

HIGHER EDUCATION BRAND-PERCEPTION CRISIS IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE OF CHINHOYI UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

The study contends that a major branding challenge facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in Zimbabwe is assumed to be linked to socio-economic and political factors. This research thus aims to establish the relationship between these factors and brand perception, using the Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) as a case study. The study also examines the branding strategies employed by CUT to enhance its brand image in the higher education sector. As a predominantly qualitative research method, the study employs participatory observation to collect data on the physical branding pattern. Focus group discussions were conducted with selected members of the Communications and Public Relations Directorate, management, the Registry Department and lecturers. Additionally, interviews were held with selected students. Findings indicate the nation's socio-political climate negatively impacts the university's brand perception. According to the study, the lens through which the country's economic and political situation is analysed is also used to view HEIs. The study further discovered that brand image building, maintenance and enhancement need financial investment from the government and other corporations that the university was not adequately receiving. The Chinhoyi University of Technology, in particular, and other state universities in general, should seek to improve their infrastructure as the general ambience tend to shape public perception of the local higher education (HE) brand. The study

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concludes by recommending that the brand perception crisis in Zimbabwe can be addressed if only HEIs establish businesses whose profits can be utilised to improve students' needs and employees' working conditions, salaries and infrastructure.

Keywords: branding, image, infrastructure, qualitative, employment, skills development

INTRODUCTION

At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe had one university (the University of Zimbabwe), six teachers' training colleges, two polytechnics and no vocational training institutions (Garwe and Thondhlana, 2022). In the Southern African region, Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education was considered one of the best (Shizha and Kariwo, 2012). The new government expanded primary, secondary and HE to improve access and equity for the marginalised black majority (Manyonganise, 2012). This deliberate policy shift to address the imbalances in the education provision coincided with technological transformations in the sector, particularly in HE.

It is noted that during the pre-independence era, the country's education system was racially segregated and highly regarded (Zvobgo, 1994). The colonial Rhodesia Front government, led by Ian Douglas Smith, declared its Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 and it resulted in economic sanctions. The government adopted extensive intervention policies. The education system was not affected by this exclusion because it was only meant for the white minority (Mashungu *et al.*, 2025). The education of the indigenous population, by default, became the mandate of poorly funded mission schools. There was unfair distribution of resources in favour of white schools, as the central government had nothing to do with African education. The rating of education focused on the quality of education accessible to the minority whites. The government of the day was financed the education system through its inward-looking and import-substitution policy (Mutenga, 2021). There were no perceived challenges in education and

the perception of the colonial system remained positive (Shizha and Kariwo, 2012). In comparison to the post-independence era, access to education by blacks increased phenomenally, exerting pressure on the system that affected brand perception (Hwami, 2012).

The period 1980-2000 was characterised by the rise of HE in Zimbabwe. A surge in the establishment of polytechnics, teachers' colleges and universities characterised this era. A few examples include the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) (1991), the Midlands State University (MSU) (2000), Bindura University of Science Education (BUSCE) (1996), the Harare Institute of Technology (HIT) (1988) and the Great Zimbabwe University (GZ) (1995). Chinhoyi University of Technology was established in 2001, having started as the Chinhoyi Degree Programme under the University of Zimbabwe. Marazanye (2016) argues that Zimbabwe's land and indigenisation laws, enacted in the early 2000s, had wide-ranging consequences for its economy. The performance of government-funded HEIs declined due to direct and indirect economic performance. This could have contributed to a drop reflected in the biometric and webometric rankings of 2024 (www.webometrics.info/en/Africa/Zimbabwe and <https://edurank.net/>) of all educational institutions. The study's case, CUT, was established during this period of economic turmoil.

At the peak of economic decline, from 2007 to 2008, hyperinflation in Zimbabwe was estimated at 79,600,000,000% per month, while the year-over-year inflation rate reached an astounding 89.7 sextillion percent to become the highest in the world (Sim, 2022). This economic meltdown saw universities and colleges, including CUT, closing down. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government could no longer afford to fund HE adequately and parents were asked to pay tuition fees for their children at universities. The withdrawal of students funding caused serious problems for universities and colleges. Student activism against the government on campus was instigated by deteriorating living conditions, lower

subsidies and a lack of adequate expertise (Shizha and Kariwo, 2012). CUT found itself in this situation in its formative years.

