

Effect of Strategic CSR Communication on the Brand Image of Selected Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to determine the effect of strategic CSR communication on the brand image of selected public universities in Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The unit of analysis was five public universities that have been in existence for more than 15 years. The study targeted the 1410 employees in these universities. The sample size was 206 employees in public universities. The study used stratified random sampling to select the sample. Primary data was collected in this research. Sourced data was mainly gathered by administering structured questionnaires. Excel and Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 21 was used to analyse data. Data was analysed using inferential and descriptive statistics. Data was presented using means, standard deviation, and distribution tables in tables and figures. Regression of coefficients showed that there was a positive and significant relationship between strategic CSR communication and brand image. The study further concluded that most Kenyan universities had an interactive form of communication that enhanced their brand image. In addition, the use of media channels during corporate social responsibility activities enhances the brand image of the institution. Further, giving true and honest messages during corporate social responsibility activities enhances the brand image of the institution. The Kenyan government, university partners, and university collaborators 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.

Keywords: *Strategic CSR communication, brand image, public universities*

1.0 Introduction

Contemporary students are aware of the data that will aid their choices regarding which university to join. The parents and the scholars utilize a lot of data to settle on their choices from a more educated perspective (Sultan & Wong, 2019). The decision cycle in choosing the universities consumes a lot of time, as one considers many variables which might be unique in relation to the scholar. Furthermore, there are many universities around the world. The challenge is how the students can find the right universities that suit their needs. In the competitive world of higher education, universities can differentiate themselves by creating strong brand images. Brand image refers to the consumer's mental picture of the offering and

it includes symbolic meanings that consumers associate with the specific attributes of the product or service (Younas, 2017).

Brand image is therefore a subjective concept rather than an objective concept formed in the consumer's mind. Consumers are more peculiar about brand associations and product attributes to determine the value for money (Salinas & Perez, 2019). Companies have set funds aside to project the right kind of image and capture their customers' loyalty. The brand image of universities should be acknowledged by prospective scholars during the decision cycle because brand perception can help determine which universities students and parents investigate in detail. In circumstances where there are a large number of brands, shoppers cannot inspect all brands exhaustively, so they will quite often zero in on the ones that appear to be generally outstanding (Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern & Speece 2016).

In most universities, a public relations office is engaged in monitoring the institution's public image, and media relations and advises the management on areas of image strength and weaknesses. They also prepare adverts for television, radio, and newspapers, especially on admissions. The PR department also prepares for events that foster corporate social responsibility for example cleaning the surrounding community; they prepare for university exhibitions and sponsor sporting activities. These activities are done to show goodwill and build trust by presenting the university in a positive way to the surrounding community. Corporate Social Responsibility programs have an important role in creating a strong brand image (Younas, 2017).

For universities, social responsibility ensures fairness in accessing higher education and supports improving training and research quality. The level of training is proposed to correlate to labor market requirements and the contribution of the university to economic development and financial stability (Yoon & Lee, 2019).

USR can be perceived as a university's philosophy, which promotes sustainable human development through education via knowledge transformation, provides high-quality services, research, and teaching, and supports financial aid (scholarships, student loans, etc.). All of these are emphasized by the university community, through the involvement of stakeholders (Chen, Nasongkhla & Donaldson 2015).

One of the under-studied determinate factors for CSR is the quality of training services is a determinate factor for USR. However, studies about CSR mention the salience of product and service quality. It is considered a method to strengthen customer loyalty, which means when a company can provide and deliver a sound product or service to customers indicates CSR provision (Mandhachitara & Poolthong, 2011). Therefore, from the perspective of higher education, a non-profit enterprise, the factor to consider the social responsibility of the school is the quality of training services (Cha and Seo 2019). Regarding the factor of training service quality, previous studies show that the main factors include the quality of faculty/staff, training programs, and facilities.

Public institutions of higher learning are frequently viewed as non-profit organizations and thus are not serious about embracing CSR. However, colleges and other public universities ought to embrace the corporate social obligation to win the generosity of their internal and external partners even as they work towards the advancement of their image (Park, Chidlow & Choi, 2014). Brand image is very important in an organization. The brand images of public institutions of higher learning are better than that of private universities and colleges. Scholars will generally focus on public colleges with a superior brand image (Chen, 2016). Public universities with substandard brand images are experiencing stiff market competition. The

understudies are the main concentration in a school, and how to fortify understudies' goal to consider is a significant issue for advanced education foundations. At the point when school working conditions are comparable, individuals will not recognize schools through their outer qualities. A special brand image is a thing that schools need to pass on to understudy clients. Educational brand image in this way impacts the decision of scholars, guardians, and society.

