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CORPORATE IMAGE AND BRAND PERFORMANCE OF KENYAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The highly competitive arena of the higher education sector implies the need for a good corporate image. Corporate image is recognized in the literature to have a positive impact on customer loyalty and is also a great way of differentiating an organization from its competitors as well stimulating consumers purchase. The higher education sectors' products and services are increasingly similar today hence the need for the institutions to devise strategies to differentiate their products. Literature acknowledges the role of corporate image as an asset, which could give an organization a chance to differentiate itself with hope of maximizing its market share, acquiring new customers retaining existing ones, as well as counteracting the competitors' actions in order to ensure success and improved performance. Organizations in the service industry are in business of creating outstanding service experiences for their customers. The management of corporate image however, is not an easy one especially in the service industry given the intangibility nature of services. An organization's proper management of its corporate image can add value to a firm in a variety ways. Conversely, a negative image can destroy an organization's reputation and isolate their customers. Empirical study results on corporate image and brand performance relationship however report mixed findings hence the need for the current study. This study investigated the relationship between corporate image and brand performance of Kenyan Universities. Data for the study were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire. The findings of the study support the notion that corporate image impacts brand performance. This therefore implies that an organization that invests in brand marketing activities relating to corporate image should experience enhanced brand performance. The study's contribution to the higher education sector is in terms of addition to the body of knowledge. It also provides policy and managerial implications. The study only covered Kenyan universities. A similar study could also be carried out in the future focusing on all universities. Future studies could also focus on other sectors other than the higher education sector.

Key Words: *Corporate Image, Products and Services, Organizations, Performance*

Introduction

The global nature of the higher education sector implies that education is now a service that could be marketed in the whole world. Institutions of higher education therefore need to attract high quality students and academic staff at not only a local level but international level as well. This therefore means that competition has heightened beyond national borders. As education and training increasingly turn to be a global business sector, universities have to reflect and develop ways they could adopt to influence students 'and faculty choice as a way of enhancing competitiveness. Research into higher education in terms of buyer behaviour has been stimulated by the need to anticipate the implications of how consumers make choices in the light of the stiff competition and to understand the key factors that student and faculty consider when choosing a university.Binsardi & Ekwulugo,(2003) opine that under the prevailing operating arena marked by heightened competition, universities are focusing on acquisition of marketing intelligence and information that would facilitate them to counter the challenge of an international market for higher education.To counter competition, univeristies are turning towards management of their corporate image for their survival.

Corporate image denotes a state of mind about an organizations that stakeholders hold.Bouchet, (2014) posit that corporate image is what the stakeholders have as a picture in their minds in relation to the way they perceive the organization implying therefore that image is never constant. It keeps on changing depending on the organization activities as well as its performance. This calls for organizations to conduct continuous research on corporate image in order to obtain regular and reliable feedback about their performance. Such feedback would enable organizations to know areas for improvement as well as how to successfully differentiate their positioning in the market. Brand performance relates to how successful a brand is in the market. It provides an evaluation of its strategic success. Literature acknowledges that brand performance acts as a powerful tool for attracting investors, employees as well customers (Coleman, 2004; Bridson &Mavondo, 2011).

However,there is an absence of a single metric that can perfectly measure brand performance and a universal measure does not exist (de Chernatony et al., 2004; Lehmann et al., 2008 & Farris et al., 2008). The study adopted both financial and subjective measure of brand performance. Financial measures were adopted to enable scrutiny of previous activities of an organization, but they are limited since brand managers cannot rely on organizations past activities alone. Ambler (2003) and Oktemgil (2003) point out that brand performance measures need to include financial measures owing to the important role they play in explaining and justifying marketing expenditures. The study also incorporated subjective measures of brand performance such as Customer measures.The inclusion was based on the fact that customers are the focal point in any organization. Employee measure was also incorporated given the crucial role that employess play especially in service organization of which universities belong.

