

The Influence of Brand Logo on Brand Recognition and Recall among Public Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT: Brand logos are central visual identity elements that encapsulate an institution's values and facilitate recognition. This study examined how brand logos influence recognition and recall among students in four public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining survey responses from 301 students with qualitative comments from open-ended questions. Results show that 76.5% of students agreed that their university's logo was unique and easy to remember, while 75.7% agreed it created a strong association with the university's identity. Thematic analysis highlighted symbolism, colour, and simplicity as the most salient features influencing logo effectiveness. The findings underscore the pivotal role of logos as cognitive anchors of institutional identity and suggest that universities can enhance brand salience by designing distinctive, meaningful, and simple logos.

KEYWORDS: Brand logo, brand recognition, brand recall, corporate visual identity, public universities, Kenya.

I. INTRODUCTION

Corporate visual identity (CVI) is widely recognized as a strategic asset in building brand recognition and recall (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002). Within CVI, the brand logo is considered the most salient element because it condenses institutional meaning into a simple visual cue (Henderson & Cote, 1998). A well-designed logo can foster positive associations, improve memory encoding, and enhance consumer loyalty (Walsh et al., 2017).

In higher education, logos appear on all official materials, from certificates to websites, and are often the first point of contact between a university and its stakeholders. As universities operate in increasingly competitive environments, a strong logo can help differentiate an institution and reinforce its identity (Chapleo, 2010). However, empirical studies on the role of logos in higher education branding are limited in African contexts, including Kenya. This study therefore investigates the influence of brand logos on brand recognition and recall among public universities in Nairobi County.

II. BACKGROUND

In an increasingly competitive higher education landscape, universities are compelled to differentiate themselves to attract students, staff, and funding opportunities. Branding has emerged as a strategic tool in this regard, with visual identity—particularly the brand logo—playing a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and institutional image (Maringe, 2010). A brand logo serves as a symbolic representation of an institution's values, culture, and reputation, and is often the first point of contact between the university and its stakeholders (Henderson & Cote, 1998). Effective logos are designed to be distinctive, memorable, and easily recognizable, thus fostering brand recognition and recall (Foroudi, Melewar, & Gupta, 2014).

Corporate visual identity (CVI) scholars describe the logo as a core element of the visual system that embodies an organisation's essence and values (Melewar & Gupta, 2014; Van den Bosch, de Jong, & Elving, 2005). Singh and Kaur (2022) emphasize that logos function as the primary visual vessel of a brand, significantly contributing to brand equity and recognition. Experimental evidence supports this, showing that figurative logos rich in associative meaning tend to be more memorable than abstract ones (Lencastre et al., 2010). Logos not only aid cognitive recognition but also forge emotional connections with audiences—connections that anchor the brand in stakeholders' minds and enhance recall (Melewar

& Bassett, 2006; Ryyänen, 2024). These functions make logos a central strategic asset in competitive sectors, including higher education (Bartholmé & Melewar, 2011; Raposo et al., 2022).

In Africa, universities are increasingly adopting professional visual identities as part of efforts to enhance competitiveness and visibility. Wayne, Farinloye, and Mogaji (2021) observe that African universities investing in strategic logos and related CVI elements gain reputational capital, attract top-tier students, and foster stakeholder loyalty. Within Kenya, this shift is particularly visible as public universities strive for distinctiveness amidst a crowded field (Waithaka, Kibera, & Munyoki, 2020). Waithaka et al. (2020) found that strong CVI elements—especially logos—are directly associated with improved student enrolment and positive public perception. However, Nyakundi et al. (2023) note that many Kenyan universities still rely on outdated logos and lack cohesive branding strategies, weakening their ability to achieve recognition and recall in increasingly digital and competitive spaces.

Despite the prominence of logos in university communications—on websites, letterheads, merchandise, buildings, and social media—there remains limited empirical evidence on their influence on brand recognition and recall in Kenyan public universities. Most Kenyan CVI research has focused on commercial organisations (Ngugi & Nyaura, 2019; Otieno, 2021), leaving a gap in understanding how brand logos shape stakeholders' cognitive and emotional engagement with universities. Addressing this gap is crucial, as studies from other regions show that universities with well-designed logos and coherent visual identities are perceived as more prestigious, which positively influences student choice and alumni loyalty (Raposo et al., 2022; Liimatainen, 2023).

Therefore, this study investigated the influence of brand logos on brand recognition and recall of public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. It aims to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on higher education branding in sub-Saharan Africa and offer practical insights to university managers seeking to strengthen their institutional identities.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In the current competitive higher education environment, universities increasingly rely on branding to stand out and attract students, funding, and partnerships. A brand logo, as the most visible element of corporate visual identity (CVI), plays a central role in shaping public perceptions, evoking emotional connections, and fostering institutional recognition and recall (Foroudi, Melewar, & Gupta, 2014; Singh & Kaur, 2022). Yet, despite the widespread use of logos in all university communication touchpoints, empirical research on their specific influence within the Kenyan higher education context remains scarce.