CSR, therefore, refers to the firm's actions that help them to act in a communally and accountable way to develop and guard the different stakeholders that have society's interest (Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern & Speece, 2016). Universities represent a segment of the community that targets to create knowledge and teach people to do good in the community. If a university/college has good leadership in its CSR activities, its brand image will be boosted. The corporate social strategy encompasses four elements which include the structure of the industry, resources of the firm, communication of ideologies, and value and stakeholder relation (Rivera-Rodriguez, 2009). This study focused on strategic CSR communication and its effect on the brand image of public universities.

Strategic CSR communication is intended to provide shared understanding between organizations and the public to address the public's growing skepticism toward organizations. Transparent CSR communication in core stigmatized industries involves an even higher level of skepticism toward their businesses and thus CSR communication and, therefore, provides a useful platform for exploring the strategic value of transparent CSR communication (Kim & Lee 2018). Organizations should be careful when selecting the CSR communication strategy since highly dialogic and interactive CSR communication strategy may not be always positive for some companies' image (Kim, 2019). This study examined the effectiveness of three CSR communication strategies (interactive, response, and involvement strategies) in enhancing corporate image.

Problem Statement

The University is a section of the community which generates new information and educates people on doing good for society. Although every organization aims to gain revenue to survive, institutions of higher learning need to balance their desire for increased revenue against the needs and desires of the society within which they operate. If the institution displays CSR leadership, the university's brand image will gradually be acceptable to all stakeholders. Therefore, the university's aim should be not only to produce good quality student graduates but also should aim to give service to the communities. This will enhance their brand image (Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern & Speece, 2016).

Kenya has seventy-four public, private, and constituent university colleges. All these institutes search for scholars and thus ought to be aggressive. However, the number of students being admitted into public universities has continued to decline. In the year 2020, the number of students admitted to public universities dropped by 12% from the previous year (CUE, 2020). Notably, only six out of the over 74 universities in Kenya made it to the top 200 ranks in Africa according to the latest webometrics report of July 2020. Furthermore, the situation is even worse globally where only the University of Nairobi made it to the top 1000 rank at position 957. In comparison, South Africa had over 20 universities emerging in the top 200 in Africa. Moreover, only five Kenyan universities were featured in the University Ranking by Academic Performance (URAP) in their latest report released in June 2020. In addition, since public universities are not profit-making organizations, they have not invested in marketing strategies that will promote their brand. Public universities, need to invest in CSR activities to improve their brand image (Mburia, 2018).

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to determine the effect of strategic CSR communication on the brand image of selected public universities in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

Theoretical Review

The Agenda Setting Theory was first put forth by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The theory essentially describes the power of news media to influence salient subjects in public discourse (McCombs, 2005). It also attempts to predict the outcome of the discourse. That is, audiences tend to regard a new issue with importance when it features a news item prominently and frequently. Agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern about salient issues by the news media. Agenda setting occurs through a cognitive process known as "accessibility" (McCombs & Stroud, 2014). Accessibility implies that the more frequently and prominently the news media cover an issue, the more instances of that issue become accessible in the audience's memories. Some groups have more leverage on news coverage compared to others and have a higher probability of getting their demands placed in a news agenda than others. For instance, because policymakers better understand the journalists' quest for predictable and reliable information and that is also newsworthy they have been found to be more influential than the overall group of news sources (Berger & Freeman, 2013).

This theory was predicated on the fact that different social groups have different agenda. The theory was instrumental in examining how the university's strategic communications department navigates the often-complex social agenda and delivers its agenda for corporate social responsibility which enhances the university's brand image.

Empirical Review

Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern, and Speece (2016) focused on university social responsibility and the brand image of private universities in Bangkok. The study used qualitative interviews to explore the perceptions of six private university executives. The study found that Communication about USR is done through both online and traditional media, but public knowledge lags somewhat compared to what universities do. Students today are more aware of university USR activities than their parents because of online media and university road shows at their schools. USR is not the major factor in choosing a university, and many activities are not well known (Plungpongpan, Tiangsoongnern & Speece, 2016). This study was therefore done in Bangkok while the recent study was done in Kenya.