Literature Review

A universal consensus among researchers and practitioners about what exactly constitutes corporate image is nonexistent. Corporate image denotes a state of mind that stakeholders have about an organization. It is what the stakeholders hold as a mental picture in relation to the way they perceive an organization (Bouchet, 2014).Corporate image therefore never remains constant. It keeps on changing depending on organizations activities, its performance and stakeholders' interpretation. Corporate image can also be defined as the overall impression or the picture that the customers' hold in their minds as a result of the feelings, ideas, attitudes and experiences they have acquired over time through interacting with the organization. The feelings are stored in the customers' memory in terms of either positive or negative meaning and recalled upon when an organization is mentioned. Corporate image also refers to the reception and interpretation of an organization in its surroundings, regarding its identity claims credibility. University image is also defined as all the beliefs individuals might have towards the university (Alves and Raposo 2010). Corporate image can also be viewed as a process of communication whereby the institution craft and pass on certain messages with the intention to establish their strategic commitment in relation to mission, vision, goals and identity and thus demonstrate the core values most valued by the organization. Erickson et al. (1984) posit that image is the subjective knowledge, attitude as well as the product characteristics, which can nonetheless be identified with the product and influence how the product is perceived.

Corporate image can also be viewed as a type of brand image where the brand name refers to the he whole organization as opposed to its individual products or services. Kandampully and Hu (2007) posit that corporate image consists of a functional and emotional component. The functional components consist of those aspects that are tangible and can be measured and evaluated easily for instance architecture and variety of products or services offered by an organization. The emotional component is the feelings on the other hand refers to attitudes and beliefs that an individual holds about an organization hence could be attributed to the results from experiences accumulated in the past as well as through linking with the organization. This implies that image could be based on information that is incomplete hence vary for the various publics of an organization given the different publics that organizations have. There is therefore a need for organizations to continuously gather information on corporate image to be able to effectively discriminate their positioning in the market and enhance their performance.

Management of corporate image is a daunting task especially in the service organizations given the intangibility nature of services (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001).It is nevertheless acknowledged that if well managed, a positive corporate image may benefit an organization in many ways. In contrast, a bad image can be damaging to an organization's reputation and could hence push away its customers. They further point out that corporate image also relates to various physical and behavioral attributes of a firm, like name of business, architecture, range of products and services offered, tradition, ideology and the quality impression communicated by each person who gets into contact with an organization's customers. Corporate image is therefore considered to be an important factor in the overall appraisal of any organization because of the power that customers' have in relation to their opinion about the organization.

Empirical literature denotes mixed findings on the contribution of corporate image on organization performance pointing out that manufacturing a product alone may not be enough and that a good image could contribute in the marketing of the product.This implies that corporate image is important in marketing a company's products and hence influences performance.Customers actions towards a product or service are influenced by the brand associations or brand image .A favorable image may contribute to an improvement in the sales generated by an organization, facilitate acquisition of more customers, attract investors and employees and dwindle the negative influence of competitors hence enabling the organizations to obtain higher levels of profit (Kim et al., 2011). Bravo et al. (2009) and Sarstedt et al. (2012) concur that corporate image could provide organizations a chance to differentiate themselves with the aim of maximizing market share, profits, getting new customers, keeping existing ones, defusing the competitors' actions hence ensuring success and survival in the market. Corporate image can thus be viewed as an asset.The literature on corporate image suggests that the beliefs about the organization that exist in the minds of its audiences influences organization performance.Further, the management of corporate image entails the fabrication and projection of a picture of a corporation that is deliberately structured to influence the public thus it is a valuable asset that organizations need to manage.

There is concensus in literature that a good corporate image can positively affect an organizations sales and size of market as well as facilitate attraction and maintenance of a long term relationship with customers (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). Keller and Aaker (1997) concur noting that a strong corporate image can aid communication to be more effective hence impact positively on consumer behavior. Similarly, Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) posit that corporate image serves as an important tool in influencing how customers perceive quality, which ultimaly impacts on their satisfaction levels and loyalty.This implies that corporate image provides consumers with informaion on which they can base their judgedment about an organization in terms of credibility and perceived quality and hence influence their purchase intentions. A favourable corporate image thus builds the reputation of an organization contributing to positive perception by the public given that corporate reputation is built over time through an impressive corporate image.

