

## **Corporate Branding and Communication Strategies: Assessment of Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions**

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**Abstract:** Today, people have access to abundant information. Hence, differentiation is considered as an important strategy to get seen by the target audience. To this end, organizations need to use unique corporate identities to create positive images. Accordingly, universities are required to plan and communicate their identities to build sustained collaborations with key stakeholders. This study aimed at examining corporate branding and communication strategies in Ethiopian Public Higher Institutions. Using stratified systematic sampling, six first generation universities and six proximate preparatory schools were selected. Then, using quota sampling method, a total of 300 regular students (50 from each university) and 300 preparatory students (50 from each school) were selected. Besides, 12 corporate communication personnel (2 from each university) were involved. A descriptive research method was used employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data have been gathered using questionnaire, interview, content analysis and observation. The results show that universities have not implemented effective corporate branding and communication strategies; there are gaps in branding their institutions using unique features and in communication utilizing effective strategies. Students pointed out that they have not been provided with consolidated information about the universities. Hence, they relied on information from other people such as family members, friends, and teachers etc to choose their preferred university. This implies that universities need to assess their corporate branding and communication strategies. Most importantly, the issue needs further studies for better understanding of the problem in all the universities to implement effective educational branding and communication strategies.

**Keywords:** Communication strategies; Corporate brand; Higher education; Identity; Students

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## 1. Introduction

In a crowded airport or bus station, it is very challenging to identify and welcome an awaited guest unless they show us a unique sign. Similarly, these days, it has become so hard for institutions to draw the attention of audiences who are always provided with myriad advertisements and promotions. If organizations do not have specific signifiers which easily differentiate themselves from the others, customers will not pay attention and identify them (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009). Thus, in today's complex and highly competitive situations, universities and colleges have turned to differentiation as a solution in dealing the challenges they encounter while trying to recruit students and attract stakeholders (Sataøen and Wæraas, 2016; Harsha & Shah, 2011; Drori, Delmestri & Oberg, 2013). On the one hand, the number of higher institutions has increased. Hence, higher institutions are required to compete and recruit competent students and potential stakeholders (Pindar, 2014). On the other hand, students, parents and other key stakeholders have to compare and choose their best universities out of these plenty of universities (Chapleo, 2010; Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016). To this end, universities need to identify their most salient features and plan effective strategies to communicate their identity (Wilkins and Huisman, 2013). A successful identity planning and communication requires more than /conventional advertising for products. In order to communicate an organization's identity, unique features need to be identified and defined well (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009).

The process of planning and promoting institutional features is termed 'Branding'. Different scholars define 'brand' in various ways. The general notion relates a brand to a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify the goods or services of either one item or a producer/provider of the item, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors (Chapelo, 2010). Brand is the image that exists more in the minds of consumers than in the product or organization itself (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Drori, Delmestri, & Oberg, 2013). A brand is established by the central points where the institution's values and the constituents' expectations intersect (Black, 2008). If this brand is used to represent a company or institution with various branches or departments, it is known as 'corporate brand'. This corporate brand helps to enhance and sustain relationships for mutual benefits between companies, their staff, and external stakeholders (Curtis *et al.*, 2009). While brand image focuses on customers' perceptions of brand differentiation, corporate brand identity is more concerned with how managers and employees make a brand unique (Mburu, Matenge, Amanze, & Makgosa, 2013; Koskimies, 2011). Hence, we say the image of a brand is what exists in the consumers' mind.

Accordingly, a university identity is not limited to its logo or motto. Rather, it is the sum of its attributes including the institution's name, logo, visual system (typeface, colors, imagery, history, reputation and environment) and editorial tone (Becker and Palmer, 2009; Javani, 2016). And, its brand is the perception formed by the audience about the university using the identities as unique features. This perception is the culmination of the above components (logo, visuals, identity program, messages, products, and actions). Thus, a designer cannot "make" a brand. Only the audience

can do this. The designer forms the foundation of the message with the logo and identity system (Adams, 2004: p.18). The perceptions that customers form about a specific brand depend largely on the ability of the company to communicate the brand clearly and effectively (Black, 2008; Mburu *et al.*, 2013).

As the number of universities increased, global quality standards and conformity and legitimacy to these standards have become inevitable requirements. Consequently, competitions among universities have continued to grow while trying to recruit best students, staff and potential stakeholders. To this end, universities have been working hard to differentiate themselves using their own unique identities (Sataøen & Wæraas, 2016; Chen & Chen, 2014; Chapleo, 2005). Most universities have been struggling to develop their own brands, differentiate themselves successfully from others, and build reputation, while at the same time matching to the expected qualities and excellences. In order to 'stand out' and get noticed by the students and stakeholders, they also have to communicate their unique identities employing effective communication strategies (Chapleo, 2005). Some institutions, such as the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford, have well-established, international brands that have grown over centuries (Harsha & Shah, 2011; Drori *et al.*, 2013; Hanover research, 2014). On the other hand, there is still limited research regarding the effects branding may have on institutions though the need for branding has been recognized in universities (Lambooy, 2011).

