community.

In describing how the university leverages core values branding to achieve undergraduate enrollment growth, P6 hinted that BUniversity's core values are imbibed in each member of the university community. So, every individual acts as a brand ambassador and influences the perception of the university. She explained,

Every person at BUniversity is responsible for creating our brand and every time we contact different people, including potential donors, prospective students or parents, alumni, and media, we influence the perception of the university. A lot of people think of branding as just marketing and communications, but it is really more than that. Every person who works for the university is like a brand ambassador and they represent the university.

The existing literature (e.g., Aaker, 2003; Luxton et al., 2017) supports the argument that organizations should develop their workforce to serve as brand ambassadors to promote the organization's brand both internally and externally. P5 also indicated that in planning initiatives, she tries to tie every aspect of the core values to promote the brand. Additionally, P2 added that during university-organized recruitment and enrollment events, such as campus tours, he always endeavors to incorporate the university's core values into every message and activity:

I try to take a look at each one of our core values and utilize each one within the event. So, just to say caring, we want to create an environment that will make students feel like they can meet their potential. So, to create that caring environment, we try to connect them with someone who is not going to just know them for the day, but they are going to have contact with later on, while they are here at the university. Because caring is showing of that action and students need to have that person that they can go to.

Although the participants indicated that core values form a critical component of BUniversity's brand-building process, the findings did not reveal any systematic brand-building process at BUniversity based on core values.

4.1.5. Focus on Personalized Learning Experiences

Most of the participants noted that an environment that promotes personalized learning experiences is a valuable resource to achieve sustainable undergraduate enrollment. Personalized learning occurs when students feel they belong in an environment that can address their academic and social needs or concerns (Pritchard, 2013). Pritchard (2013) argued that these environments mainly take the form of close-knit settings or small environments where students and educators work together to create personalized learning plans. As several participants noted (e.g., P5, P4, P8, P2, P6, P7), BUniversity promotes small class sizes that portray a "community feel" to the students. According to these participants, students need this environment to nurture a true college experience, which will benefit them for the rest of their college lives.

P6 remarked that in some universities, students are identified or tracked by their social security numbers because of the large numbers. However, at BUniversity, students are not numbers, they have names. She narrated,

In some universities, there are 100 people in a class, 200 people in a class, and the faculty certainly do not know your name, whereas at BUniversity our faculty know your name, and a lot of times they know your life story. They know what is going on with you, and I think that is the biggest differentiator.

P7 also explained that several students chose BUniversity because of its size and small environment. She believed BUniversity's small class size and environment is an essential brand component that provides a competitive edge over other universities. P7 also shared that the students and faculty are very engaged. The university provides students with personalized and unique learning experiences that are different from the practice in larger schools.

Although BUniversity is a small university compared to others in the state, she argued that the close-knit environment is one of the university's biggest strengths. In terms of branding and recruitment campaigns, P7 noted her department capitalizes on this strength because that is what people love about the school.

Similarly, P8 indicated that having small class sizes is a way to pay closer attention to students' needs and concerns. Students are able to interact with their peers and professors to create their own experiences. P8 stated,

I really do feel like the small classes and small environment at BUniversityare starting to become more of a positive thing, especially in the day of COVID, but I think it was even happening before then. We were seeing a lot of students choose BUniversity because they did not want to get lost in the shuffle of our bigger competitors, especially those students that do not really know what they want to do. And so, they want to be able to talk one-on-one with a

professor or academic advisor and get some ideas. Those are the kinds of students that we would see more and more at BUniversity.

Further, P4 indicated that the student-focused environment at BUniversity creates high-impact practices that each student experiences regardless of their majors. Students get real-world skills that can be applied as soon as they enter the workforce, graduate school, or professional school. P4 noted that maintaining a small class size and environment is a niche that BUniversity has created for itself. She also added that "BUniversity provides one-on-one attention, personalized experience, as well as prepares students for not only the classroom but applying that to real-world situations prior to graduation."

