

Brand Awareness as a Determinant of Students' Choice of a Higher Institution: Evidence from Students in a Ghanaian University

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Abstract: The competitive landscape of university education in Ghana is characterised by poor infrastructure, quality and environmental conditions, making it challenging for students and parents to select an institution for study. To attract students, universities must effectively leverage their marketing mix, particularly products and brands. This study examines the influence of brand awareness on students' selection of a higher institution. Employing a positivistic paradigm and quantitative approach, a self-administered questionnaire was completed by 345 students at a Technical University in Ghana. Data analysis using SPSS and Smart PLS software revealed a significant positive impact of institutional brand awareness on students' decisions. The study concludes that university branding plays a vital role in enrolment and highlights the importance of developing and promoting brand personality to differentiate universities in a competitive market. By understanding the factors contributing to brand awareness, higher institutions can tailor marketing strategies, enhance their reputation and achieve their objectives.

Keywords: *Brand awareness, Technical University, Brand image, Brand identity, Brand culture, Brand personality, Higher institution, Ghana.*

1. Introduction and background

The Ghanaian education landscape has undergone significant transformations. The country's educational system is categorized into three levels: tertiary, secondary, and primary education (Takyi et al., 2021). This structure has enhanced the quality of education at each level, culminating in higher standards at the tertiary level. Through the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, the government converted all polytechnics into Technical Universities (Amoako & Asamoah-Gyimah, 2020), expanding access to education nationwide. With the surge in higher education institutions in the country, competition for attracting new students has intensified (Chen, 2019). Additionally, the proliferation of institutions and varying quality standards have created challenges for parents, students, and stakeholders in selecting the best institution for study and knowledge acquisition (Esia-Donkoh & Antwi, 2015). Consequently, institutions struggle to effectively brand themselves and raise awareness, attracting students' attention and motivating them to act. Institutions seldom engaged in brand promotion or marketing strategies in the past, but this has changed (Mao et al., 2020). Higher institutions must compete to attract students and promote their brand (Zhang, 2015). According to Mabkhot, Shaari, and Salleh (2017), brand awareness plays a vital role in influencing students' decision-making and creating an institutional image (Kwarteng-Amaniampong et al., 2024). Proper brand management, reputation, and quality facilities are essential for attracting students to institutions (Leland, 2016). Meanwhile, these have not been properly articulated by Technical Universities in Ghana. The rise of social media and other digital marketing platforms, and the increase in options for higher education in Africa, particularly in Ghana, have enabled students to make informed choices when applying to institutions (Chatterjee & Chakraborty, 2020).

The success of higher institutions depends on developing strategies to increase brand awareness, leading to a return on investment and increased matriculation (Abbas, 2019). It is worth noting that there is a mutual relationship between universities and students, with each depending on the other's existence (Moreira, 2023). Students seek good institutions for knowledge, and institutions need brilliant students for success. Among the numerous universities in Ghana, the one that effectively positions itself will attract more students (Yiadom & Madele, 2022). Creating effective awareness about what higher institutions offer to their customers and positioning themselves well in students' minds are crucial (Abbas, 2019). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time a study has been conducted concerning brand awareness and its impact on Technical University students in Ghana. This study aims to investigate institutional brand awareness among students at a Technical

University in Ghana. Previous studies have established the importance of brand awareness in consumer decision-making (Abbas, 2019); however, there is limited literature on its specific impact on the enrolment decision-making process of Technical University students, especially in Ghana. This study fills this gap by exploring the effects of brand awareness on students' enrolment decisions, providing valuable insights into the role of brand awareness (i.e., brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality) at each stage of the decision-making process. The next sections of this study present the literature review, methodology of the study, discussions, managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions.