Universities can build a strong identity as long as the brands are planned and communicated in a unified manner (Becker and Palmer, 2009). But, in most cases, universities have gaps in building corporate brands and communication strategies across their constituencies. Most universities have various campuses, colleges, and departments. In principle, each section has to use similar brand, image and identity of the university as a whole in order to maintain and enhance its competitive advantage (Curtis *et al.*, 2009). However, often times, there are irregularities and inconsistencies of using the representative brand. Collectively, the college or the whole university community must identify expected core values, missions, visions and behaviors associated with the identified corporate brand. Employees, for example, must passionately believe in and care about the promise for it to be authentically delivered through the educational experience and student services (Black, 2008).

Higher education in Ethiopia has a relatively short history of some 60 years, but during the past 15 years it has undergone major changes. There were few public universities 20 years ago but now the number of public universities has reached 35 and some more to start soon. Besides, currently, the intake capacity has reached over three hundred students per year (e.g. 392,788 UG students in 2016-17) (MoE, 2016). As it has been set in Education Sector Development Program (ESDP- IV) plan of Ministry of Education (MoE) of Ethiopia, for higher education, the goal is to develop highly qualified, motivated and innovative human resources and produce and transfer advanced and relevant knowledge for socio-economic development and poverty reduction with a view to turning Ethiopia into a middle-income country by the year 2025 (MoE- ESDP-IV, 2010). The higher education section of ESDP IV suggests pursuing and consolidating ongoing reform such as systems expansion and changes

in the governance system. Major new emphases are guided by the present overarching development vision of Ethiopia to become a middle-income country by the year 2025. One major new emphasis will be the concern with improving the quality and the employability of university graduates (ibid).

Though the country has worked a lot in expanding the education in different regions, the higher education quality has become the major concern of different stakeholders. Ethiopian public universities do not recruit their students by their own. Once students pass the national university entrance exam prepared by National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency (NEAEA), they have to choose universities provided to them via MoE. This placement strategy is not has not been effective. In fact, Kassa (2016) assessed higher education admission policy and concluded that the current HE admission policy is not fair and consistent as it gives attention to quantity rather than quality. It places students based on the 'intake' capacity of each university. The students have to select their preferred university based on their field of study they want to join in the future. However, the students may not have enough information about each university. On the other hand, universities may not get students of higher caliber they want as they do not have the mandate to recruit by their own. The better way to get high caliber students is to publicize their universities via their distinctive brands and promote them so that students select out the renowned university by making careful decisions. Each university has to identify itself using unique educational brands which can attract potential students during the selecting process. The question is, therefore, how much have the Ethiopian public universities worked to plan and communicate their own identities so far? The main purpose of this study is exploring the problem of Ethiopian Public Universities in planning corporate identities and communication strategies to attract competent students and reliable stakeholders.

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1. Research Design and Approach**

The study aims at examining the existing practices of corporate branding and communication strategies in Ethiopian Higher Education and find out the limitations. In order to examine the existing problem in educational branding and communication strategies in Ethiopian Public HEs, a descriptive research design involving qualitative and quantitative data was employed.

This approach has been applied because the purpose is, as Bhattacharjee (2012) states, to make careful observations and detailed documentation on the practices of communicating educational brands in the higher educations based on the scientific methods. 'Descriptive research studies are those studies which are concerned with describing the characteristics of a particular individual, or of a group and the major purpose is description of the state of affairs as it exists at present' (Kothari, 2004:37).

## 2.2. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

In order to select the target study areas, public universities were arranged systematically as first, second and third generation universities. There are eight first generation universities (World Bank, 2017).

Out of these, six universities were randomly selected. As the researcher is interested to explore the educational branding and communication strategies in the universities, first generation universities were deliberately selected as they are assumed to have significant experiences on the issue under investigation. Hence, the researcher selected six universities based on subjective judgments using purposive sampling method. This sampling method is used when the target population is small and if the researcher wishes to answer research questions using specific samples (Kothari, 2011). Similarly, the preparatory schools were selected using non-probability sampling method. There were few (one or two, except Addis Ababa) preparatory schools in each town where the universities are located. Hence, the researcher selected one preparatory school as the focus was not for deep understanding of individual differences in each school. Accordingly, using quota sampling method, one preparatory school, which was easily accessible, was selected from each town where each university is located

Accordingly, Addis Ababa University (AAU), Adama Science and Technology University (ASTU), Bahir Dar University (BDU), University of Gondar (UG), Mekelle University (MU), and Jimma University (JU) were selected as the target study areas. The target populations of this study were personnel of corporate communication directorates, regular university students and grade 12 preparatory school students. As the main purpose of the study is to assess the corporate branding and communication strategies of universities, the individual unique characteristics of participants were not the focus of this study. The researcher selected one key feature i.e. '*preparatory school student*' and '*university student*' to select students instead of other individual features. Hence, the researcher used quota sampling technique to pick 50 students randomly from each preparatory school. Using quota sampling method, 50 regular students from each university (a total of 300 university students) and 50 preparatory students (a total of 300 students) were involved. In addition, as the researcher assumes the relevant information related to the issue under investigation, i. e. '*corporate branding and communication strategies*', can be obtained from communication office heads, university communication persons were involved. Accordingly, using purposive sampling technique, 2 personnel from corporate communication directorates of each university (a total of 12 participants) were selected.