Empirical studies support corporate image and brand performance relationship.A study by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) found out that a favourable corporate image contributes to consumers attraction to an organization hence aiding their commitment.A study by Arpan et al. (2003) found three influencing factors to a university image namely academic characteristics, athletic characteristics and news relayed on media. The study however, only found academic characteristics to be consistent across groups.Boyle (1966) in a case study on Prudence insurance company in the U.K noted that Corporate image promoted the sales of the organizations' products and also attracted shareholders and employees to the organization.This view is supported by Kim et al. (2011) who posit that a favorable image can contribute to an increase in an organizations sales, acquisition of more investments and employees and minimize the negative influence of competitors hence positively impacting on an organizations performance.Similarly, Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) study on image and brand performance relationship found out that the interface between an organizations image and reputation added to enhanced customer loyalty pointing out further that these determine how students perceive a higher learning institution based on the image or reputation.

Empirical study by Oplatka (2002) concluded that corporate image influences customer attraction and retention in an organization. This view is supported by Owino (2013) study on Service dimensionality on Kenyan universities. The study established that image had a positive and significant influence on how students perceived the quality of services provided. Studies have found a relationship between university institutional image and reputation and loyalty of students. The implication is that even after leaving a higher learning institution, a student who is satisfied is more likely to continue supporting the institution in terms of financing or through recommendations to other potential students, which could ultimately affect the performance of the university. This view is further supported by Kheiry1 et al (2012) work on university intellectual image impact on satisfaction and loyalty of students. The study focused on Tehran selected universities involving a sample of 989 students from selected universities. The study results showed that image of university has direct and positive effect on satisfaction of students hence affecting university's performance. Similarly, Abd-El-Salam et al (2013) study on the impact of corporate image and reputation on service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty focusing on 650 customers of an international service company showed that there was a significant positive relationship between corporate image and reputation and customer loyalty which ultimately impacts on an organization's performance.(r=0.175, P<0.01). However, the corporate image and brand performance relationship show some contradictory results in literature. The work by Mohammed (2012) on perceived value, service quality, corporate image and customer loyalty an empirical assessment from Pakistan telecommunication sector established that corporate image had no influence in promoting customer loyalty. Similarly, Bloemer, De Ruyter, and Peeters (1998) work observed a lack of clarity on the exact relationship between corporate image and loyalty arguing that the relationship was largely a matter of debate.

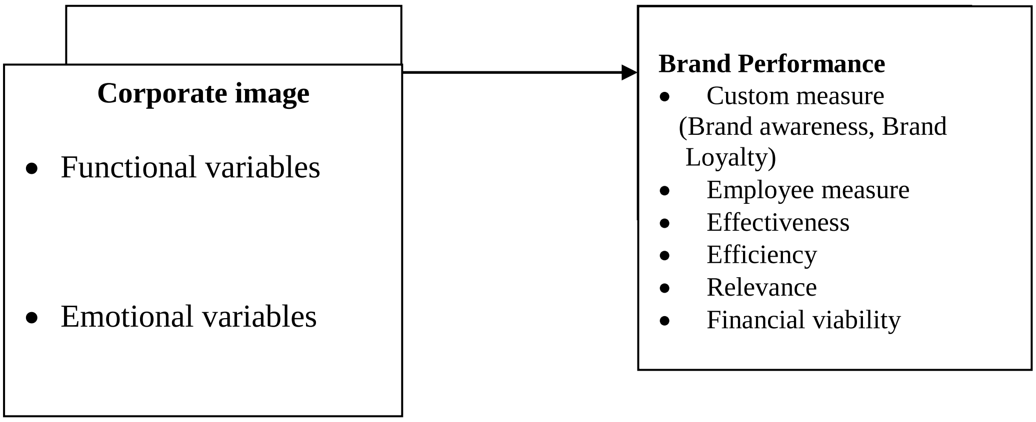
Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The relationships between Corporate Image and Brand Performance is depicted in the figure below.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Independent Variable