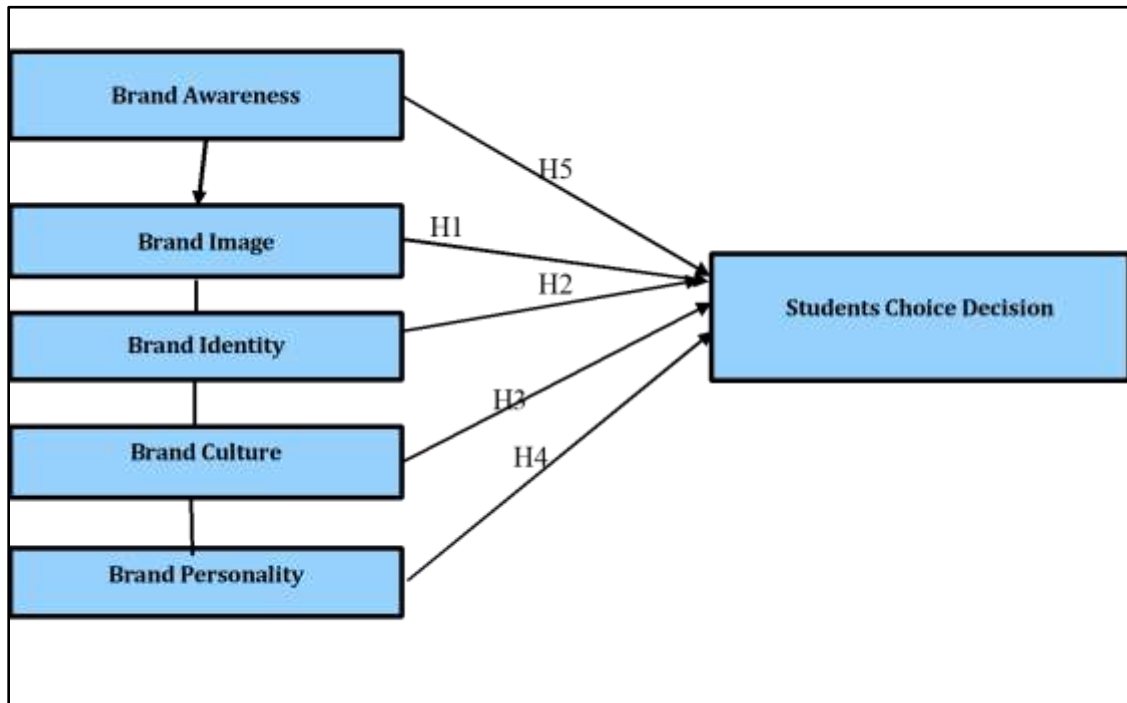
2. Literature Study and Hypotheses

Theoretical foundation

This study adapts the AIDA theory, which was originally propounded by Lewis (1896) and later expanded by Strong (1925). The acronym refers to Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) (Muñoz et al, 2019), and it is popularly known as the hierarchy of effects models (Lewis, 1896; Strong, 1925). Although the framework has been found to have several challenges, it is still considered one of the most dominant theories in marketing and advertising (O'Shaughnessy, 1992; Baber, 2022). This theory explains that consumers pass through several arranged processes before making a purchase or choice decision (Montazeribarforoushi et al., 2017). These decisions are classified into three levels during the process, including cognition (Awareness and Learning), Affect (feeling, interest, or desire), and behaviour (Action). Thus, the theory posits that, to make a purchase decision, people will first need to be aware of what they intend to buy and show interest and desire in the product before taking action (AIDA), whether to buy or not buy the product or service (Baber, 2022). This choice enables people to choose between alternatives successfully (Savioni et al., 2022). As in this study, a student who plans to study at a Technical University would initially have to utilise their cognitive thinking ability to learn, perceive, process, and respond to the various information concerning the university and its environment.

Specifically, a student pays attention to the institution's image, identity, culture, and personality to interpret or organize their thoughts before objectively deciding to choose enrollment. Afterwards, students generate some motivation, passion, or interest in whether they found the institution's image, identity, culture, and personality enjoyable and engaging (Interest). These interests are measured personally, financially, and based on the extent of investment they wish to put into their studies. Also, concerning desire (D), the student at this level develops a strong feeling or emotion, either positive or negative, about the university based on the perception of their brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality. At this level, students clarify what is important to them, create paths, and align their actions with their values. The desire stage sets the pace for the next and final letter A (Action) in the framework. This is the stage at which the students make a final decision to achieve goals regarding choosing or not to select the university as a place of study and enrolment. Students' decisions will be based on their goals set initially, applying energy, time, and resources, as well as continuing to make that decision despite challenges or obstacles to be successful. Rooted in the explanation from these theories and to offer answers to the research aim and objective, a conceptual framework was developed (see Figure 1), whilst each part of the model is discussed in the sections below.