## 2.3. Data Collection Methods and Tools

Data were gathered using multiple tools. For both regular university students and preparatory students, a questionnaire was distributed. The items were designed based on the literature review about educational branding strategies. Students were asked mainly about criteria used in selecting university. Moreover, the items included techniques used by students to gather information in selecting university.

A face to face interview was also made with the university communication directors. In order to investigate the actual practices in the selected research areas, face to face conversations with respondents was held so that they can share their experiences without any predetermined directions. Using *in-depth interview* questions are probed and participants are encouraged to reflect on or describe their opinions and experiences freely. The responses are used as descriptors, often in verbatim form, and were integrated with the researcher's arguments based on Creswell's (2014) procedures. Besides, five students at each study area (schools and universities) were selected randomly for focus group discussion. The six focus group discussions were led by a moderator or facilitator who introduced the topic, asked specific questions, controlled digressions and stopped break-away conversations. This method is used for detail understanding of the problem in gathering participants at once and allowing them discuss each other (Dawson, 2002).

Furthermore, branded materials were gathered from each university for content analysis. The data from secondary sources, as Schensul (2008) states, was helpful to describe the historical background and current situation in a community or country where the research is being conducted.

## **2.4. Data Analysis**

For the quantitative approach, a survey was utilized, and the data were organized and analyzed in percentages/frequencies and mean scores; whereas, qualitative data were categorized, coded and analyzed thematically. In order to examine the texts qualitatively, a qualitative textual analysis method has been applied.

A qualitative textual content analysis is concerning the general import or message of the existing documents. It consists of analyzing the contents of documentary materials such as books, magazines, newspapers and the contents of all other verbal materials which can be either spoken or printed (Kothari, 2004). Accordingly, brochures, magazines, mugs pens and other gift materials were collected to analyze the gaps in branding. Besides, the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and notes were taken carefully, coded and analyzed thematically.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1. Attracting Students via Corporate Branding and Communication Strategies**

According to Higher Education Proclamation 650/2009 (Art. 39), university entrance exam for undergraduate students is prepared by Ministry of Education. However, the NEAEA provides students a list of universities and students have to choose the university they prefer. Then, based on their scores and the choices they make, the agency places students to universities. Even though public universities are not allowed to directly recruit the students they need by themselves, they have to introduce themselves so that students can make informed decisions when they are given lists to choose. In fact, the proclamation has pointed out that universities have to be guided by values such as 'competitiveness and cooperation' (Art. 7, Sub Art. 3, 4). Besides, universities have to 'inform students about the courses available, content,

structure and requirements' and 'explore and establish necessary system of pre-admission counseling of students on study choice' (Art. 23, Sub Art. 1, 4).

The first item of the questionnaire for preparatory students enquired the students how they have decided to choose their future university. A list of nine options was given for the students to choose. As it has been learned from their responses, most of the students chose their future university based on others' advices; 28.7% from their teachers, 24.7% from their parents, 18.7% from classmates and 10% from their friends). On the other hand, some students selected their future university based on the information obtained from previously employed graduates.

Students build their perceptions of a university brand image, identity, and meaning before enrolling at a university and they continue evolving during their study and even after graduation (Curtis *et al.*, 2009: 2). However, their responses have shown that students have not been provided with adequate information by each university. The students mainly rely on information about universities from other people (family, teachers and friends); they do not have access to each university to get information so as to decide by their own judgment. The responses of communication directors support this finding. The directors were asked how much they have done in introducing the university for new students. They responded that they have not been promoting their university using specialized strategies other than informing entrance dates on TV and radio. As they admitted, most of them do not go to schools to promote their university distributing brochures and posters. According to the interviewees, there is a challenge to promote their university, i.e. bureaucracy. It has been learned that the process to get permission for promoting the universities is so long. In this regard, one interviewee complained that:

We are not able to promote our university and let our public know about the activities on time because of the slow purchasing process. The advertisements have to pass through Purchasing and Property Administration Directorate (PPAD). Hence, we cannot do that on time. For instance, this year's calendar has just arrived after six months passed (Interviewee 5).

The second item emphasized the students' personal experience of gathering information about their future university. A list of ten statements were provided for the students, and they were asked to rate their attitude. The result showed that only few students (8.6%) read brochures/newsletters and magazines. Most of them (86.6%) did not read. The mean score of their rating for this option is 2, which means "disagree". For the second option-attending electronic media (TV and radio), only few students (about 10% of them) agreed that they attended the media about the university they prefer. Majority of them (86%) disagreed and the mean score of their rating is 2, which means "disagree". The majority of the students (89.7%) replied "disagree" for visiting university websites to get information. Few of them (8%) responded "agree" and the mean score is 2, which is "disagree".