Existing studies on CVI in Kenya have primarily focused on commercial organisations, such as banks and private firms (Ngugi & Nyaura, 2019; Otieno, 2021), offering little insight into how visual identity strategies operate in public universities. Research that does examine Kenyan universities has tended to treat CVI holistically (Waithaka, Kibera, & Munyoki, 2020) without isolating the distinct role of logos in shaping stakeholders' perceptions. Meanwhile, Nyakundi, Wambua, and Kariuki (2023) report that many Kenyan public universities still use outdated or inconsistently applied logos, limiting their capacity to build strong institutional identities. This is a critical gap, as studies from other regions show that universities with well-crafted, coherent logos are perceived as more reputable and prestigious, which directly influences student choice and alumni loyalty (Raposo, Alves, & Duarte, 2022; Liimatainen, 2023).

Without empirical evidence on how brand logos influence recognition and recall in the Kenyan public university sector, institutional branding efforts risk remaining fragmented, intuitive, and ineffective. Addressing this gap is essential to guide strategic visual identity design and strengthen the competitive positioning of public universities. This study therefore seeks to investigate the influence of brand logos on brand recognition and recall among public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

IV. Objective of the Study

To assess the influence of Brand Logo on Brand Recognition and Recall among Public Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya

Literature Review

4.1. Theoretical Review

The following two theories guided this study.

4.1.1 Visual Rhetoric Theory

Visual Rhetoric Theory, pioneered by scholars like Foss (2004; 2005) and influenced by Barthes (1977), posits that images possess rhetorical agency. This means they are intentionally crafted to convey

specific messages and elicit predetermined responses from an audience, functioning as a form of persuasive communication.

Key tenets of visual rhetoric include: Symbolic Action: This tenet argues that a logo functions as a symbol, not a literal representation. Its form, colour, and composition are chosen to convey complex ideas (e.g., a shield symbolizes protection and tradition; an atomic symbol represents technology and innovation). Human Intervention: This tenet argues that the design of a logo is a deliberate, persuasive act. Elements are carefully chosen to guide the viewer's interpretation and forge a connection with the institution's values (e.g., using blue to communicate trust and stability). Audience Interaction: This tenet argues that the meaning of a logo is not fixed; it is actively constructed by viewers based on their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. A logo's effectiveness is measured by its ability to successfully communicate the intended message to its target audience. Therefore, this study argues that Visual Rhetoric Theory provides the lens to analyse how a university's logo is rhetorically constructed to persuade its stakeholders. It answers the *how*: How does the logo use symbolism, colour, and form to persuade various stakeholders of the university. students of the university's prestige, reliability, or innovative spirit? For example, the University of Nairobi's logo, with its detailed imagery of a shield, animals, and torches, is a rhetorical device designed to persuade viewers of its long history, strength, and academic excellence (Ndiege, 2025). The theory suggests that a rhetorically effective logo will be more successful in creating strong associations and being remembered.

4.1.2 Signal Theory

Originally developed by Spence (1973) in economics, Signal Theory explains how parties communicate information under conditions of asymmetry. In branding, it frames visual identity as a "signal" sent to stakeholders to convey unobservable qualities about the organization, such as its quality, stability, and credibility.

Key tenets of Signal Theory include: Information Asymmetry: This tenet argues that prospective students and other stakeholders cannot fully observe the quality of education beforehand. They rely on visible cues, like the logo, to make judgments. Costliness: This tenet argues that for a signal to be credible, it must be costly for low-quality senders to mimic. A well-designed logo requires a significant investment in professional design expertise, market research, and brand strategy. This investment acts as a credible signal that the institution is committed to quality and is stable enough to afford such an investment. Observability & Consistency: This tenet argues that the signal must be highly visible and consistent across all touchpoints. A logo that is professionally applied and consistently used signals organizational discipline, coherence, and attention to detail—attributes associated with a high-quality institution (Bergh, Connelly, Ketchen, & Shannon, 2014). Therefore, this study argues that Signal Theory provides the *strategic rationale* behind a logo. It answers the *why*: Why does a well-designed and consistent logo influence perception? It frames the logo as a "costly signal" of institutional quality. In essence, a university's logo is a rhetorically crafted signal. Its design persuades and creates meaning (Visual Rhetoric), while its professional execution and consistent application make that meaning credible and trustworthy (Signal Theory), thereby directly enhancing brand recognition and recall.