Figure 1: A conceptual model of the relationship between brand awareness and the Students' Choice Decision



Source: Author's construction

Branding and Brand Awareness

Branding: Institutions need to differentiate and build trust with students (Hassana, Ibrahim & Sani, 2021). It is a marketing and communication strategy that distinguishes an organisation or product from competitors, aiming to create a lasting impression on customers (Kotler & Keller, 2020; Siitonen, 2017). However, technical universities have failed to utilise the concept more effectively. Positively, branding is crucial for attracting people (Mao et al., 2020). An organisational brand comprises various elements, including logos, visual design, mission, tone of voice, product quality, customer service, and pricing (Wheeler, 2014). Branding enables institutions to express their values, personality, or distinctive features, which they want others to associate with them (Ries & Trout, 2018). Branding creates a unique identity, image, reputation, and experience, differentiating top organisations (Kwarteng-Amiampong et al., 2024). According to Kotler and Keller (2020), a strong brand offers various benefits to customers, including identifying the product's source, reducing risk and cost, signifying quality and promising consistency, creating unique associations, providing a competitive advantage, and generating income and returns. In a higher educational setting, branding is not just about standing out but also creating a consistent experience across all touchpoints (Rhian, 2021). On a negative note, a strong brand can also make it more vulnerable to criticism and negative publicity (Rodas, 2019). There is also brand dilution associated with the expansion of an organization's brand, making the brand less focused and less effective (Florack & Palcu, 2017). In addition, creating high expectations through branding can also lead to disappointment if the product or service fails to deliver (Moreira, 2023). It is believed that relying too heavily on branding and marketing can create a dependence on these efforts, rather than focusing on developing a high-quality product or service (Yu, 2020). Notwithstanding the positive and negative influence of branding, the extent of influence of brand awareness on students when deciding to choose a university as a place of study.

As a result, universities' branding strategies should be integrated across all student interactions. Branding requires a data-driven and customer-focused approach to marketing to fulfill customer needs (Hassana, Garba & Abdullahi, 2021). Technical universities, as tertiary institutions in Ghana, have limited information and understanding concerning how to develop strong linkages with stakeholders and the community through branding. They can utilise branding to facilitate effective increases in student enrolment, thereby achieving returns on investment.

Brand awareness: This concerns the extent of customers' familiarity with a brand's qualities and image, serving as a critical foundation for brand equity, customer preference, and loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2020). According to Aaker (2020), brand awareness is the ability of potential customers to recognise or recall a brand's existence, driving customer acquisition and retention. A strong brand awareness influences student decisions, creating a competitive advantage (Bohara & Panwar, 2022). An institution that creates effective awareness about its brand builds loyalty through repetitive publicity and advertising, leading to long-term customer retention (Bilgin, 2018). According to Keller (2009), a brand with high awareness has a greater chance of being considered, influencing consumer choice and brand association. Brand awareness is a fundamental component of brand equity, influencing consumer decision-making (Stocchi et al., 2020). Furthermore, brand awareness comprises brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality (Bilgin, 2018; Bastos & Levy, 2012).

Brand Image

Brand image refers to the perception of a brand by its customers and stakeholders, reflecting the brand's identity, personality, and values (Chun, Lee & Park, 2020). According to Sallam (2014), brand image is a crucial factor in predicting consumer behaviour. Technical universities in Ghana can leverage brand image to assess their brands' or products' strength, uniqueness, and favorability among students, providing valuable insights into their reputation, distinctiveness, and appeal (Grönroos, 2015). By measuring brand image, universities can evaluate the perception of their brand by their target audience, identify areas of strength and weakness, and inform strategies to enhance their reputation and competitiveness (Grönroos, 2015). Additionally, Bilgin (2018) explains that brand image significantly influences brand equity through the associations formed by signals sent to consumers. For instance, the conscious signals sent to students can shape their perception of a technical university. According to Siitonen (2017), brand image refers to how customers or brand purchasers perceive a brand and the attributes they associate with it. However, the extent of the influence of brand image on technical university students' awareness and choice decisions to study or not study at the institution. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: *A positive brand image positively predicts a student's awareness and decision to choose a higher institution as a place of learning.*

Brand Identity

Brand identity encompasses unique associations and perceptions that customers have regarding a brand, based on its distinctive attributes, personality, and market positioning (Mao et al., 2020). Additionally, brand identity is a collection of all brand elements that an organisation creates to portray the right image of itself to consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2020). Brand identity serves as a set of strategic instruments that an organisation can leverage to increase recognition, differentiate itself from rivals, and build strong customer loyalty and value for its brand (Wheeler, 2014). Brand identity can help establish a strong bond and relationship with students (Aaker & Keller, 1996). However, the extent of influence of the technical university's brand identity on students' awareness and choice decisions regarding enrolment. Consequently, it is proposed that:

H2: *A positive brand identity predicts a student's awareness and decision to select an institution as their preferred place of study.*