The students' responses call attention to two scenarios. For one thing, most students do not have experience of gathering information about universities by themselves. On the other hand, university administrators do not work hard to promote their universities for the public. During the interview, communication directors pointed out two major reasons for this problem. As it has been mentioned above, the bureaucracy

is the bottle neck. All the promotion activities have to pass through long processes. Thus, they are discouraged to work on promotion activities. Moreover, the university managers do not give due emphasis for promotion activities. One of the respondents states this challenge as follow:

Our university managers believe that the university has already built a good image. Hence, they do not give much emphasis for planning the university brand and communication strategies. When our office proposes communication packages, they devalue it and become reluctant to allow the budget. Our university could not compete internationally because of our poor branding and communication strategies (Interviewee 6).

The students were asked if they obtained sufficient information from the identities (logos, mission, vision and mottoes) of each university. As per their responses, most students (88%) disagreed; only few of them (2.7%) agreed that they have got enough information. In addition, some students (9.3%) replied neutral. Almost few of the students (4.7%) replied “agree” for knowing the direction of a university from its mission, vision and mottoes. The majority (84.6%) rated “disagree” and the overall mean score is 2, which means “disagree”. On the other hand, some students (10.7%) replied “neutral”. For simplicity and uniqueness of a university’s brand to clearly identify it, many of the students (48%) replied “neutral”, whereas, half of them (51.3%) replied “disagree”. Only few of them (6%) agreed. Some students (22.6%) agreed that they have got enough information from the website of their preferred university. However, over half of the respondents (60%) rated “disagree”. Just over half of the respondents (52%) agreed that they are confident to choose the university because of their role models, but over a quarter of them (28%) are not sure. Only some students (20%) replied “disagree” and the mean score is 3.5 which means “Agree”.

For option 9 (whether the university they have chosen issues booklet, pamphlet, leaflet, brochure etc./ distributes reading materials), most of them (83.6%) responded “disagree”. Very few of them (2.66%) rated “agree”. The rest (14%) of students remained “neutral” and the mean score is 2; that means “disagree”. For the last option of the 2<sup>nd</sup> item (relatives graduated from the university), many of the students (44.7%) are not sure, whereas 36% of them replied “agree”. Some students (19.3%) replied “disagree” and the mean score is 3, which means “Neutral”.

The result shows that the students do not have comprehensive information to decide and choose a university they would like to join in the future. Higher education institutions do not provide well organized information for the prospective students. The respondents are dissatisfied with the way universities promote their brands, i.e., mission, vision, and motto to the customer. This implies that the students are not reliably informed and make decisions relying on information received from informal talking, conversation and unreliable sources.

Similarly, regular university students were given a list of nine possible options to identify as ‘main reason’ for choosing the university they have joined.



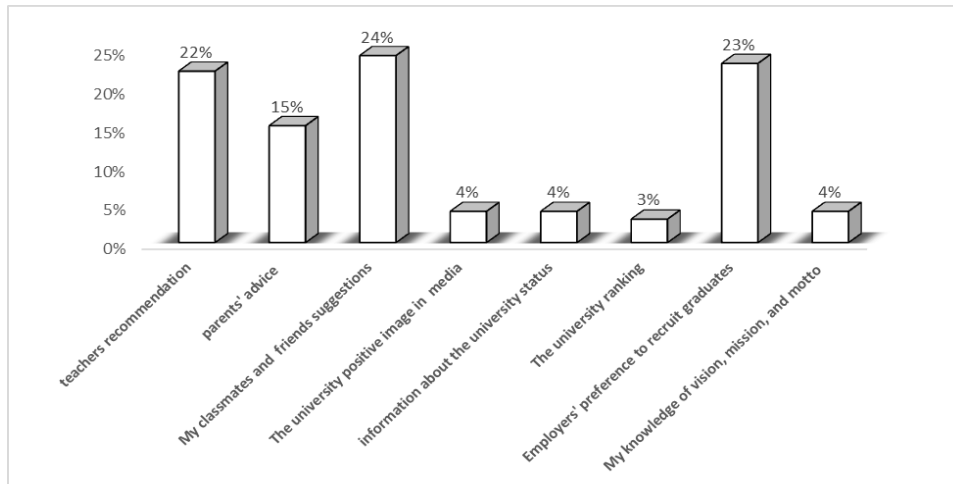


Figure 1: Reasons of regular students for choosing the university they have joined  
Source: Own survey, 2018

As it can be seen from the pie chart, most of the students chose their university based on suggestions they have received from others (22% from their teachers, 15% from their parents, 24% from classmates and friends). A good number of the respondents (23%) chose their university based on the information about employers' preference. Other options such as the university and local media, and its rankings and achievements have received very low points. It is obvious from the students' responses that they did not get reliable information about the universities. Hence, most of their decisions (65%) were based on the suggestions from others. The result matches with the responses of the prospective students.

Regular students were also asked about how they got information about university. They were asked to rate ten possible mechanisms. The average rating for eight of the factors listed (I read its brochures/magazines/newsletters; I watched/listened news/promotion/notice about it on TV/radio; I visited the website/read about it on Facebook; I got enough information about my preferred university from its unique features on the brand-logo, mission, vision; The university's vision, mission, motto and core values gave me clear directions of the university; The brand of my preferred university is very unique and simple, so I can identify it easily; I have got enough information from its website; The university distributed newsletters/brochures to our school) is 2 which is "disagree". For the rest factors (I was quite confident to choose it because of my role model-graduates and my relatives/brothers/sisters/graduated from this university and advised me to choose it), the mean rating is 3, which means "Neutral".