In South Africa, a study on brand communication, brand image, and brand trust as precursors of brand loyalty was conducted. The study was descriptive. The investigation established that communication has a greater effect on brand image than on brand trust. Notwithstanding, brand image emphatically impacts brand trust. Outstandingly as well, the connection between brand trust and brand loyalty is powerful. This discovery demonstrates that brand correspondence can impact brand trust and brand loyalty through brand image (Chinomona, 2016). This study was therefore done in South Africa while the recent study was done in Kenya.

Studies on the mediating role of brand image & brand awareness and brand communication and brand knowledge have been previously reported. The study was informed by the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model theory of Keller. This study is quantitative. The findings of this investigation showed that there was a significant influence between brand knowledge and social media and brand communication and brand knowledge. In addition, brand image

and brand awareness have been widely attributed to the connection between online media brand correspondence and brand information (Bhatti et al., 2018). The study used the brand image as a mediating variable and brand communication as the dependent variable thus showing a conceptual gap.

In Indonesia, Afriani and Syah (2019) focused on brand communication's influence on brand image. A cross-sectional research design was used in this investigation. The findings established that brand image is highly influenced by communication. In addition, brand image is a key product of communication and reliability (Afriani et al., 2019). This study was therefore done in Indonesia while the recent study was done in Kenya.

In India, Kala and Chaubey (2018) focused on communication on brand image and purchase intention towards lifestyle products. The study used structural equation modeling. The study indicated the significant effect of electronic word of mouth on brand image and the moderating role of the brand image between eWOM and purchase intention. The study was done in India while the current study was done in Kenya.

Gómez-Rico et al. (2022) focused on the role of novel instruments of brand communication and brand image in building consumers' brand preference and intention to visit wineries. The study adopted a desktop research design. The study shows that brand communication and brand image have similar positive effects on brand preference, and that brand image mediates the relationship between brand communication and brand preference. The study adopted a desktop research design thus showing a methodological gap.

Febriani (2021) focused on the effect of marketing communication on brand equity with brand image, brand trust, and brand loyalty as the intervening variables. This study employed a quantitative method. Results of the study indicated a significant positive effect of advertising and eWOM on brand image. eWOM exerts a larger effect on brand image than advertising. However, sales promotion does not affect brand image. Sales Promotion and eWOM have a significantly positive effect on brand trust, while advertising has a significantly negative effect on brand trust. Brand trust has a significantly positive effect on brand loyalty. Nevertheless, the brand image does not affect brand loyalty. Meanwhile, brand loyalty has a significantly positive effect on the brand equity of smartphone products purchased by consumers. The study used the brand image as an intervening variable thus showing a contextual gap.

Alam and Khan (2019) focused on the role of social media communication in brand equity creation: an empirical study. The study, therefore, adopted a desktop research design. The study shows that firm-created content over social media significantly influences functional brand image, whereas user-generated content significantly influences brand awareness and hedonic brand image. Further, brand awareness and hedonic brand image lead to brand attitude, which finally impacts purchase intention. The study adopted a desktop research design thus showing a methodological gap.

Conceptual Framework

The independent variable in this study was strategic CSR communication whereas the dependent variable was the brand image of public universities.

Independent Variable



Dependent Variable

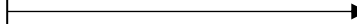
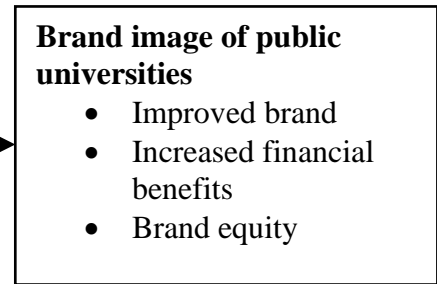


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design. The unit of analysis was five public universities that have been in existence for more than 15 years. The study targeted the 1410 employees in these universities. The sample size was 206 employees in public universities. The study used stratified random sampling to select the sample. Primary data was collected in this research. Sourced data was mainly gathered by administering structured questionnaires. Excel and Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 21 was used to analyse data. Data was analysed using inferential and descriptive statistics. Data was presented using means, standard deviation, and distribution tables in tables and figures.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics included; the age of the respondents, gender of the respondents, school, and the degree program of the fourth-year students.

Age of the Respondents

The respondents were asked to indicate their age. Results were presented in Figure 2.