Brand Culture

Brand culture is the living, breathing embodiment of the brand, encompassing everything from employee communication to design elements (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2021). It concerns the way an organization's values and beliefs are reflected in its products, services, and interactions with customers (Hassana, Garba, & Abdullahi, 2021). Most explanations regarding culture detail that it involves a specific group of values held closely by customers in society, which determine what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour (Moorhead & Griffin, 2001). An organisation's brand showcases its culture, where the foundations of such culture are built on its roots and reflect on consumers. Brand culture plays an important role as a unique identifier that differentiates an organization from its competitors (Sharma, Patro & Chaudhry, 2022). It is worth noting that the behavior of brand marketers is influenced by trends in society, including shifts in values, cultural ideology, and ethics (Moreira, 2023). According to Sharma, Patro, and Chaudhry (2022), a Technical University's culture lays a strong foundation of values and acts as a basis for students to resonate with the brand's image. However, the impact of brand culture on technical university students' cultural awareness and choice decisions remains unclear. Consequently, it is proposed that:

H3: A positive brand culture predicts a student's awareness and decision to select an institution as their preferred place of study.

Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to the unique set of human-like characteristics that a brand exhibits, creating a sense of familiarity and affinity with its target audience (Loureiro et al., 2020). According to Aaker and Keller (1996), brand personality comprises five dimensions of the human five-factor model of personality. These dimensions include sincerity (down-to-earth, real, sincere, and honest), excitement (daring, exciting, imaginative, and contemporary), competence (intelligent, reliable, secure, and confident), sophistication (glamorous, upper-class, good-looking, and charming), and ruggedness (tough, outdoorsy, masculine, and western) (Gronroos, 2015). These variables have been replicated in Asian cultures, with consistency in cross-cultural variables discovered in Japan for sincerity, excitement, competence, and sophistication. However, a culture-specific variable of peacefulness was found in Japan (Mao et al., 2020). Literature on brand personality has found that Aaker's explanation and definition are the most recognized and representative, as they depict that brand personality and human personality characteristics are similar (Su & Tong, 2015). Therefore, brand personality emulates the features of human beings and directly personifies the brand, attributing human qualities to it (Siitonen, 2017). Technical universities, as artificial entities exhibiting these personality variables, have not been able to attract a high number of students for enrolment. Consequently, it is proposed that:

H4: A positive brand personality predicts a student's awareness and decision to select an institution as their preferred place of study.

Students' Choice Decision

The theory of decision-making has been studied and contextualized in various fields, from economics (Stolyarov et al., 2019) to psychology (Beach & Connolly, 2005) to statistics (Stine et al., 2011) and marketing (Cialdini, 2009). It has a considerable influence on medical, political, economic, organizational, and business fields (Stine et al., 2011). Decision-making involves choosing from several alternatives to derive an outcome (Eisenfuhr, 2011). Thus, the decision-making process of students involves an aspect of choice from several options, available resources, and opportunities. It also considers several factors and sub-processes, as well as a purpose or objective accomplished (Savioni et al., 2022). According to Chao et al. (2021) and Ben-Akiva et al. (2012), people do not make choice decisions in isolation but through the broader society and family they belong to. This mostly occurs, for instance, in the context of life paths, where they are impacted by the area in which they occur. Issues like making a decision concerning love and family affect people's future associations and life satisfaction (Savioni et al., 2022). Consequently, life paths selected by people interconnect and impact one another; for example, following a particular career in life can have a major influence on one's lifestyle and vice versa. According to the study conducted by Ngambeki, Dalrymple, and Evangelou (2008), choosing the type of job or degree program is connected to one's talent and capability, job security, highest income earned, and status in society. This implies that students' choices regarding a university are influenced to a great extent by the utilization of the deliberative system theory, which revolves around motivation and the decision to choose. Students are motivated by the culture of the university, the images, identity, and the university's personality.

According to psychological literature and authors, people's decision-making is influenced by two "forces or systems," including rationality and deliberation, also known as System 1, as well as System 2, which concerns students' emotions and intuition (Pacheco-Barrios & Fregni, 2020). These forces do not work in isolation but rather contribute to impacting people's decisions. For instance, students can make choice decisions regarding enrolment based on several associated memories concerning a Technical University using the institution's logo, image, colors, and ambiance. Such decisions are the fastest to be made and work automatically (Loewenstein et al., 2015; Stamos et al., 2018). Unlike System 1, System 2 is based on slow decision-making by people; it works intentionally. With this system, people go through a daunting process to reach a decision, which is long-term goal attainment, very slow, and controllable (Stamos et al., 2018). While people's intuition can dictate choice decisions, sometimes relations play a role in choice decisions (Levine, 2019; Khatri et al., 2018). The extent of the relationship between technical universities' brand awareness and students' decisions to enroll is not known. Consequently, it is proposed that.