Political instability and economic upheavals in Zimbabwe affected universities because competent and experienced staff with university teaching expertise left the country for greener pastures within the region (Shonhiwa, 2024). Some lecturers left in fear of political persecution because the government believed that they encouraged and supported student strikes (Mlambo, 2013). Salaries continued to be eroded by hyperinflation (Yon, 2023). Hyperinflation also eventuated in the reduction of financial support for HEIs and this contributed to the deterioration of services and infrastructure, retarded growth of newly established universities and colleges and a deficit of trust in local HE. The study argues that these political and economic factors have influenced how HE in Zimbabwe has been and is viewed.

With diminished funding, a contrived political environment and a depressed economy, government institutions like CUT should develop a perception-building strategy that gives the university a competitive advantage. As universities take a business model approach to their operations, their marketing and branding strategies also change. There arises a need to devise new, suitable and applicable branding strategy models. Assuming that there are HE brand identity and perception challenges in Zimbabwe, current branding strategies at the centre and the decline in the economy on the other hand, local universities are called to formulate a branding conceptual framework that brings balance to the matrix. However, HEIs should be aware of the paradox that comes with the idea of universities as businesses and the business of universities in knowledge generation through research and engagement. When universities are businesses, they should follow appropriate business practices and procedures. By borrowing from business practices in a declining economy, universities risk being viewed through the same lens that perceives the economic recession in Zimbabwe.

Higher education institutions in Zimbabwe, particularly the Chinhoyi University of Technology, suffer from a negative perception that has a deleterious effect on their brand image and reputation. The study aims to determine the existence and extent of the HE brand perception crisis at the Chinhoyi University of Technology, to suggest strategies to promote a positive perception and corporate image.

The study intends to:

- Establish the existence of socio-economic and political environmental effects on the brand perception of CUT.
- Expose how the socio-economic and political factors have affected the CUT brand image.
- Develop strategies that can reshape the CUT brand perception in Zimbabwe

The study confines itself to the perception challenges bedevilling the Chinhoyi University of Technology. This is one challenge singled out from a myriad of challenges facing HEIs in Zimbabwe. Other challenges which might have a collaring effect, but not adequately addressed in the study, include funding constraints, brain drain and limited resources. The research limits itself to the HE brand perception crisis. It also concentrates on socio-economic and political challenges in Zimbabwe during different historical epochs. In the study, s HEIs refer to universities only.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A theoretical framework that can be used to understand the HE brand perception crisis at the Chinhoyi University of Technology can be analysed through several models. One of these models is the Brand Equity Model. This model focuses on brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and loyalty (Awalludin and Heikal, 2024). It shows how negative perceptions can lead to a decrease in brand value. Another model that can be used is the Service Quality Model (SERVQUAL). This model looks at the gaps that exist between what students expect and the actual service delivered (Gultom *et al.*, 2024).

These gaps can lead to issues with perception. The Stakeholder Theory can also provide insight. This theory explains how perceptions are influenced by different stakeholders (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023). These stakeholders include students, staff, government and industry. Their conflicting interests can contribute to a crisis. There is the Crisis Communication Theory that presents strategies which can be used to manage and recover from damage to reputation (Sellnow and Seeger, 2021). This is important for addressing perceived brand crises in HEIs like CUT.

The study is also grounded in the Branding Theory. It posits that a brand is more than differentiation, it is a blend of emotional, physical, rational and aesthetic elements (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Four major tenets of the Branding Theory are identification, differentiation, personification and brand as an asset (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). The identification tenet of the branding concept ensures that consumers identify or recognise the products or services on offer through the owner. For instance, CUT should have a market identity. The market should just know that there is a university that specialises in technology, innovation and entrepreneurship. However, Krasnikov and Jayachandran (2022) contend that owner-name trademarks have weak marketing value. Identification becomes just one of a process in the chain to enhance brand image.

The differentiation tenet of the Branding Theory shows a need for a brand to differentiate itself as competition increases in new world markets. This phase is also synonymous with brand conception as an extended product (Wang and Liu, 2020) which includes the functional aspects of the brand and its services. Creating a brand means developing a message that communicates with targeted consumers about goods and services repeatedly. For example, CUT should differentiate itself from any other HEIs, its organisational culture, brand reputation, physical presence, community impact and its overall brand image.

The third tenet is the branding as personification theory which posits that a brand is more than differentiation; it is a blend of emotional, physical, rational and aesthetic elements (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Consumers develop a set of relations with the brand, unlike what they can do with a product that is not differentiated. Therefore, branding becomes an attribution of symbolic and social meaning to the product (Kotler *et al.*, 2021). For a successful brand to be developed and maintained, the needs of the consumers and the markets should be appreciated. García-Salirrosas and Gordillo (2021) suggest that a consistent brand personality requires integrating a company's identity system, value system, image, relationships and value-added aspects.