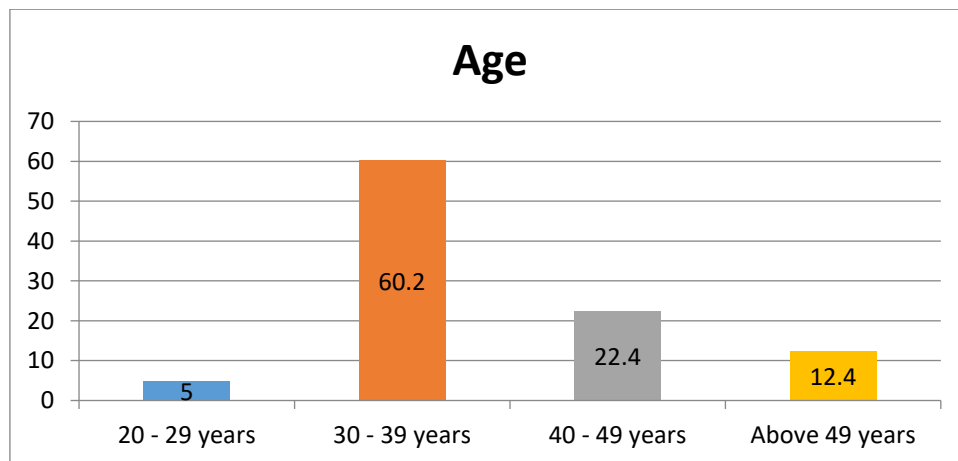


Figure 2: Age of the Respondents

The results revealed that the majority of the respondents who were 60.2% were 30 – 39 years old, 22.4% were 40 – 49 years old, 12.4% were above 49 years old while only 5% were 20 – 29 years. This implied that most employees of public universities were middle-aged people energetic to improve the brand image of the universities. These outcomes are tallied with that of Timiyo (2014), who concluded that people between the ages of 30 and 40 are likely to perform well because they are energetic. These results were in agreement with Cheruiyot and

Tarus (2016) who found out a modal age of employees being 31-40 years is appropriate for mature and experienced workers well-versed with adequate knowledge to handle management issues

Gender of the Respondents

The respondents were asked to indicate their gender of the respondents. Results were presented in Figure 3.

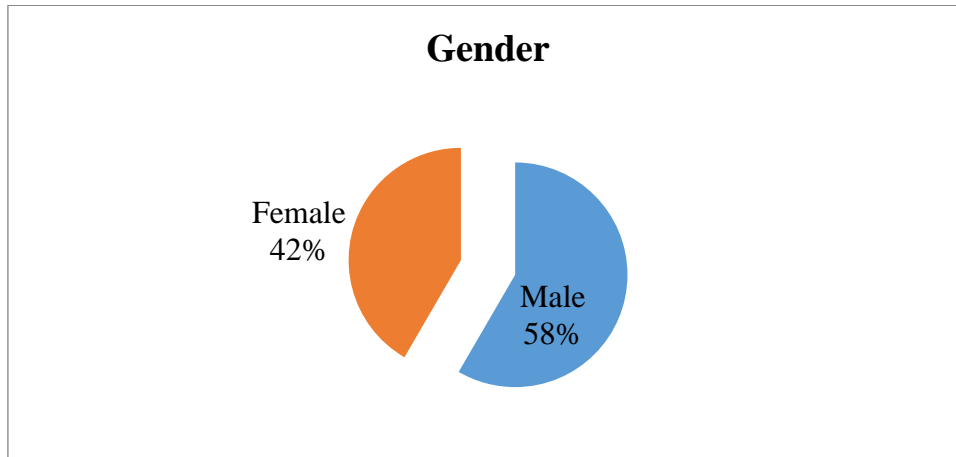


Figure 3: Gender of the Respondents

The results revealed that the majority of the respondents who were 58% were male while 42% were female. This implied that public universities in Kenya had applied the 1/3 gender rule since they had over 1/3 of employees being women.

Level of Education

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of education. Results were presented in Figure 4.