The findings about small class size and environment being an essential brand component that provides a competitive edge for BUniversity over other universities is incongruent with some previous studies. Currently, a body of literature exists that questions the effects of small class sizes on student success and sustainable enrollment (e.g., Ake-Little et al., 2020; Bedard & Kuhn, 2008; Blatchford et al., 2011). Ake-Little et al. (2020) found that small class size has a less significant effect on student success and enrollment than historically debated. The authors argued that small class sizes may be beneficial to instructors rather than students; a possible explanation is attributed to social group theory. According to Ake-Little et al. (2020), "Instructors generally favor smaller class sizes because it allows them to work closely and develop a relationship with their students; however, this reasoning does not consider learning that may happen either between students or even outside of the classroom" (p. 602). This finding from the literature indicates that even though BUniversity administrators may be leveraging small class sizes as a valuable brand component to attract and retain students, that may not be in the interest of the students. Students may, therefore, choose or move to bigger universities to have the experience they require.

On the other hand, the finding that small class sizes allow instructors to pay closer attention to student needs and concerns is founded in the existing literature. For instance, Blatchford et al. (2011) argued that small class sizes provide more benefits for low-performing students because such students obtain specific attention from instructors. Similarly, Diette and Raghav (2015) concluded in their study that students, particularly susceptible students with low SAT scores, academic performance decreased as class size increased.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Several conclusions derive from the study findings in relation to the existing literature. The major conclusion drawn from the findings is that visual identity creates a lasting impression in the minds of external stakeholders. The participants repeatedly emphasized that the university's brand icons and visual identity, including the unique logo and colorful signages, give the university a lot of visibility. As external stakeholders see these brand icons and signages, they recognize the institution's presence in the community. Consequently, these stakeholders can tie the observable visual identity to their perception of the university. The participants indicated that an appealing visual identity could create a good brand impression in the minds of prospective students.

This conclusion is extant in the literature (e.g., Buttle & Westoby, 2006; Clardy, 2012; Glac, 2014; Japutra et al., 2016; Labrecque & Milne, 2012; Walsh et al., 2010). The findings indicate that brand colors and logos have a positive effect on key marketing constructs, including brand attitude and brand likeability. Also, an institution's visual identity forms an essential portion of brand aesthetics, which ultimately influences consumers' perceptions and brand likeability.

The interpretation drawn from this conclusion is that external stakeholders develop high brand associations when they perceive the visual identity of a brand as attractive. Keller (2016) argued that visual aesthetics can appeal to consumers' emotions. For instance, in the fashion sphere, marketing campaigns that use carefully designed visuals are able to trigger customer's sense of adventure leading to their engagement with the brand. The shopping experience is also highly influenced by visual factors. The manner in which items are displayed in a shop influence how consumers react to the product and their buying behavior. In a university setting, external stakeholders including students, community members, business affiliates, and social media followers receive some pleasure or benefit from the success of the brand.

According to Czekanski and Lee (2017), this pleasure can derive from visual signs such as logos, mascots, symbols, colors, and hallmarks. External stakeholders, therefore, develop brand awareness and brand loyalty from the constant engagement with these visual signs, which ultimately drive their brand equity.

The study has implications for educational administrators and brand managers. The findings may inform brand managers on strategic resources that are needed to improve the university's intermittent short-term undergraduate growth to long-term growth through effective brand promotion initiatives. The findings revealed several favorable brand components of the university including brand icons, small class size, core values, close-knit environment, geographic location, and high-impact experiences. Brand managers in collaboration with other relevant internal stakeholders can develop brand-related initiatives and programs that will create positive mental images in the minds of students, parents, and other external stakeholders.

Further, educational administrators can develop specific brand association strategies to attract more students and promote institutional growth based on the study findings. Institutions in a competitive environment should employ brand association strategies to ensure growth and long-term sustainability. For brand managers, the findings from this study suggest that core values should be the foundation of all brand association strategies. Core values are differentiators and can ensure a unique visual identity, which is critical for continuity and consistency in the brand value-creating process. Practitioners can leverage core values to build brand loyalty among stakeholders, particularly students.

6. Compliance with Ethical Standards

All ethical considerations for human subject research, including informed consent, were maintained prior to, during, and after the study.

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