From the responses, it can be implied that the techniques that could have helped them to get comprehensive information about a university were not easily accessible for the students. For one thing, the universities failed to provide students with sufficient information about their university and their unique brand. For example, for the option "The University distributed newsletters/brochures to our school" and "I watched/listened news/promotion/notice about it on TV/radio" the students' mean

rating is 2.1 which means “disagree”. On the other hand, the students themselves did not have a habit of searching for information about universities they wish to join. For instance, visiting website has been rated 1.9, which means “disagree”. This proves that they make decisions mainly based on the information obtained from peers, parents or teachers.

Students were also asked to order 6 possible criteria from first to last when choosing their preferred university.

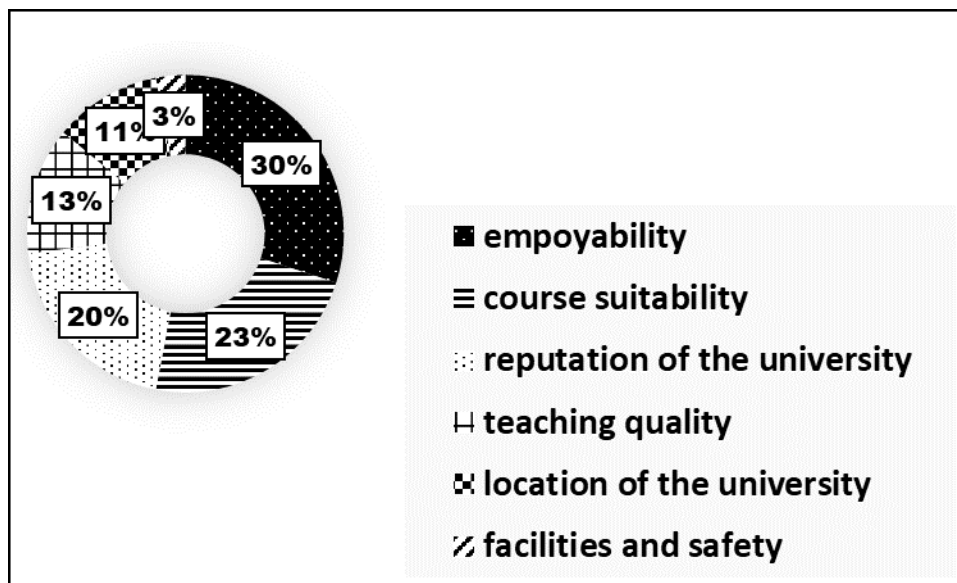


Figure 2: Regular Students' Criteria ranking

Source: Own survey, 2018

As it can be seen from the pie chart, ‘employability’ has been rated as the first criterion (30%), followed by ‘course suitability’ (23%) and ‘reputation of the university’ (20%). The rest, ‘teaching quality’ (13%), ‘location of the university’ (11%) and ‘facilities and safety’ (3%) have been rated as 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> criteria for ranking respectively.

It is possible to conclude from the students’ responses that students gave first priority to ‘employability’ of the university when choosing university. As we have seen from the previous results, the students have relied on others’ advice to choose their university. Hence, their information about that university is mainly ‘word of mouth’. In other words, those who have good image about a university promote it via informal talking and conversation and influence others. The students do not have concrete evidences. Hence, they are easily influenced by unreliable information. Had each university informed the students about their university formally, students would have rated “teaching quality” and “facilities” as their first or second priority? In fact, we have seen that the students do not have a tradition of gathering information about university they wish to join.

The students were also asked to rate the six universities in order of their preferences. As it was learned from the mean score of their responses, Addis Ababa University was rated at first, and Jimma University has been their second priority. University of Gondar, Adama Science and Technology University and Bahir Dar University have been rated third, fourth, and fifth respectively. Mekele University has been their last choice. The results have supported the above response. From the previous responses, it was learned that ‘reputation’ and information about ‘employability of graduates’ have been placed the top criteria to choose universities. As, the three universities-Addis Ababa University, Jima University and University of Gondar are first generation universities which may have good ‘images’ among the people, especially in Medicine. As it has been seen in the previous results, preparatory students get information mainly from other people. These people have good image of these universities though the universities may not promote themselves. Hence, the popular image influences students’ choice.

The students were also asked how they identified the above universities. As we can see from the responses below, the majority (95.7%) use just logo to identify each university. Motto, vision and mission statements are rarely used to identify one university from the other.