Using the personification metaphor, Deng and Messinger (2022) ascribe to brand dimensions of personality, in the same way psychologists have identified and ascribed dimensions of personality to humans (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Personifying brands in this phase moves from the brand being an artefact that can be manipulated to becoming a living organism (Heding *et al.*, 2020). The social and professional character of a university's Vice Chancellor influences the corporate personality of an institution. Consumers' loyalty aligns with the organisation's CEO personality (Nurhilalia and Saleh, 2024). It would be desirable to align the customers' and companies' personalities (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020).

A university without a distinct brand personality is like a dull person, hence, it will only be a second choice in the customer's mind. Deng and Messinger (2022) reiterate that brand personality is embedded in the brand's DNA and summarise the internal and external benefits of the brand across all media types to all stakeholders. Consumers' brand memory usually recognises the historical achievements of that brand as a way of tracing or even predicting the trend and/or trajectories the brand may take.

This tenet accords the research to advocate for the mainstreaming of the identification by particularisation the role of a university brand in a community of other HEIs. The importance of this phase to the study is encapsulated because the institution under study is personified as a living being with a soul and feelings and should be branded as such for it to be accepted by its different stakeholders. Central to the Branding theory are identification and differentiation (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020) in creating a distinct brand. The theoretical scale measures whether CUT is identified as having distinct brand images in the eyes of its stakeholders or not.

Lastly, there is the brand as an asset tenet which is central to branding theory in measuring brand value by the consumers (Rud, 2021). If a brand does not add value to the market, there is a high likelihood of brand dearth. A brand is measured from the consumer behaviour's viewpoint or the economic principle of utility maximisation (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Brand equity or brand value is also measured by brand loyalty. Brand equity is a set of brand assets and liabilities that link a brand name and its symbol which may add or diminish product and/or service value to an organisation or its customers (*ibid.*). When a brand becomes an asset to the organisation, it adds value to both the consumers and to the organisation. Universities are now traversing an era of marketisation and commodification of their services, hence, they embrace business practices. The creation of the business development and resource mobilisation portfolio in university operations shows that they have realised the need to embark on a business model approach.

A rise in the global university population has increased competition within local HE. This competition pushes universities to transition from solely service-based models to more business-oriented ones. Yiadom *et al.* (2025) also argue that universities have become increasingly “marketised and promotionalised”, leading to a need for a redefinition of what a university represents and stands for in the context of

competition. Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) observe that HE in Britain and the United States is undergoing substantial transformations, with universities increasingly adopting business-like practices and treating students as customers. Evolving economic conditions and the emergence of competing universities caused this paradigm shift. A prominent challenge confronting the contemporary landscape is the disparity between the soaring demand for higher and tertiary education and the capacity of governments to provide adequate public funding to meet this demand (Maile and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022). To boost United Kingdom universities' global competitiveness and attract international students, the British government launched a rebranding campaign in 2000 (Clark *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, Joseph *et al.* (2021:710) argue that British education remains prohibitively expensive, attributing this phenomenon to its "high brand value". The branding strategies prevalent among many European universities tend to prioritise brand

Today's landscape of American HE is increasingly characterised by universities structured as self-sustaining business entities (Kinchin, 2022). This evolution can be traced back to Ronald Reagan's tenure as the Republican Governor of California, where he advocated against funding "intellectual curiosity". Concurrently, economist Milton Friedman opposed the concept of free HE, arguing that students pursuing personal advantages should bear financial responsibilities (Rosenman *et al.*, 2022). The escalation in competitive pressures within the sector has prompted a pronounced emphasis on corporate branding strategies in HE.

In contrast, Asian HE is shaped by its socio-political and economic history. Most Asian nations, similar to their African counterparts, were colonised by European powers and notable exceptions are Thailand, Japan and parts of China. This historical legacy has profoundly influenced the contemporary Asian HE model that reflects a confluence of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and Western educational

philosophies (Sanger, 2020; Akbari *et al.*, 2022). The model shapes Asian HE brand perception. According to Sakar (2025), East Asian countries have emerged as the third-best HE hub globally, following Western Europe (second) and North America (first). By recognising post-Confucian countries as pivotal in the growth of HE, science, innovation and technology, Teferra *et al.* (2022) endeavours to enhance the perception of Asian university education relative to that of Africa and other global regions. The influence of Confucian ideology has historically shaped HE in Asia, resulting in a hybridisation of traditional practices with Western educational models. The Asian HE system embodies elements from German, British and American frameworks (*ibid.*).