Dependent Variable



H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between corporate image and brand performance of Kenyan universities.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. The type of design was judged appropriate for studies that aim to analyze a phenomenon, situation, behavioral relationships problem attitude or issue by considering a cross-section of the population at one point in time. All the 53 Kenyan public and private universities together with their constituents' university colleges were considered the target population. Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Primary data was gathered though the use of a structured questionnaire. The study focused on the institutions key informants mainly the corporate affairs managers or their equivalent who were considered able to provide information sought. Secondary data were collected from publicly available sources. Descriptive and regression analysis was used to analyze data. Descriptive analyses were conducted to provide a profile of the respondent organizations. To establish if a relationship exist between corporate image and brand performance a regression analyses was carried. To check on the reliability of the study variables Cronbach's Alpha coefficient α was used. Literature notes an absence of consensus as to the lower limit of the coefficient with some authors citing a lower limit of 0.70 and others citing 0.60 to be the lower limit (Gliem&Gliem, 2003; Hair et al., 1998). The study adopted an alpha of 0.7 as the lower limit for the current study.

Descriptive Statistics

To measure the corporate image of universities, items were adopted from previous studies Stensaker (2005), Bravo et al. (2009) and Kandampully and Hu (2007) with adjustments to reflect the Kenyan context particularly the higher education sector.Literature posit that corporate image consist of a functional and emotional component (Kandampully and Hu, 2007). The functional components consist of the tangible characteristics that can be easily evaluated such as architecture, variety of products or services. The emotional component on the other hand refers to feelings, attitudes and beliefs that an individual has towards an organization.

The respondents had been requested to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the strategies adopted by the university to manage its corporate image. A five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1=not at all to 5=to a very large extent was used to collect the data. The pertinent responses were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviation.Their responses are contained in Table 1

Table 1: Respondents' mean score on Corporate Image

Functional component	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	CV (%)
The general environment is conducive for learning	39	3.82	.644	16.9
courses are market oriented	39	3.82	.644	16.9
Faculty members are qualified and experienced	39	3.79	.732	19.3
Offers variety of courses	39	3.64	.811	22.3
Buildings are modern and attractive	39	3.56	.641	18.0
Has adequate equipment and facilities	39	3.54	.790	22.3
Has enough faculty members	39	3.31	.893	27.0
Average score		**3.64**	**0.736**	**20.4**

The data in Table 1 reveal that general environment being conducive for learning and courses being market oriented had mean score rating of 3.82 implying respondents agreement to a large extent. Faculty members being qualified and experienced obtained a mean score of 3.79.The study results point to the importance of elements such as faculty, academic staff members and facilities on campus as important factors in influencing the way students perceive a higher education institution.

The respondents were also requested to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the strategies adopted by the university to manage its corporate image based on the emotional component of corporate image. The pertinent results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents mean scores on Emotional Component of Corporate Image

Emotional component	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	CV (%)
The university CVI provides it with visibility and makes it easy to be recognized	38	3.68	.620	16.8
Customers' overall perceptions of total experience in the university is rather good	39	3.62	.590	16.3
Regular communication makes both the staff and students feel appreciated	39	3.59	.595	16.6
Current and potential customer generally consider the university as being a good place to be	39	3.56	.552	15.5
Our corporate image is enhanced by excellent customer relationship	39	3.46	.600	17.3
The university culture motivates staff and contributes to their loyalty and retention	39	3.44	.598	17.4

University's brand personality of sincerity competence and sophistication enhances its corporate image	39	3.41	.637	18.7
Grand Mean Score		**3.537**	**0.599**	**16.9**

The results contained in Table 2 indicate that the respondents agreed to a large extent that the university CVI provides it with visibility hence making it easy to be recognized with a means score rating of 3.68. Customers' overall perceptions of total experience in the university had a means score rating of 3.62. This could be attributed to the fact that corporate image is an asset which enables an organization to differentiate itself from others. The university culture as a motivator for staff and university's brand personality of sincerity competence and sophistication enhancing universities corporate image received lower mean score rating of 3.44 indicating a moderate agreement.