Table 1. University identifying methods

No.	University identifying method	Response	
		Frequency	%
1.	Logo	287	95.7
2.	Motto	7	2.3
3.	Vision	2	0.7
4.	Mission	4	1.3

The results show that the students have been affected by their experiences in the university. It seems that their current criterion is employability not reputation unlike the views of prospective students who do not have experiences at all. That is why they placed employability’ as 1<sup>st</sup> and reputation 3<sup>rd</sup>. This might be because they feel they were not right when they decided. On the other hand, ‘course suitability’ has been placed at the second rank which is different from prospective students. This might be because their current experiences influenced them to put it as important criterion. However, still their responses point out that their judgments were not based on personal knowledge rather information from informal discussions.

A list of four statements were given for regular students to rate their attitudes for each to check how much students get chances to know about their university. For the options “informing students about the university regularly” the students and for the statement “I can easily demonstrate/explain the university’s brand for a stranger; logo, color, motto, vision, mission, font types/sizes” the mean rating is 1.9 ( $\approx 2$ ) and 2.2 respectively which means ‘disagree’. But the average rating for the options “the university has its own code of conduct and we have been oriented from the very

beginning”, and “students are proud to advise new students to choose it” is 2.6 and 2.9 respectively which means “neutral”.

The students’ responses have shown that the universities do not inform their students about their progress and directions on a regular basis. Besides, the universities do not explain their brands to their students. Hence, the students do not have much information to tell the newcomers. For example, the respondents “disagree” the option “I can easily demonstrate/explain the university’s brand for a stranger; logo, color, motto, vision, mission, font types/sizes”. This shows that they are not familiar with the brand employed by their university and they do not have confidence to explain it to others. This matches with the finding of Lamboy’s (2011: 30) study that states “students who feel as if they are part of the institution they are attending might be further inclined to remain and graduate from the school and may continue to be involved and become active participants as alumni”.

### **3.2. Evaluation of the Contents of Printouts, the Website and Visual Identity**

In order to evaluate the printouts, rubrics (adopted from Texas Education Agency, 2006) had been prepared to analyze the design of university brand in brochures, newsletters, magazines and other materials. Samples of printouts were taken from each university for general overview. The researchers then distributed the samples to selected professionals for comments. The experts forwarded their own comments using the evaluating rubrics as frame of reference.

As it was seen from reports of the experts’ comments, their average evaluation lay under the column “Needs Work” and the contents of these printouts need more upgrading. Three main contents- introducing the university, education and research contents, and university corporate identity were expected to be incorporated in the printouts. As it was learned from the evaluation result, the contents were not visible as they were not demonstrated effectively. Hence, a reader can just get little understanding of the university. Besides, the materials are not well consolidated. Most importantly, unclear information about education and research progress and incomplete university corporate identities have been included in the printouts. When we see the presentations of the information in the printouts evaluated, first of all, the contents lack organization. In other words, the contents included in the brochures, magazines and newsletters are not designed coherently and consistently. For example, the formats are difficult to follow as they are poorly organized. Some printouts are designed using software such as adobe indesign. However, the results observed are not to the standards of other international universities’ designs. The color, typeface and font size used are not consistent and cannot represent the universities’ identity. In addition, the messages displayed in these printouts are not clear and do not provide readers with precise information. Furthermore, lack of consistency in language is the common problem observed in the printouts of these universities. There are even silly grammar and spelling errors which should have been proofread and edited painstakingly.

A checklist was also designed to review the website of the selected universities. The researchers then recruited two experts of ICT from Adama Science and

Technology University for the website evaluation. The experts have checked each university's website using the checklists.

As per the evaluation of the experts, all the universities selected do not have clear regulation of website management. In fact, communication office officials have complained about this during the interview. In five of these universities, the website is under the management of ICT directorate except Bahir Dar University. The problem is uploading and monitoring the contents into the website. The communication office directors claim they have to edit and approve any information to upload into the website. But, the schools, faculties and colleges do not like to go through long processes of the bureaucracy. They say they do not have to go to the communication offices in order to get approvals. Temporarily, the ICT directorate has granted communication offices' directors gate-pass codes or passwords to access and monitor the websites so that they can access the website for uploading and editing. BDU has already made ICT under Strategic Planning and Corporate Communication Vice President Office which also encompasses Public Relations.

This problem has also been recognized during the interview with the communication directors. As it has been learned from the interview, there is no *strong intra-university communication*. The selected universities have 5 or more campuses under one president. Some of these campuses, especially engineering fields, have upgraded themselves into institutes. The institutes are managed by two directors; one scientific director and one managing director. There is a tendency of being independent campus among the officials of these institutes. Consequently, there are no strong interactions between the communication office and the campuses. As the interviewees indicated, their office is unable to follow up all the university activities and publicize them to the public. The communication offices have also a challenge to get latest information from each campus and update their university website. They do not know what has been changed or included in the campuses as the campuses fail to communicate with the communication offices. As an illustration, one of the interviewees explained the communication gap among campuses as follows:

There are times when people call and shout at us about the obsolete information. For example, one day a guy called and shouted at my secretary; 'I missed the chance to enroll for PG class because of the old fields posted on the website.' They do not let us know the new programs for each year or the new position holders (Interviewee 4).