The evolution of HE in Africa is deeply intertwined with the continent's colonial history. Higher education institutions in Africa largely mirror the university models established by their former colonisers. Education, as utilised during the colonial period, functioned as a mechanism of exploitation, primarily designed to serve colonial administrations. This system sought to produce educated citizens who facilitated economic production (Sifuna, 2020). Badugela (2024) analyses colonial education as a purposeful strategy to displace indigenous technological knowledge and skills among Africans. Consequently, this educational framework has been criticised for lacking “*Ubuntu*” or “Africanness”, leading to a lasting distortion of identity that persists to this day. Mapara (2023) contends that the nature of African universities often represents a distorted reflection of Euro-American models rather than embodying authentically African characteristics. He critically observes that these universities function as substandard imitations of their Western counterparts, consequently leading to a dependency among African scholars on the validation of academic standards set by Western institutions.

The Zimbabwe HE system reflects socio-economic and political trajectories in the country's history (Bonga, 2024). Before

independence in 1980, the education system was heavily skewed against the black majority, hence, the establishment of free and compulsory primary and secondary education was a deliberate policy to redress colonial imbalances in the post-independence era. Researchers on education systems in Zimbabwe, such as Hwami (2011), Shizha and Kariwo (2012) and Hapanyengwi-Chemhuru and Makuvaza (2014) observe that the colonial educational system was exclusionary because the policies and practices ensured that very few blacks received both primary and secondary school education that opened pathways to HE. Post-independence policy initiatives provided free education, automatic progression right to university and age restrictions were removed. There was substantial government financial support for education and a rapid expansion of higher and tertiary education in Zimbabwe. New universities were established and some teachers' colleges were upgraded to university status (Teferra *et al.*, 2022). Zimbabwe's expanding university education system faced economic challenges at the turn of the 21st century due to political events, including fast-track land reform, growing opposition, widespread job boycotts and Western sanctions. Zimbabwe's government could no longer sustain HE expansion, leading to policy changes and declining standards (Chitongo and Zhanda, 2025). Brand perception of universities in the country was shaped by these developments, transformations and reconfigurations in the HE sector.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ZIMBABWE'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISIS

According to the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) ⁴, by June 2024, there were thirteen (13) State universities, eight (8)

⁴ Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE): This Higher Education Regulatory Board was established in 2006 by an Act of Parliament of Zimbabwe, Chapter 25:27. Its broad mandate is "to promote and coordinate education provided by higher education institutions and to act as a regulator in the determination and maintenance of quality standards in higher education" (ZIMCHE, 2019). This regulatory board follows Government Policy directives via the Executive Authority, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher and Tertiary Education and the Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development. All private, church-related and public or state colleges, polytechnics and universities are regulated by ZIMCHE.

private universities, one (1) intergovernmental institution (Eastern and Southern African Management Institute), two (2) international institutions, fifteen (15) teachers' colleges and eight (8) polytechnic colleges. The Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) Treasury provided salary grants and other operational expenses for State institutions (von Haldenwang *et al.*, 2025). The GoZ faced an insurmountable task to reconstitute the HE policy to be more accessible and all-inclusive.

Underpinning the national policy-making process was providing education for all that mainstreamed accessibility and equity. Viewing itself as the cog that could drive the economic transformation, the GoZ sought to redress colonial imbalances by realigning policy-making institutions with the new socio-economic and political dispensation (Mutenga, 2021). National policy-making processes and systems inevitably became state-centric. By 2018, fifteen (15) economic policies were enunciated and all had an impact on education policy in general and HE in particular. The rise and fall of the economy are subject to socio-economic and political internal and external pressures (Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2021). This nexus with HE has affected HE's brand perception and, ultimately, the overall brand image. Central to the question of the quality of education in Zimbabwe is the issue of funding.

Table 1 summarises all economic policies from 1980 to 2018 which affected HE policy, thereby contributing to HE branding trends in Zimbabwe. Each economic policy had financial obligations on education provision in the country.