4.2 Empirical Review and Critique of Existing Literature

The strategic role of Corporate Visual Identity (CVI) is well-established, with the brand logo recognized as its most salient element, condensing an organization's essence into a single visual marker (Melewar & Gupta, 2014; Henderson & Cote, 1998). Globally, empirical studies affirm that a well-designed logo enhances perceptions of prestige in higher education, directly influencing student enrollment and alumni support (Raposo et al., 2022). This aligns with Signal Theory (Spence, 1973), wherein a professional logo acts as a "costly signal" of quality and credibility to stakeholders (Bergh et al., 2014).

In Kenya, research by Waithaka et al. (2020) confirms a correlation between strong CVI, including logos, and improved enrollment. However, studies also note significant challenges, such as outdated logos and inconsistent application, which weaken brand recognition and recall (Nyakundi et al., 2023). A clear gap persists in the literature: while existing studies offer macro-level insights, they treat CVI holistically and lack specific focus on the logo's attributes—clarity, uniqueness, and memorability—in shaping brand recognition and recall within Nairobi's public universities. Previous work has focused predominantly on commercial sectors, neglecting higher education (Ngugi & Nyaura, 2019; Otieno, 2021).

This study addresses that gap by isolating the brand logo as an independent variable. It examines how its design influences student identification and recall, providing a granular analysis of branding efficacy in the under-researched context of sub-Saharan African higher education.

V. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 301 students across four public universities in Nairobi County. Respondents rated statements about their university's logo on a five-point Likert scale.

Qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions asking students to describe the most memorable aspects of their university's logo. Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret the qualitative responses. Data from both strands were integrated during analysis to provide a richer understanding.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Quantitative Findings

Students evaluated their university's logo on two dimensions: memorability and ability to create a strong association with institutional identity.

TABLE 1: Student Perceptions of University Logo (n = 301)

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total Agree (SA + A)
The logo is unique and easy to remember.	98 (32.6%)	132 (43.9%)	51 (16.9%)	16 (5.3%)	4 (1.3%)	230 (76.5%)
The logo creates a strong association with the university's identity.	87 (28.9%)	141 (46.8%)	58 (19.3%)	12 (4.0%)	3 (1.0%)	228 (75.7%)

Source: Researcher (2025)

The results in Table 1 show that a substantial majority of students perceive their universities' logos as both unique and memorable (76.5%) and as creating a strong association with the university's identity (75.7%). These findings are significant because they point to the presence of two critical preconditions for effective brand recognition and recall: distinctiveness and symbolic association.

Distinctiveness is central to a logo's function as a cognitive shortcut, enabling quick and accurate brand recognition in competitive environments (Singh & Kaur, 2022). The fact that over three-quarters of respondents rated their universities' logos as unique and easy to remember suggests that these visual marks are functioning as intended — capturing attention and standing out from competing institutional symbols. This supports Lencastre et al. (2010), who demonstrated that logos with clear, figurative designs are more easily encoded and retrieved from memory than abstract or overly complex ones. Similar patterns were reported by Foroudi et al. (2014) in UK universities, who found that clarity and visual salience were among the strongest predictors of student logo recall.

Equally important is the strong association between the logos and institutional identity reported by 75.7% of respondents. This reflects the logo's symbolic role as a condensed expression of institutional values and ethos (Foroudi, Melewar, & Gupta, 2014). The finding resonates with Melewar and Bassett (2006), who showed that strong visual identifiers contribute to coherent corporate identity structures in universities, thereby fostering emotional and cognitive associations among students and staff. It also aligns with Raposo, Alves, and Duarte (2022), who found that students with positive perceptions of their university's logo reported stronger brand loyalty and advocacy intentions. In contrast, studies in other Sub-Saharan contexts (e.g., Kwenda & Mtembu, 2021) found weaker associations between logos and institutional identity, suggesting that the Nairobi universities sampled here may have comparatively more mature or consistently applied branding systems.

Taken together, these results indicate that public universities in Nairobi County are making notable progress in leveraging their logos to build recognizable and identity-rich brands. However, while the perceptions are positive, they also suggest the need for consistent and strategic management of logo design and usage to sustain and strengthen these associations across diverse stakeholder groups. This echoes Nyakundi, Wambua, and Kariuki's (2023) observation that many Kenyan public universities still face challenges of inconsistent or outdated visual identities, which can erode the symbolic power of logos over time.

6.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of 275 open-ended responses revealed three primary features that enhanced logo recognition and recall: symbolism, colour, and simplicity.

Symbolism: Students highlighted symbolic elements as central to logo memorability. A TUK student noted, “The atomic symbol symbolizes technology.” A UoN student remarked, “The shield, torch, lion, and giraffe make it look official and academic.” This supports Henderson and Cote’s (1998) claim that symbolic imagery enhances emotional resonance and facilitates brand memory.