The experts have further commented that the universities lack consistency in applying designs, typefaces, and color for their website. The contents contained in the graphic designs of the universities for their websites lack consistency. A reader has to guess which university is coming out as soon as the first page appears just looking at the designs if the logo, colors, font types and sizes are demonstrated consistently. As the experts have commented, some university websites are overloaded with too much information. A visitor has to scroll up and down to check all the contents in the websites. As an expert stated "This is an outdated way of designing a website. In the latest technical development, one simple page is enough" (Expert 1). A visitor may not be that much patient enough to scroll all the pages while checking a website. For

one thing, it takes time. Besides, the internet connection may be bad and slow down to display all the contents at once. On the other hand, the contents included in the website pages are not simple and comprehensive. Related to this, Expert 2 stated “A large amount photos and texts are uploaded and it is difficult to check the website in a short time.”

The other gap observed in the websites of these universities is ‘inactive links’. In some universities, there are links found but these links do not open or they are empty when they are clicked. One of the experts stated his comment on the links which are inactive as follows:

You see a caption academic calendar at the heading, but you cannot access it when you try to open it. In the other university, I found a heading ‘research and innovation progresses’, but it is empty when I opened it. If it has no content there is no need to show the heading (Expert 2).




Most universities do not update their website continuously and on time. The case in point is students’ challenge to get up to date information on university websites. In this regard, an expert commented on the website evaluation as follows:




One student told me that when he was in grade 12, he chose the university checking the “Software department” on the website. But when he joined the university he learned that, the department had been closed two years ago. This is a mess for the student. They failed to update their website contents and affected the students’ life (Expert 1).

Moreover, the campuses of each university do not have strong relationships with the communication office. In fact, this was raised as one big challenge during the interviews. The communication office does not get up to date information continuously. As a result, obsolete information is displayed in the website. According to the experts’ comments, in some universities a person who is no more at the position has still been displayed in the website.

An attempt has been made to evaluate the visual identity planning of the selected six universities which has included logo, color and typeface. A checklist has been employed to evaluate the identity planning and design of these universities.

Table 2. Universities' logo, design, and contents

Logo	Motif (picture items)	Possible conceptual attributes	Colour	Image style
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gear</li> <li>• Science symbol</li> <li>• Crop</li> <li>• Book</li> <li>• Texts in 2 languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Red</li> <li>• Yellow</li> <li>• Blue</li> <li>• White</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed-text and pictures</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Odaa (Tree)</li> <li>• Gear</li> <li>• Science symbol</li> <li>• Book</li> <li>• Globe</li> <li>• Nomenclature-in 3 languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Industry</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• World</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Red</li> <li>• Green</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Blue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed-texts and pictures</li> <li>• Circle logo</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Torch</li> <li>• Sun</li> <li>• Book</li> <li>• River</li> <li>• Plants</li> <li>• Stones</li> <li>• Nomenclature in 2 languages and motto</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yellow</li> <li>• Brown</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Green</li> <li>• Blue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed-text and picture</li> <li>• Circle logo</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mountains</li> <li>• Plants</li> <li>• Castle of Fasil</li> <li>• Paper</li> <li>• Gear</li> <li>• Science symbol</li> <li>• Sky</li> <li>• Nomenclature in 2 languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environment</li> <li>• Civilization</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Industry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blue</li> <li>• Green</li> <li>• Yellow</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Black</li> <li>• Blue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed; text and pictures</li> <li>• Circle logo</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gear</li> <li>• Sun rise</li> <li>• Book</li> <li>• Stool</li> <li>• Coffee tree+ beans</li> <li>• Nomenclature in 2 languages+ motto</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry</li> <li>• Hope</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blue</li> <li>• Yellow</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Black</li> <li>• Green</li> <li>• Red</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed-text and pictures</li> <li>• Cup shaped logo with wave at the bottom</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gear</li> <li>• Obelisk of Axum</li> <li>• Book</li> <li>• Science symbol</li> <li>• Crop</li> <li>• Nomenclature in 2 languages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry</li> <li>• Civilization</li> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Knowledge</li> <li>• Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blue</li> <li>• Yellow</li> <li>• White</li> <li>• Green</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed; text and pictures</li> <li>• Circle logo</li> </ul>



As we can see the logos in Table 1, all logos except Jimma University have similar shape, i.e., circle. The logos of AAU and ASTU (Adama Science and Technology University) look similar and may confuse people at first glance.

When we see these logos in terms of memorability and simplicity, they cannot be easily identified and recognized as they are so complex and are full of items. All the logos contain more than five items. Moreover, the logos appear in various colors. Thus, it will not be easy for the universities to identify a unique colour endorsed as an identity.

On the other hand, it is difficult to say that they are unique identities as they share several similarities. In the first place, all the logos except Jimma University are circle. When we see the pictures incorporated in each logo, they contain similar items. For example, all of them contain 'gear and book except BDU. Hence, the concepts which are thought to be represented in each symbol are similar. Accordingly, the common concepts that are possibly signified in the pictures are: knowledge, culture, industry and development.