Table 1: Summary of all economic policies from 1980 to 2018 which affected higher education policy

DATE	POLICY	PERIOD COVERED
1st February 1981	Growth with Equity (GWE)	1981
	Transitional National Development Plan (TNDP)	1982-1985
	First Five Year National Development Plan (FFYNDP)	1985-1990
18th January 1991	Economic Structural Development Programme (ESAP)	1991-1995
20th February 1998	Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST)	1996-2000
29th March -2000	Vision 2020 & Long-Term Development Strategy	1997-2020
1st August - 2001	Millennium Economic Recovery Programme (MERP)	2001-2002
1st February - 2003	National Economic Revival Programme (NERP)	2003-2004
1st November- 2004	Macro-Economic Policy Framework (MERF)	2005-2006
1st April -2006	National Economic Development Priority Programme (NEDPP)	2006-2008
30th September 2007	Zimbabwe Economic Development Strategy (ZEDS)	2007-2011
19th March 2009	Short-Term Emergency Recovery Programme (STERP I)	2009
23rd December 2009	Short-Term Emergency Recovery Programme (STERP II)	2010-2012
1st July 2011	Medium Term Plan (MTP)	2010-2015
1st October 2013	Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET)	2013-2018
1st January 2019 - 2025	National Development Strategy (NDS1)	2019 – 2025

Soon after independence, the Zimbabwean government borrowed money from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to bankroll national development (Chikerema and Chakunda, 2025). The Bretton Woods institutions converted Zimbabwe's national debt into an opportunity for the GoZ to promulgate the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) from 1991 to 1995. This programme became the turning point for the economy and the start of a decline in education funding by the government. The GoZ was asked to reduce spending, allow a free-market economy to grow and privatise industries and services (Mutenga, 2021). Another major requirement was the devaluation of the local currency. Higher education was also affected when the GoZ was called upon to stop financing universities and colleges. Students were asked to pay for the service. It was thought that government involvement in funding HE exceeded economic efficiency (*ibid.*).

While HE policy reversals were forced upon the country, they also ignited socio-political dissatisfaction. Student unrest and a rise in trade unionism resulted in the formation of a strong political opposition in Zimbabwe in 1999 in the mold of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). These developments also affected the performance of HE in the country.

EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC DECLINE AND POLITICAL CRISIS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Some economic analysts point out that the economy of Zimbabwe has been on a free fall, especially after the Indigenisation and Empowerment Act (2008) and any recovery is being hampered by misplaced government priorities, human rights abuses, political intolerance, bad governance and corruption among a host of other contributing factors (Wedzerai, 2021). The operationalisation of the Indigenisation and Empowerment Act disrupted the manufacturing industry, commerce and mining activities in Zimbabwe. This directly and indirectly affected HE which also relied on industry's partnerships and collaborations through provision of research grants and levies. The disruption of formalised industrial activities constrained the government's financial capacity to allocate an adequate budget for HEIs

(*ibid.*). Other researchers (Muzira and Bondai, 2020; Togo and Gandidzanwa, 2021) posit that transforming HE into the heritage-based Education 5.0 Philosophy aims to foster self-sufficiency in universities through the creation of Innovation Hubs and Industrial Parks intended to generate revenue via spin-offs and commercialisation efforts, thereby supporting continuous development and aligning academic pursuits with industrial and societal needs. Zimbabwean universities are currently grappling with challenges such as reduced funding, significant skills gaps among graduates and perceptions of bureaucratic hurdles that hinder administrative efficiency and academic progress (Mhlanga and Ndhlovu, 2021).

The economic decline in Zimbabwe has had a profound impact on universities, leading to increased tuition fees that burden students, insufficient accommodation and limited learning spaces that hinder effective education, underfunding that results in dilapidating infrastructure and lack of modern equipment and donor flight which reduces financial stability and resource availability, collectively compromising the quality and accessibility of HE (Muzira and Bondai, 2020). A critical challenge threatening the quality of HE offered by local universities is brain drain because qualified teaching personnel and skilled experts continue to leave the country for greener pastures where their salaries are not eroded by the hyperinflation experienced in Zimbabwe. The challenges highlighted above have impacted the functions and operations of universities in Zimbabwe (Togo and Gandidzanwa, 2021). The economic crisis has profoundly affected HE and the socio-political landscape by prompting adjustment policies that have complicated access, funding and institutional stability, as highlighted by Mhlanga and Ndhlovu (2021), leading to increased challenges in maintaining quality and equity in education amidst financial constraints and shifting policy priorities.

PERCEPTION BUILDING THROUGH PROTOTYPICAL BRANDING STRATEGIES

Barton (2022) argues that to build perception in the competitive HE sector, universities should use niche branding strategies that help them

differentiate and coexist instead of competing directly. This approach is also supported by Ward *et al.* (2020), who point out that creating a distinct and authentic brand identity is important and Flannery (2021) observes that universities are increasingly investing in niche branding initiatives. Kezar and Bernstein-Sierra (2024) highlight the commercialisation of HE, stating that even small differences in brand perception can have a significant impact on institutional reputation and this is amplified by digital branding and appealing physical environments. Lee and Kim (2025) and Muchengeti (2025) support these views, noting that perceptions shaped by students and academics are important for establishing and maintaining a university's unique position. Delivering on brand promises shows the institution's core values and competitive edge in HE global market.