H5: A positive brand awareness significantly predicts students' awareness and likelihood of choosing and enrolling in a higher education institution.

3. Method

Procedure

The study's population consisted of students enrolled full-time and part-time at a Technical University in Ghana. Respondents were selected using a convenient sampling technique. A hard-copy self-administered questionnaire was utilized to collect data for the study between March and April 2023, which took an average of 25 minutes to complete. The three authors participated in the data collection process, which took place at the university's departments, faculties, and classrooms with permission from Deans, Heads of Department, and other staff members. Participants were informed about voluntary participation and were guaranteed anonymity and privacy before receiving the questionnaires.

Participants

A total of 345 paper and pencil questionnaires were administered to participants. As shown in Table 1, 166 (48.1%) of the sample were males, whilst females formed the majority with 179 (51.9%). The majority (213, i.e., 61.7%) of the students were between 19 and 30 years, followed by 127 students with an age range between 31 and 40 years (i.e., 36.8%). Among the students, 121 were at the level 200 (i.e. second year) of their studies, followed by 109 at the third year of their studies, and the least of the students (13, i.e. 3.8%) were at the level 500, also known as the Diploma in Business Studies. Nearly 128 (37.1%) were from the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, whilst 65 (18.8%) were in the Faculty of Built and Natural Environment. To achieve the objectives of this study, only students from five faculties of the university were concentrated. It must be noted that the sample distribution by age and marital status is consistent with other studies regarding university students' profiles (Mensah et al., 2021). This also supports the idea that the age categories of Ghanaian university students are predominantly young adults compared to adult learners.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	261	60.4
	Female	171	39.6
Age	Below 19	36	8.3
	19 to 30 years	386	89.4
	31 to 40 years	10	2.3
	41 and beyond	0	0.0
Level of study	Level 50	25	5.8
	Level 100	243	56.3
	Level 200	119	27.5
	Level 300	30	6.9
	Level 400 and beyond	15	3.5
Faculty	Art and Design	39	9.0
	Applied Science and Technology	159	36.8
	HTU Business School	70	16.2
	Built and Natural Environment	42	9.2
	Engineering	122	28.2

Measures

The hard copy survey questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section involved the main concepts of the study, including brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality (independent variables) and students' choice decision (dependent variable). In total, 25 items were developed based on a review of the literature. The second section concerned respondents' profile characteristics, including gender, age, year of study, and faculty of study. A research instrument was designed relevant to the background of the study, research objectives, and problem, as well as hypotheses of the study. A measuring instrument is a tool or method that helps researchers collect data from participants or respondents with the purpose of the study in mind (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). A 5-point Likert-type scale with end-points ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5) was employed for questions dealing with the independent and dependent variables in the model. It must be noted that with a 5-point Likert scale, a high overall score can be

viewed as a positive response, whereas a low overall score depicts a negative response (Mensah et al., 2021). Multiple-choice and dichotomous questions were utilised to gather respondents' profile data. The instrument met all the requirements, as indicated in the literature, and was pilot-tested for reliability (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). A pilot test was conducted using 50 respondents, and no changes were required. The scales used in the study were originally constructed in English and were similar to those developed and widely used by experts and authors in the brand and brand management field (e.g., Bilgin, 2018; Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019). In the research instrument, sample items concerning brand image included (1) "The name of my institution was of high prestige," (2) "There were positive word-of-mouth concerning high-quality teachers in my institution," (3) "My institution's brand image was consistent with my career aspirations," and (4) "My institution's brand image influenced my perception of its reputation among employers." All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items about brand identity included (1) "The colours of my institution were attractive," (2) "There were unique infrastructure designs in my institution," (3) "My institution's identity was consistent across different faculties," and (4) "My institution's brand identity reflected its commitment to sustainability." All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Sample items concerning brand culture included (1) "The institution's culture encourages creativity and innovation," (2) "My institution's staff had exceptional attitudes towards students," (3) "My institution's culture emphasized social responsibility," and (4) "My institution's brand culture supported work-life balance." All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Also, sample items for the element brand personality included the following: (1) "The institution's brand aligned with my values and personality," (2) "The institution's brand was consistent across different communication channels," (3) "My institution's brand was more relatable," and (4) "My institution's brand conveyed a sense of high standard." All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Lastly, students were asked about their extent of awareness of the institution and its influence on choice decision on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The sample items were (1) "The institution's attractive typography and imagery were crucial factors in my decision to enrol," (2) "Awareness of my institution's positive shared values, beliefs, and practices played a significant role in my decision to apply," (3) "I chose my institution because it is a well-known brand," and (4) "The institution's set of human-like traits and characteristics influenced my decision-making to study there." Based on the results of the constructs, the measurement model was considered appropriate for the structural analysis (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2019).