When we observe the texts incorporated in the logos, they are almost similar. Some universities applied texts in different ways. Bahir Dar University and Jimma University included their mottos in their logos. Besides, Jimma University used the English version of the nomenclature at the top unlike the others. All universities used the Amharic and English versions of their nomenclature, except ASTU which used three languages. All in all, the logos of these universities cannot be said perfect visual identities. For one thing, they are not simple and easily recognizable. There are many items and colours included. For another, they may not be used as unique identities as they have no their own peculiar signs. Hence, their own unique concepts are not contained on the logos.

To sum up, this study has identified two major gaps of corporate branding and communication strategies in the universities selected. For one thing, the communication strategies employed have not been able to attract customers. One of a university's purposes for planning and employing communication strategies is to attract high caliber prospect students (Curtis *et al.*, 2009). As it has been discussed, both prospective and regular students were asked how they decided to choose their preferred university. The result showed that universities are not doing well to convince and attract the students. Most prospective students decided to choose their preferred university based on advice obtained from teachers, parents and friends. Though students prefer institutions with a remarkable reputation which is mainly related to the success of an institution's brand (Lambooy, 2011), they do not have sufficient knowledge about the brands. The same is true for regular students. Similarly, students have confirmed that they do not know much about their future universities. When new students were given statements to rate about their efforts of accessing universities' information directly, the majority "disagreed". That means they do not get information directly. Universities do not provide useful information for new students using various mechanisms. For example, only 8.6% read news letters or brochures of universities. On the other hand, the interviewees (Communication officials) have pointed out that the communication strategies

universities pursue are poor. As they have stated, sometimes university top managers do not care about promoting and attracting students as they believe their university has already built 'good image'. They also admitted that the university websites are not updated frequently and do not give customers the most recent information. This has been confirmed by the experts during the website evaluation.

Consequently, students choose universities based on information obtained from informal talk and conversation. Thus, the decision to choose university comes from their family, friends and teachers. That is why they give due emphasis for 'reputation' and 'employability' as their main criteria. The universities failed to reach target students and provide comprehensive information using various communication strategies.

Moreover, the universities have not been successful in identifying unique features and symbols using effective brands. An effective branding and positioning captures the distinctive mission, aspirations, and strengths of an institution and appeals to the motivations and interests of the stakeholders. According to Haris (2009), corporate branding requires a holistic approach to brand management, in which all members of an organization behave in accordance with the desired brand identity. Accordingly, a university's brand has to be unique, recognizable and comprehensive. However, this has not been accomplished by the selected universities. As we have learned from the content analysis, there are gaps in symbolizing and communicating the identities of the selected universities.

First of all, the universities' identities which include the logo, color, typeface, unique mission, vision and core values have not been planned well. As it has been seen from the content analysis, the design of the universities' visual identities has various gaps. The designs are not unique and are almost similar. In addition, the designs are not simple and precise. It is not clear why some shapes are incorporated. The universities failed to display they are unique and distinctive brand of academia. Moreover, the items included in the logos do not contain any unique feature of the university's mission and vision other than general cultural concepts. As a result, both new and regular students do not have enough knowledge about the identity of each university. New students do not know about the mission and vision of their future universities. Similarly, regular students responded '*disagree*' for the statement 'I can easily demonstrate/explain the university's brand for a stranger; logo, color, motto, vision, mission, font types/sizes'. Secondly, there is inconsistency in selecting and applying typefaces and color. As it has been pointed out in the content analysis of the printouts, there are problems of consistency. In fact, most interviewees have stated that they do not have approved editorial policy to manage all the printouts and displays in the names of their universities. In fact, Addis Ababa University and Jimma University have editorial policies, but they have not yet implemented in all the campuses. Other universities do not have any document that is used to regulate and manage printouts and displays. Thus, materials have not been prepared based on editorial policy. Besides, the universities visual identities are not planned and implemented well. As the analysis on has indicated, the logos of these universities lack several qualities: simplicity, uniqueness and completeness.

#### 4. Conclusions

As the results show, students do not have sufficient knowledge to choose the appropriate universities. Hence, they choose universities based on ‘suggestions’ from others such as friends, teachers and parents. This is because universities do not introduce their unique features and give directions to the students. For example, students do not have access to brochures and newsletters. Similarly, the students have difficulty distinguishing one university from the other as they have no information that recurs in their mind and represents universities’ unique identities. As it has been learned from the content analysis, the universities are not working hard to promote their universities using various media. Our universities websites are not planned as per the standards of international universities. The printouts lack designing and content planning. Furthermore, the logos are not designed in simple and unique way. As universities continued to expand, establishing unified communication has been difficult in many universities. Each campus has less interaction with the main communication office; hence, the communication officials fail to update the public. Furthermore, consolidating identity has been difficult for university as each campus tries to put its name and concerns first.

#### 5. Recommendations

The researchers have forwarded the following possible recommendations based on the conclusions. Universities have to design their unique identities; specific core values, missions and visions have to be signified in their logos. Universities have to promote themselves; e.g. new students have to be provided with up to date information via websites, printouts and mass media. Preparatory schools have to make efforts to provide their students with useful information about each university. Communication offices have to work with each campus of the university so that they can publicize comprehensive information to the audience and customers. Further research has to be conducted on all universities so that branding problem of Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions can be overcome.

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