University brands should focus on creating an untapped market space where competition is irrelevant and unexplored. The Blue Ocean Theory is one branding strategy that suggests that a majority of brands are all competing in the same market space, otherwise known as the red ocean (head-to-head competition), where the need to differentiate is required (i.e. creating a blue ocean) (Išoraitė and Alperytė, 2022). Brands can use the marketing communications approach to differentiate their brand from competing brands. The Differentiating, Reinforcing, Inform and Persuade (DRIP) framework has been introduced to facilitate brand differentiation (Sutanto, 2024). This is a useful framework to consider if operating in a market with little to separate competing brands. Another strategy which assists in perception building is the reconfiguration of the HE system in a country to reflect local needs and identity, but benchmarking with global trends (Muzira and Bondai, 2020).

Another strategy that has a bearing on brand perception is improving physical branding, which is the keystone of marketing an institution. Nunez (2025) argues that physical branding is the face that attaches clients to the brand's voice and message. It represents the university logo, signage, décor choices and any paraphernalia which reflect the

message of the university brand. A good physical infrastructure appearance enforces a favourable heart and mind share with the consumer. The physical presence of an institution constitutes physical branding, as no customer is lured by a ramshackle building. Repairing broken buildings, for example, may create a positive brand identity and an improved perception. This is one of the reasons the local political and economic elite in the country shun local HEIs and send their children to foreign universities. Physical infrastructures are capital investments because they require strong funding (Wu, 2023). National universities are called upon to go into public-private partnerships (PPPs), Build Operate and Transfer (BOT) and Build Own Operate and Transfer (BOOT) arrangements with industry and commerce. Improved brand perception can be achieved when a university has well-kept campuses, modern equipment and robust branding communication strategies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a case study research design, a predominantly qualitative methodology, to explore the HE brand perception crisis in Zimbabwe. Data on the physical branding pattern were collected through participatory observation and focus group discussions were held with the Communications and Public Relations department personnel, management, members of the Registry Department and selected lecturers from the Chinhoyi University of Technology. In-depth interviews were also conducted with selected students. The study chose a qualitative research design because brand perception issues cannot be quantified (Sallis *et al.*, 2021). Physical branding patterns of a case study are better analysed through observation. To develop effective branding strategies that reshape the perception of the University, the study employed focus group discussions with participants whose duties were directly aligned with the University branding. Students are critical stakeholders of the University and the study sought to understand, through in-depth interviews, the extent the socio-economic and political environment has contributed to a diminished brand perception.

THE STUDY POPULATION

By 2024, CUT had about 14 000 students and a staff complement of 1 500, according to statistics provided by the University's Registry Department. The target population of 10% available for the study is representative enough to draw conclusions and generalisations. The permissible study population percentage is anything not less than 10%.

THE STUDY SAMPLE

Research participants were selected based on their qualifications, hierarchical positions in the university under study and their knowledge of the issues under investigation, interest, or typicality – those that fit a general profile of respondents with a stakeholder interest (Shah, 2023). The sample was chosen using intuition and self-evident criteria (Meyer and Mayrhofer, 2022). Units with required characteristics were chosen by the investigator's judgement and qualified to be representative of the study population. The study used non-probability sampling controlled by researcher's judgement. Interviewer judgement and availability of case study units are critical to non-probability sampling (*ibid.*). The disadvantages of this method are over-weighted by study objectives. Estimates variability and bias are uncontrolled and reliance is wholly on risky intuition.

DATA COLLECTION

Participatory observations provided valuable insights into the University's physical branding pattern, starting with the design of the administration block, highlighting areas for improvements such as the lecture rooms, laboratories, hostels and chapel, sporting and recreational facilities, billboards, campus signage, memorabilia, vehicles, grounds, Student Representative Council (SRC) Office and general campus ambience, maintenance and repairs to infrastructure and online presence. Students were put into two separate focus group discussions, revealing diverse perspectives on branding strategies, with the first group comprising seven (7) participants and the other with eight (8). Two sets of in-depth interviews were also held, capturing students' perceptions influenced by socio-economic and political factors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This article’s findings begin with a descriptive analysis of observations made at the Chinhoyi University of Technology. An Observation Guide was used during this process (Table 2) below. Presentation of results from focus group discussions and interviews were categorised, discussed and analysed.

PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATIONS AT CUT

Table 2: Observation Guide used

	Units of Observations
Selection Process	Position, Appeal, Visibility, Importance/Function
Infrastructure	Main gate -Administration block -Lecture rooms -Student accommodation and Chapel -Sports grounds and SRC Office -Billboards and signage -Vehicles and other branding paraphernalia -Memorabilia
Online presence	-CUT Website page -CUT Facebook page -WhatsApp platforms -YouTube site -X handle -Instagram

Observations made at CUT provide important information regarding the physical infrastructure, branding and digital engagement of the university. These elements together have an impact on how the institution is perceived and its overall reputation. The original Main Gate of the Technical Teacher’s College is still in use with a manual gate. This situation has a negative effect on first impressions and is viewed as a lack of modernisation that harms the university’s image of progress. On the other hand, the Administration Block has a modern architecture made of glass and insulation, contributing positively to visual branding. However, the academic facilities are in poor condition,

outdated, vandalised and poorly equipped which affects teaching and learning. This situation also negatively impacts how students perceive the university and its credibility.

Problems with infrastructure also extend to campus amenities. There are overcrowded hostels with broken facilities, sports infrastructure not up to standard and there is a lack of dedicated spaces for religious activities or administration. These issues, together, lower the quality of campus life and discourage prospective students (Doyle *et al.*, 2024). While campus signage does help with navigation and supports brand visibility, the poor condition of university vehicles detracts these branding efforts. This situation suggests low operational standards and maintenance practices that do not align with the professional image the institution wants to project.

The university's promotional merchandise is effective in promoting brand recognition and creating institutional pride. This aligns with internal branding theories that say memorabilia plays a role in fostering loyalty and community identity, as noted by Barton (2022). However, digital branding is not being used to its full potential. The university's website is an important communication tool, but its social media platforms that are essential for reaching a younger audience, are not managed well and are underdeveloped. This situation reduces opportunities for effective perception management and engagement with stakeholders (Hasanah *et al.*, 2023). Overall, these findings highlight the necessity for specific investments in infrastructure, improvements in branding consistency and a more strategic approach to digital engagement to improve CUT's institutional image and create a more positive perception among both prospective and current stakeholders.

Enhancing the CUT brand image requires a strategic, carefully planned approach that involves insights from key stakeholders such as staff from Communications, Public Relations, management, Registry and lecturers, as revealed through focus group discussions. These responses underscore the necessity for innovative strategies to reshape and sustain

a positive perception of the university, thereby providing a competitive advantage in the educational landscape. Implementing targeted communication initiatives, leveraging digital platforms and fostering community engagement are potential avenues to effectively improve and maintain the university's brand reputation over time.

The Communications and Public Relations Department at CUT recognises the importance of leveraging all multimedia platforms, particularly social media, to effectively engage their target audience of digital-native youth, thereby enhancing awareness of the university's specialised and niche programmes. This approach aligns with Letten *et al.* (2017), who emphasise the effectiveness of niche branding strategies in reaching specific markets. By optimising their social media initiatives, CUT can foster sustained engagement, strengthen its brand presence and better communicate its unique offerings to prospective students, ensuring their messaging resonates with the digital-savvy demographic.

The management and lecturers emphasised that internal stakeholder dissatisfaction regarding service conditions and remuneration significantly impacts the university's brand image, as external stakeholders rely on internal staff for brand endorsement. To mitigate this, they recommended implementing a retention policy that incentivises skilled staff and establishing profit-generating strategic business units separate from core academic activities, especially amid reduced government funding, ensuring both staff motivation and financial sustainability. The strategy described enhances the university's financial capacity to support its retention policies, aligning with Meyer and Zhou's (2017) observation that modern universities are increasingly structured as self-sustaining business entities, emphasising financial independence and strategic resource allocation.

The Registry and Communications participants shared the perspective that universities are not ivory towers, emphasising the importance of stakeholder engagement, including industry, commerce and local

communities, as a means to foster mutually beneficial collaborations such as PPPs and curriculum development. These relationships enhance the university's relevance, facilitate access to resources for capital projects and promote a positive institutional image by ensuring clear communication and reducing misunderstandings or brand distortions. By actively involving stakeholders, the university can better serve societal needs while strengthening its position within the community and industry.

It was revealed by most participants that developing a comprehensive social media strategy with dedicated resources and advanced communication tools is essential for CUT to enhance brand visibility and effectively engage its target market, leveraging social media's accessibility, speed and cost-effectiveness to shape a stronger brand perception.