Table 3: Summary of Corporate Image Mean Scores

	N	Mean Score	Standard deviation	CV%
Functional component	39	3.64	.736	20.4
Emotional component	39	3.54	.599	16.9
Grand Mean Scores		**3.59**	**.668**	**18.7**

The results in Table 3 reveal a higher rating of functional component (mean score rating =3.64) as compared to emotional component (mean score rating =3.54). This could imply that universities focus more on tangible characteristics such as facilities and buildings. Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) posit that elements such as faculty, academic staff members and facilities on campus are critical factors in influencing students' perceptions of the image or reputation of a higher education institution. Similarly, Owino (2013) noted the influence of corporate image on university students' satisfaction. Functional component had a higher variability in responses (CV=20.4%) as compared to emotional component (16.9%).

Brand performance was measured using both subjective and financial measures. Subjective measures included brand awareness, brand loyalty and employees satisfaction.It also included organization effectiveness to reflect degree to which universities moved toward attainment of mission and goal realization, efficiency to reflect an organizations ability to cut on its operational expenses , relevance as a measure of the extent to which universities mission continued to serve the purpose it was meant for and research and publications and CSR activities as an indication of universities research output as well as CSR activities engagement.

The respondents were asked to state the extent of agreement with the subjective brand performance measures adopted by the university. A five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1=not at all to 5=to a very large extent was used. The relevant responses were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviation.Table 4 summarizes the pertinent results.

Table 4: Summary of subjective Brand Performance Measures

Summary of Brand Performance	N	Mean score	Standard Deviation	CV (%)
Brand loyalty	39	3.73	.635	17.0
Brand awareness	39	3.68	.657	17.9
Employee satisfaction	39	3.495	.564	16.2
Effectiveness of the organization	39	3.452	.645	18.9
Efficiency of the organization	39	3.754	.552	14.2
Relevance of the organization	39	3.679	.557	15.2
Research and publications and CSR activities	39	3.355	.706	21.1
Average of Grand Mean Scores		**3.59**	**.617**	**17.2**

The summary results in Table 4 show an average of grand mean scores of the selected subjective brand performance measures of 3.59. Efficiency of the organization had the highest mean score of 3.75 followed by brand loyalty 3.73 and relevance of the university with mean score rating of 3.68.Research and publications and CSR activities had relatively low mean score rating of 3.36 and also had the highest average variability in responses (CV =21.1%). This suggests a moderate engagement in research and CSR activities by the universities. Efficiency of the organization had the lowest average response variations (CV= 14.2%).

Brand performance was also measured using financial measures focusing on financial viability of the university as well as the financial position. To survive in a highly competitive environment, universities need to constantly monitor their revenues and expenses as well as sources of funding as a way of ensuring a healthy financial status. The results on financial viability are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Financial Viability of the University

Financial Viability of the university	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	CV (%)
Monitors finances on a regular basis	39	3.54	.555	15.7
Does not depend on single source of funding	39	3.44	.680	19.8
Consistently obtains new funding sources	38	3.42	.758	22.2
Has improved liquidity position	39	3.36	.668	19.9
Keeps a reasonable surplus of money to use during difficult times	38	3.32	.775	23.3
Existing sources of fund offer sustainable support	39	3.28	.825	25.2
Consistently has more revenues than expenses	39	3.00	..889	29.6
Grand Mean Score		**3.337**	**.736**	**22.2**

The results presented on Table 5 reveal a moderate agreement regarding university's financial viability with an average mean score of 3.34. Monitoring of finances on a regular basis was the most highly rated with a mean score of 3.54. New funding sources existing for the universities obtained a mean score rating of 3.42.The overall result indicates that universities closely monitor their finances. The highest variability in responses was on university consistently having more revenues than expenses (CV=29.6%). University monitoring finances on a regular basis had the lowest variability in responses (CV=15.7).

Table 6: Summary of Brand Performance

Overall Summary of Brand performance	**N**	**Mean Score**	**Standard Deviation**	**CV%**
Subjective measure	39	3.59	.617	17.2
Financial measure	39	3.34	.736	22.2
Average of Grand Mean Scores		**3.47**	**.667**	**19.7**

The results on overall summary of brand performance measures reveal a higher average mean score rating of 3.56 for subjective measures as compared to financial measure with an average mean score of 3.34.The average variability in responses was higher in financial measures of brand performance (CV=22.2%) as compared to the average variability in responses on subjective measures (CV=17.2%).