Analytical approach

Data were processed using IBM SPSS statistical software version 26.0. Respondents' profiles were analyzed with descriptive statistics. The research model and associated hypotheses were assessed using partial least squares-based structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). Measurement models were evaluated separately, followed by the evaluation of the structural model (Hair et al., 2022; Hair et al., 2018). The PLSc algorithm, followed by bootstrapping sampling (5,000 re-samples), was applied to determine model fit, factor loadings, path coefficients, and their respective significance levels (Hair et al., 2022). Common method bias was assessed using Kock's (2015) approach. The results show that all factor-level Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) resulting from a full collinearity test are less than 3.3. Hence, the model can be considered free of common method bias.

4. Results

Model Characteristics and Estimations

The study's results showed that the composite reliability (CR) coefficients ranged from 0.842 to 0.858, exceeding the recommended limit of 0.70 (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Additionally, the Cronbach alpha (CA) coefficients were greater than 0.7, ranging from 0.725 to 0.780 (Nunnally, 1979). Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Heterotrait Monotrait (HTMT) guidelines were utilized to assess the model's discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). The square root of the AVEs and HTMT met the suggested requirements, as shown in Tables 2 and 3 below (Hair et al., 2021). Table 2 shows that the square root of the AVE of brand image (0.760), brand personality (0.738), and brand identity (0.757) were greater than their corresponding rows (0.412), (0.479), (0.353) and columns 0.479 (i.e. brand image), 0.412 (i.e. brand identity) and 0.353 (i.e. brand culture) correlations. Similarly, the correlations between pairs of constructs produced results that were less than the

HTMT 0.90 threshold values. As a result, the four latent constructs used in the research model varied, indicating the quality of the measured constructs (see Table 3). Also, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to check for collinearity among each set of predictor variables (Hair et al., 2019). As a rule of thumb, VIF values less than 3 show an absence of collinearity. The results in Table 4 indicate that all VIF values of the pair of brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality were below 3, demonstrating the absence of collinearity among students' awareness and choice of institutions (a Technical University) as a place of study. Also, R2 values were measured to assess the model's exploratory power (Sarstedt, et al., 2022). It must be noted that R2 values of 0.75, 0.50 and 0.25 indicate substantial, moderate and weak values (Henseler et al., 2016). The R2 values obtained for this study were awareness and choice of students (0.907), brand culture (0.419), brand identity (0.124), and brand image (0.170) (see Table 5). All these results are satisfactory as the study predicts the extent of awareness and choice of students on an institution (Raithel et al., 2012). Also, to explain further, the effect sizes of the main exogenous construct were examined using Cohen's (1988) f^2 , which helped to determine the effects of the path (i.e. partial or full effect) and how the model fits (Nitzl, Roldán & Cepeda, 2016). The findings showed that the values between brand image and brand identity (0.204), brand culture and brand identity (0.142), brand culture and students' choice decision (1.597), brand identity and students' choice decision (0.016), brand image and students' choice decision (0.016), brand personality and students' choice decision (1.806), and brand personality and brand culture (0.720). As a rule of thumb, values higher than 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 depict small, medium, and large f^2 effect sizes (Cohen, 1988).

These indicate that brand culture and brand identity results showed small effects, brand image and brand identity indicated a medium effect. Also, brand culture and students' choice decision, and brand personality and students' choice decision, as well as brand personality and brand culture, indicate large effects, therefore, showing the model's full effect. In addition, to assess the PLS path model's predictive accuracy, Q2 values were measured (Sarstedt et al., 2022). As a guideline, Q2 values higher than 0, 0.25 and 0.50 show small, medium and large predictive relevance of the PLS-path model (Hair et al., 2021). The Q2 results are students' choice decision (0.754), brand culture (0.413), brand identity (0.095), and brand image (0.079), all indicating small, medium, and large predictive relevance of the PLS-path model (Hair et al., 2019). Also, the direct effect of H1, H2, H3, and H4 of the brand awareness elements on students' choice decision of an institution, and hypotheses of the model were evaluated. As indicated in Table 5, the results of the path coefficients, t-value, and p-values showed that all four path relations were significant. Consequently, H1 was supported as brand image predicts a positive influence on students, and H2, brand identity predicts a positive relation and influence on students' choice decisions on institutions. Also, H3, brand culture predicts a direct and positive relation to students' choice of an institution as a place of study, and H4, with moderate support, as brand personality predicts students' choice of an institution positively and significantly. These also support the view that, in totality, brand awareness of an institution positively influences students' decision-making regarding the choice of a university as a place to study, thereby supporting the H5 proposition.