The views held by students at CUT, regarding the socio-economic and political environment, show a clear link between large-scale societal issues and individual experiences on campus. These views reveal that students are aware of how economic challenges and political instability affect their access to good education, safety on campus and job prospects after graduation. This awareness points to the need for universities to take active steps to deal with outside pressures that could help build resilience through support systems and community involvement, improving student well-being and the university's reputation during times of political unrest.

Moreover, CUT's rapid growth has led to increased social tensions, seen in problems like overcrowding and the decline of community values, with issues such as drug use, theft and cohabitation becoming common. These matters show failures in social control made worse by high staff turnover and lack of resources, both of which harm campus tranquillity and threaten the academic environment. Students are calling for government action, particularly in areas like improving housing, building infrastructure and lowering living costs. Their demands

connect to broader discussions about social justice and fair access, indicating that developing the campus sustainably needs cooperation from multiple stakeholders to promote social stability and support the idea of HE as a means for societal advancement.

Criticism of poor economic management and policies imposed from outside highlights how instability in the economy negatively affects the stability of universities and national progress. This aligns with findings from researchers who argue that policy changes and neoliberal reforms worsen resource shortages, lessen donor trust and hinder the growth of institutions (Holden, 2020). Additionally, the involvement of politics in campus life, especially during Student Representative Council elections, raises safety issues and damages the university's reputation. Increasing tensions and claims of electoral misconduct threaten academic freedom and trust among stakeholders. Students are advocating for less political interference and a focus on safety, emphasising that academic spaces should be neutral areas that encourage learning and community building.

The student interviews also underscored the impact of economic decline on their perception of the university's brand, stressing the importance of fostering a resilient and inclusive campus environment to maintain and strengthen the university's reputation amid challenging circumstances. Students are the most vulnerable stakeholders in an economically declining environment.

In summary, the belief that Zimbabwe's perception crisis is largely self-inflicted points to the urgent need for real political commitment and credible economic reforms that are vital for restoring faith in institutions like CUT. Fixing issues like insufficient campus housing is not just about improving student living conditions but is also a strategic effort to address social problems and boost the university's standing in a difficult socio-political climate, thereby strengthening the role of HE as a stabilising influence during national difficulties.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The perception of Zimbabwe's higher education system has been significantly shaped by socio-economic and political upheavals, particularly since the early 2000s, which have undermined the stability and quality of universities. The economic meltdown, driven by both internal and external factors, has created an unstable environment that negatively impacts university performance and reputation. Historical legacies, policy reversals and neoliberal reforms have further deteriorated the quality of HE, with state universities being perceived through a political lens due to their close ties with the government. Overall, the intertwined influence of socio-economic and political factors has deeply affected the brand perception of Zimbabwe's HE, highlighting the systemic challenges rooted in the country's complex historical trajectory. In light of the above findings, the following recommendations are put forward:

- Ensuring the continuation of free HE in Zimbabwe is crucial for fostering socio-economic development, as it provides equitable access to advanced skills and knowledge necessary for national progress. Abrogating this promise could undermine social equity, limit opportunities for talented students from marginalised backgrounds and hinder the country's overall growth by reducing the pool of skilled professionals. Therefore, the government should uphold its commitment to free HE to promote inclusive development and build a more prosperous future for Zimbabwe.
- The Chinhoyi University of Technology should develop innovative branding strategies that leverage social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram and LinkedIn to enhance its visibility, engage with prospective students, showcase academic achievements and highlight campus life. Implementing targeted digital marketing campaigns, creating compelling content like student testimonials, research breakthroughs and virtual campus tours can position the university as a modern, dynamic institution. Additionally, fostering an active online community and utilising analytics to tailor messaging will help the university compete effectively with well-established regional and global institutions, ultimately attracting a diverse and talented student body.

- Policy makers and CUT management should prioritise establishing a stakeholder-driven approach in moulding a modern university to enhance collaboration, responsiveness and relevance in education, research and community engagement. By actively involving students, faculty, industry partners, government agencies and communities in decision-making processes, CUT can better align its programmes with societal needs, foster innovation and improve institutional accountability. This inclusive strategy not only ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, but also strengthens partnerships, boosts resource sharing and enhances the overall quality and impact of HE, ultimately contributing to sustainable national development.
- Providing CUT with financial capital to initiate new business ventures can stimulate campus development and generate employment, thereby reducing staff attrition by offering more opportunities and financial stability. This strategic investment fosters innovation, enhances the institution's economic ecosystem and creates a sustainable environment that retains staff through expanded career prospects, ultimately strengthening the University community and contributing to long-term growth.

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