Colour (as part of the logo): Although colour was assessed separately as a CVI element, students often described colours as part of what made their logos stand out. One MMU student said, “The distinct blue and red,” while a CUK student mentioned, “The green colour is different from other universities.” This aligns with research by Bottomley and Doyle (2006) showing that colour contributes significantly to brand differentiation and recognition.

Simplicity vs. Complexity: Opinions were mixed. Some students praised minimalist logos as easier to remember, while others appreciated detailed logos as more distinctive. Several students critiqued some logos as “too busy” or “not modern enough.” This mirrors van Riel and Fombrun (2007), who found that overly complex logos can hinder memorability, while well-balanced simplicity improves recognition.

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings affirm that logos are powerful cognitive anchors in university branding. High agreement scores on uniqueness and identity association suggest that logos are the most consciously processed CVI element. Symbolism and simplicity appear especially critical for aiding brand recall, which aligns with previous research showing that simple yet meaningful logos enhance memory retention (Henderson & Cote, 1998; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). The emphasis on colour corroborates studies such as Foroudi et al. (2014) and Bottomley and Doyle (2006), which found that colour consistency increases brand recognition among student populations.

This study adds empirical evidence from a Sub-Saharan African higher education context, where branding research remains sparse. Whereas prior work in European and Asian universities has demonstrated the positive influence of logos on student perceptions (Foroudi et al., 2014; Raposo et al., 2022), comparable studies in African universities (Kwenda & Mtembu, 2021; Nyakundi et al., 2023) report mixed results due to inconsistent brand implementation. By showing how students in Nairobi County link symbolic meaning and visual simplicity to brand recognition, the present study reinforces the argument that logos are not just decorative but strategic assets in university branding.

Implications

The findings carry important implications for university brand management and communication strategies. The strong perception of logos as unique and closely tied to institutional identity indicates that visual identity elements—when thoughtfully designed—can serve as powerful anchors for brand recognition and recall among students. This reinforces Melewar and Bassett’s (2006) argument that a coherent and consistently managed corporate visual identity system enhances the symbolic power of institutional brands.

Given that students are among the most visible and vocal brand ambassadors, their positive perceptions can significantly enhance the university’s reputation within and beyond the campus, supporting broader goals such as recruitment, alumni relations, and stakeholder trust. Prior research confirms that strong visual identity systems cultivate student identification and brand loyalty (Foroudi et al., 2014; Raposo, Alves, & Duarte, 2022), while inconsistencies in design application can dilute brand meaning and reduce stakeholder engagement (Nyakundi, Wambua, & Kariuki, 2023).

The evidence that colour, symbolism, and simplicity shape logo recognition also underscores the need for strategic design grounded in consumer psychology. Henderson and Cote (1998) and Bottomley and Doyle (2006) showed that simple, symbolic, and colour-consistent logos are processed more fluently and remembered longer, leading to stronger brand equity over time. Therefore, universities should invest in the deliberate design and continuous evaluation of their logos and visual identity systems across all brand touchpoints—including digital platforms, physical signage, and promotional materials—while engaging students in these processes to foster emotional attachment. This echoes van Riel and Fombrun’s (2007) view that stakeholder involvement enhances logo relevance and acceptance, ultimately strengthening institutional reputation and competitive positioning in the higher education market.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how university logos—core elements of corporate visual identity—shape brand recognition and recall among public universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The findings demonstrate that a substantial majority of students perceive their universities' logos as both unique and strongly associated with institutional identity. These perceptions are not merely aesthetic preferences; they reflect the logo's cognitive and symbolic roles as visual anchors of institutional meaning. Consistent with prior research (Henderson & Cote, 1998; Foroudi, Melewar, & Gupta, 2014; Raposo, Alves, & Duarte, 2022), the results underscore that logos can serve as powerful triggers of memory and emotion when they are distinctive, simple, and symbolically meaningful.

By providing empirical evidence from a Sub-Saharan African higher education context—where branding scholarship remains relatively sparse – this study contributes to a growing body of literature highlighting the strategic value of visual identity in university branding (Kwenda & Mtembu, 2021; Nyakundi, Wambua, & Kariuki, 2023). The high levels of student agreement on logo memorability and identity association suggest that public universities in Nairobi are beginning to leverage their logos as strategic brand assets. However, sustained success will depend on the consistent application, periodic evaluation, and stakeholder engagement in visual identity design to ensure continued relevance and resonance.

Ultimately, the study affirms that logos are not mere decorative emblems but potent tools for cultivating recognition, recall, and loyalty – cornerstones of competitive brand positioning in the higher education sector. Future research could expand this inquiry by comparing perceptions across diverse stakeholder groups, examining other corporate visual identity elements such as colour and typography, and exploring longitudinal effects of visual identity redesigns on university brand equity.

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