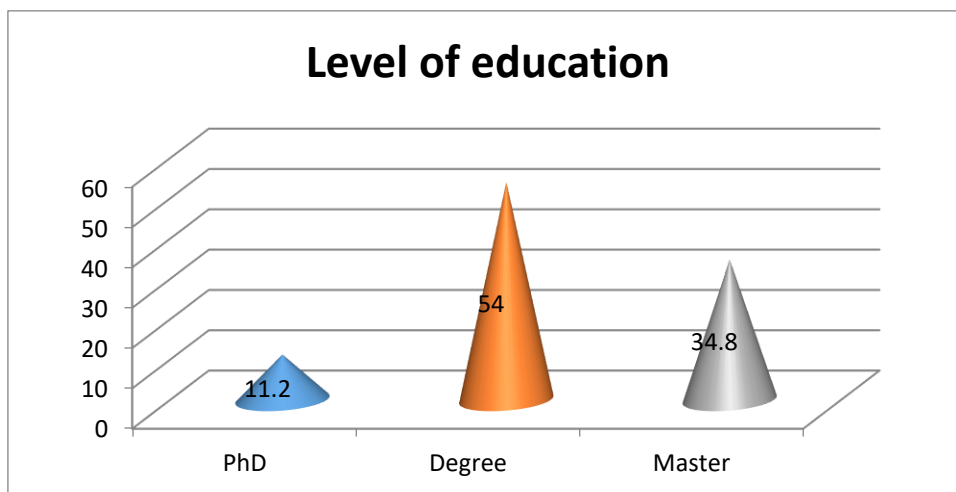


Figure 4: Level of Education

The results revealed that the majority of the respondents who were 54% indicated that they had a university degree, 34.8% had a master's degree while 11.2% had a Ph.D. This implied that most academic staff in public universities had attained tertiary-level education.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive results for both the dependent and independent variables are presented below:

Strategic CSR Communication

To measure strategic CSR communication, six questions were posed to the respondents in which they were to show the extent of disagreement or otherwise to the statements. The descriptive results for Strategic CSR Communication are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Strategic CSR Communication

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev
I am aware of the university's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	4.30%	19.30%	13.70%	46.60%	16.10%	3.51	1.11
The university's communication about its CSR is interactive	2.50%	16.10%	6.80%	47.80%	26.70%	3.80	1.08
I have access to media/channels used by the university to communicate its CSR activities	2.50%	19.30%	13.70%	44.10%	20.50%	3.61	1.09
The university has a mechanism for getting feedback from the employees about its CSR activities	10.60%	11.20%	6.20%	47.20%	24.80%	3.65	1.26
I recommend that the university should change its communication strategy about CSR activities	5.00%	15.50%	3.70%	38.50%	37.30%	3.88	1.21
Messages about the university's CSR activities are true	6.80%	8.10%	8.70%	47.80%	28.60%	3.83	1.14
Average						3.71	1.15

Results showed that the majority of the respondents who were 62.7% agreed with the statement that they are aware of the university's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This implied that the university communicated its social responsibility mandate to its employees. Results also revealed that most respondents who were 74.5% agreed with the statement that the university's communication about its CSR is interactive. This infers that the university management involves the employees in the CSR decision-making process. Further results indicated that most of the respondents who were 64.6% agreed with the statement that they have access to media/channels used by the university to communicate its CSR activities. This infers that universities use social media to communicate CSR activities.

Results also revealed that most respondents who were 72.0% agreed with the statement that the university has a mechanism for getting feedback from the employees about its CSR activities. This infers that universities involve their employees in CSR activities. Further results indicated that most of the respondents who were 75.8% agreed with the statement that they recommend that the university should change its communication strategy about CSR activities. This infers that most public university employees were not comfortable with the communication strategy used by the universities. In addition, results indicated that most of the respondents who were 76.4% agreed with the statement that messages about the university's CSR activities are true.

On a five-point scale, the average mean of the responses was 3.71 which means that majority of the respondents agreed with the statement on strategic CSR communication; however, the answers were varied as shown by a standard deviation of 1.15.

Brand Image

To measure strategic brand image, six questions were posed to the respondents in which they were to show the extent of disagreement or otherwise to the statements. The descriptive results for the brand image were presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Brand Image

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std.Dev
The university is very much concerned about its image to the community	10.60%	5.60%	6.20%	45.30%	32.30%	3.83	1.24
The institution involves in university social responsibility to improve their brand	7.50%	6.80%	7.50%	38.50%	39.80%	3.96	1.19
The university's image has great financial benefits	8.10%	14.90%	0.00%	33.50%	43.50%	3.89	1.33
The university brand equity is noticed by students' enrolment increase	6.80%	8.70%	11.80%	59.00%	13.70%	3.64	1.05
The institution's brand is influenced by how attractive it is to the donors and financiers	5.00%	13.00%	24.20%	44.10%	13.70%	3.48	1.04
Our university's brand equity is reflected by its attractiveness to donors, well-	8.10%	9.90%	1.90%	75.20%	5.00%	3.59	1.02

wishers, and
 financiers.