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis using Pearson product moment and correlation coefficient technique was used to stablish the relationships between the study variables.The results are summarized on Table 7.

Table 7: Correlations Analysis

Variables		1	2	3	4
Corporate Image	Person correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.515** .001 37	1 38		
Brand Performance	Pearson correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.674** .000 36	.672** .000 36	.376* .024 36	1 37

**** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**
***Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).**
Source Data: Primary Data.

The results in Table 7 show that the relationship between corporate image and brand performance was positive and statistically significant (r=.674, p-value=.000).

Regression Analysis

The study was based on the proposition that there is a relationship between corporate image and brand performance of

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Kenyan universities.Results are presented on Table 8

Table 8: Regression Results of Corporate Image and Brand Performance

(a)The Goodness of Fit

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.672	.451	.435	.04339

(b) The Overall Significance

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-value	Sig (p.value)
1	Regression	.053	1	.053	27.985	.000
	Residual	.064	34	.002		
	Total	.117	35			

(c) The Composite Score Test

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	Sig. (p-value)
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.346	.071		4.849	.000
	corporate image	.447	.084	.672	5.290	.000

Predictors: (Constant). Corporate Image

Dependent Variable: Brand Performance

The results in Table 8 indicate that the relationship between corporate image and brand performance is statistically significant. It explained 45.1% of variation (R^2=.451). The standardized regression coefficient (β) value of the computed (composite index) scores of corporate image was .672 with a t-test value of 5.290 and a significance level of p-value=.000.

Conclusion

The study investigated the relationship between corporate image and brand performance of Kenyan universities. The results indicate a positive relationship between brand performance and corporate image. The results of the study supports the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship between corporate image and brand performance of Kenyan universities. If an organization manages its corporate image properly, it can add value in terms of being able to differentiate itself from other organizations as well as maximizing market share, increasing profits, attracting new customers, retaining existing ones, defusing the competitors' activities and ensuring success and survival in the market. On the other hand, a poor image can be damaging to an organization's reputation and could as a result push away its customers. Corporate image relates to various physical and behavioral attributes of a firm, like name of business, architecture, range of products and services offered, tradition, ideology and the quality impression communicated by each person who gets into contact with an organization's customers. It is therefore considered an important factor in the overall appraisal of an organization because of the power that customers' have in their opinion about the organization. A poorly managed image can therefore hurt an organization's reputation and lead to loss of customers. Corporate image is never constant it keeps on changing depending on business performance as well as stakeholders commentary. Subsequently, there is need for continuous research on corporate image to facilitate universities to differentiate themselves in an environment where competition is increasingly becoming global. A favorable corporate image could also ensure effective positioning in the market as a way of enhancing organizations performance.

Implications of the Study

The study results have implications to both theory and policy. It provide support for the hypothesized direct relationship between corporate image and Brand Performance from a theoretical perspective. A favorable Corporate Image has been shown to boost an organization's sales through increased customer satisfaction and loyalty and attraction of employees and investors. From a policy point of view, the results of the study are expected to inform policy formulation and implementation of corporate image initiatives by the universities, universities development partners as well as the government, which could enhance universities competitiveness in a global market. The globalization of university education should make it even more necessary for universities to have an increased emphasis on corporate image.

From the managerial perspectives, the results suggests the critical areas that should be given priority by the management of the universities for favorable corporate image. The results established that the general environment being conducive for learning, variety of courses being offered, ensuring courses are market oriented, buildings being modern and university having adequate qualified faculty members had a great impact on corporate image. Corporate image is an asset, which can enable an organization to differentiate itself from other organizations, increase sales, acquire new customers while retaining existing ones and neutralize the competitors' activities. Given the financial implications of executing strategies for enhanced corporate image, the study recommends that the government, university collaborators and partners of the universities should offer support to the universities in their corporate image initiatives. It is also important for the Commission of University Education (CUE) as the regulatory body to ensure that universities in Kenya operate in a favorable learning environment necessary for satisfactory service provision.

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