Table 2: Convergent validity and reliability

Constructs	Items	Factor Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Brand Image	Q1a	0.737	0.757	0.845	0.578
	Q1b	0.690			
	Q1c	0.856			
	Q1d	0.749			
Brand identity	Q2a	0.745	0.753	0.842	0.573
	Q2b	0.856			
	Q2c	0.742			
	Q2d	0.673			
Brand Culture	Q3a	0.614	0.762	0.849	0.588
	Q3b	0.832			
	Q3c	0.816			
	Q3d	0.785			
	Q4a	0.781			
	Q4b	0.864			

Brand Personality	Choice	Q4c	0.628	0.780	0.858	0.603
		Q4d	0.652			
		Q5a	0.748			
		Q5b	0.761			
		Q5c	0.770			
Students' Decision		Q5d	0.825			

Note (s): α =Cronbach alpha, CR=Composite reliability, AVE=Average variance extracted

Table 2: Fornell-Larcker criterion

Constructs	Students' choice decision	Brand Culture	Brand Identity	Brand Image	Brand Personality
Students' choice decision	<i>0.776</i>				
Brand Culture	0.854	<i>0.767</i>			
Brand Identity	0.313	0.353	<i>0.757</i>		
Brand Image	0.400	0.368	0.412	<i>0.760</i>	
Brand Personality	0.870	0.647	0.338	0.479	<i>0.738</i>

Note(s): Figures in italics are the square roots of the AVEs

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT)

Constructs	Students' choice decision	Brand Culture	Brand Identity	Brand Image	Brand Personality
Students' choice decision					
Brand Culture	1.093				
Brand Identity	0.388	0.458			
Brand Image	0.508	0.481	0.551		
Brand Personality	1.089	0.849	0.471	0.658	

Table 4: Collinearity assessment (inner VIF values)

Constructs	Students' choice decision	Brand Culture	Brand Identity	Brand Image	Brand Personality
Students' choice decision					
Brand Culture	1.785		1.000		
Brand Identity	1.279			1.000	
Brand Image	1.430				
Brand Personality	1.950	1.000			

Table 5: R²

Constructs	R-square	R-square adjusted
Students' choice decision	0.907	0.906
Brand Culture	0.419	0.417
Brand Identity	0.124	0.122
Brand Image	0.170	0.167

Table 5: Path coefficient and hypothesis assessment of direct paths

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values
H1	Brand Image -> Students' Choice decision	-0.047	2.310	0.000
H2	Brand Identity -> Students' Choice decision	-0.063	3.490	0.000
H3	Brand Culture -> Students' Choice decision	0.496	17.651	0.000
H4	Brand Personality -> Students' Choice decision	0.893	60.384	0.000

Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the influence of brand awareness (i.e., brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality) on students at a technical university in Ghana. Further, it sought to determine whether the institution's brand is attractive enough to influence these students' decisions to choose the institution as a place of study. PLS-SEM analyses were utilised to confirm the proposed structural model and test the related hypothesised path relationships. The results of this study were found to be consistent with previous studies (Mao et al., 2020; Bilgin, 2018; Siitonen, 2017; Zhang, 2015), indicating that brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality support hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5. Thus, a highly positive brand image perceived by students about an institution influences their decision to choose and select it as a place of study (Siitonen, 2017). The findings also suggest that, concerning brand personality, students will choose a university as a place of study if the institution exhibits a unique set of human characteristics and personifies itself in the minds of those students. This can be achieved, for instance, through positive customer service, effective communication strategies, and a clear visual identity (Mahmudah & Iskamto, 2024). In addition, students will select an institution as a place of study and enrolment if they perceive the institution's culture positively. The brand culture of the institution can be showcased if employees of the technical university communicate effectively and politely with stakeholders (Mahmudah & Iskamto, 2024). Students also consider the physical space of classrooms, the atmosphere and surroundings, and the digital interfaces of institutions when selecting and choosing them as places to enroll and study (Yiadom & Madele, 2022a). An institution's values and beliefs must be reflected in its products and services (Kwarteng-Amaniampong et al., 2024).