Average

3.73

1.15

Results showed that most of the respondents who were 77.5% agreed that the university is very much concerned about its image to the community. This infers that universities engage in activities that will improve their image. Further results showed that 78.3% of the respondents agreed that their institution involves in university social responsibility to improve their brand. This infers that public universities use corporate social responsibility to improve their brand image.

In addition, results showed that 77.0% of the respondents displayed that they agreed with the statement that the university image has great financial benefits. This infers that improving university brand images helps the university to enroll more students and thus more revenue. Further results showed that 72.7% agreed with the statement that the university brand equity is noticed by students' enrolment increase. This infers that an increase in student enrolment is a sign of brand equity. In addition, results showed that 57.7% of the respondents agreed that the institution's brand is influenced by how attractive it is to the donors and financiers. This infers that a good brand image can attract more financiers to the universities. Further results showed that 80.2% of the respondents displayed that they agreed with the statement that the university's brand equity is reflected by its attractiveness to donors, well-wishers, and financiers. This infers that good brand equity can attract more financiers to the universities.

On a five-point scale, the average mean of the responses was 3.73 which means that majority of the respondents agreed with the statement on brand image; however, the answers were varied as shown by a standard deviation of 1.15.

Correlation Analysis

To understand the connection between the independent variables and the dependent variable correlation analysis was performed to show the strength of the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation Results

		Brand image	Strategic CSR Communication
Brand image	Pearson Correlation		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
Strategic CSR Communication	Pearson Correlation	.658**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	

Results showed that Strategic CSR Communication has a strong positive and significant correlation with brand image ($r = 0.658$, $p = 0.000$). This implied that an improvement in strategic CSR communication would lead to an improvement in brand image.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was used to examine whether strategic corporate social responsibility influences the brand image of selected Kenyan public universities.

Table 4: Model Fitness

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.623 ^a	0.388	0.377	0.470

The results presented in Table 4 showed that strategic CSR communication was found to be a satisfactory variable in explaining the brand image. This means that strategic corporate social responsibility explains 63.0% of the variations in the dependent variable which was a brand image. These results further mean that the model applied to link the relationship of the variables was satisfactory.

Table 5: Analysis of Variance

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	37.819	5	7.564	34.230	0.000
Residual	59.662	270	0.221		
Total	97.481	275			

The results in Table 5 indicate that the overall model was statistically significant as supported by a p-value of 0.000 which is lesser than the critical p-value of 0.05. This was supported by an F statistic of 34.320 which imply that strategic CSR communication is a good predictor of brand image.

Table 6: Regression of Coefficient

	Unstandardized Coefficients		T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error		
(Constant)	-0.095	0.245	-0.390	0.697
Strategic CSR Communication	0.311	0.067	4.614	0.000

Regression of coefficients showed that there was a positive and significant relationship between strategic CSR communication and brand image ($\beta=0.311$, $p=0.000$). This implied that an improvement in strategic CSR communication by one unit would lead to an increase in brand image by 0.311 units.

$$Y = 0.311 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where;

Y=Brand Image

X₁= Strategic CSR Communication

5.0 Conclusion

The study concluded that there was a positive and significant relationship between strategic CSR communication and brand image. The study further concluded that most Kenyan universities had an interactive form of communication that enhanced their brand image. In addition, the use of media channels during corporate social responsibility activities enhances the brand image of the institution. Further, giving true and honest messages during corporate social responsibility activities enhances the brand image of the institution.

6.0 Recommendations

The Kenyan government, university partners, and university collaborators 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.

Policymakers in the higher education sector can develop policy guidelines that will encourage universities to pay crucial attention to corporate social responsibility as a way of enhancing students' satisfaction and the brand image of the university. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has the mandate to ensure that students and staff are happy and satisfied with the services offered by universities to enhance the quality of graduates from these institutions. A new policy guideline focusing on branding and corporate image management will help the institutions adopt a customer-centric culture hence improving their ratings in the global market. Most Kenyan universities have been rated poorly in global ratings due to a lack of visibility. Investing in initiatives that will increase their brand recognition can boost their visibility hence improving global recognition and rankings.

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