5. Managerial Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to theory and practice in the field of branding and brand awareness in the higher education environment. The study provides support and predicts a strong relationship between (1) brand image, (2) brand identity, (3) brand culture, and (4) brand personality (which are elements of brand awareness discussed in the study) on students' choice of a higher institution as a place of study. These relationships have not been fully established and explored in the context of Ghanaian higher education literature. Thus, the hypothesis that the predictive validity of brand awareness (i.e., brand image, brand identity, brand culture, and brand personality) on students is strongly positive. This study supports Yiadom and Madele's (2022b) opinion that a positive experience of an institution's atmosphere and surroundings influences their decision-making to facilitate value creation. This study's findings that brand awareness has a positive impact on student choice support the view of Kotler and Keller (2016), that students are more likely to choose an institution with high brand awareness. It also supports the opinion of the marketing mix concerning a positive impact on brand awareness, as effective marketing strategies can increase brand recognition and recall (McCarthy, 1960). In addition, the findings support Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) and Kotler, Armstrong, and Tait's (2016) views that student choice has a positive impact on enrolment, as students who choose an institution are more likely to enrol.

Practical implications

Alongside providing theoretical contributions, this study also offers a practical solution to higher education institutions in Ghana and internationally on the best way to attract more students to derive value. The study revealed that a positive brand image perceived by students, parents, and other stakeholders motivated them to select an institution as a choice and a place of study. Consequently, specific programmes about the

institutions, for instance, relating to the surroundings, environment, and websites, must be well-designed with attractive content and clear pictures to inspire and attract students and parents. Concerning brand identity, higher education managers must continuously name some of the institutional halls with local and well-achieved or recognized figures in the university's community, provide instructions, and be social; these will communicate better messages about the institution to society and further offer word-of-mouth advertisement to entice students to choose them as a place of study (Ebrahim, 2020). Also, on brand culture, the cultural heritage of the community in which the institutions exist and the country as a whole must be respected to inspire and attract students. Higher institutions must also endeavor to use the language spoken, symbols, colors, and artifacts belonging to the community in their communications; these will make the community realize that the universities are part of them, generating emotional attachment with students and parents to patronize their services. Further, universities must be responsible to the members of the community by adhering to their values and beliefs. With regards to brand personality, the university policies must be updated to sensitize all staff to exhibit the best human characteristics towards all stakeholders who visit the institution.

Employees should be trained enough to understand the best human behaviors and traits for effective customer satisfaction (Su & Tong, 2015). Also, the employees of the institutions should be sincere, honest, down-to-earth, and charming to stakeholders. Excitement must be the hallmark of all employees at the university, as well as the necessary competence and qualifications to occupy positions at the university. The dress code of employees, especially secretaries, must look good and be of high class for positive experiences (Yiadom Madele, 2021). These will help position the institutions in the minds of anyone who visits their premises and serve as the best identity to the world (Yiadom & Madele, 2022a). Technical universities should invest in developing a unique and compelling brand identity that differentiates them from competitors. This can be achieved through consistent branding, effective communication, and engaging storytelling. The universities should increase their brand visibility through various marketing channels, such as social media, online advertising, and campus events. This can help raise awareness and attract potential students. Also, institutions should strongly emphasize their unique selling points (USPs), such as academic programmes, research opportunities, campus facilities, and alumni networks. This can help differentiate them from competitors and attract students who value these aspects. They should also invest in digital marketing strategies, such as search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, and social media marketing. This can help increase brand visibility and attract potential students. Lastly, the academic staff must be given effective training to be positioned and encouraged to help students cultivate specific, positive, and realistic hopeful thinking behaviour as brand ambassadors to attract people to the universities.

Limitations and other future research directions

In this study, careful measures and efforts have been undertaken to reduce limitations; however, some limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was limited to students and a technical university (a higher education institution) in Ghana. This did not allow the study's findings to be generalised and to test its validity to cover all other higher education institutions in the country. Therefore, caution is advised when using the study's findings. Secondly, this is the first study to determine the awareness of students and potential students about a technical university in Ghana. Therefore, a recommendation is made that future studies focus on other higher education environments. Lastly, future authors should put more effort into theoretically and empirically testing the antecedent roles of other constructs related to branding and brand awareness and their influence on students' choices of an institution, as well as their further antecedent variables. Future research could explore the impact of brand awareness on Ghanaian students' retention and graduation rates. Also, future investigations could evaluate the role of social media in shaping brand awareness and influencing students' choice of institution. A future research study could examine the effectiveness of different branding strategies, such as storytelling, emotional branding, and experiential branding, in the Ghanaian higher education sector.

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