

## Changing the College Enrollment Narrative: Refocusing Brand Imitability Strategies for Success

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### Abstract

*The U.S. college enrollment data continue to show a downward trend after the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher educational institutions lost 1.1% of undergraduates in Fall 2022, leading to a 2-year decline of 4.2% since 2020. Moody's reported that the decline is projected to worsen in the 2 decades ahead, resulting in a 25% closure rate of mid-sized and less competitive colleges. Recent strategic management researchers have indicated that physical (tangible) institutional resources, including people, processes, and structures, are imitable and effortlessly reproduced by other institutions; hence, they are unable to achieve market goals. Using the resource-based view theoretical lens, this qualitative case study explored how brand managers of a comprehensive regional university utilize institutional brand as an inimitable (intangible) resource to achieve sustainable growth in undergraduate enrollment. The findings revealed institutional core values as critical to the architecture of brand processes and campaigns for enrollment growth.*

**Keywords:** Intangible resources, core values, brand reputation, competitive advantage, enrollment.

### 1. Introduction

Several higher educational institutions in the United States are currently experiencing undergraduate enrollment decline despite the NCES's forward-looking projections in 2018 (NCES, 2019). The phenomenon of enrollment decline has been attributed to several factors including the decline of the traditional-age student population and increased competition for students among institutions of higher learning (Camera, 2019; Fain, 2019). The 2019 college enrollment report by the NSC Research Center indicated that college enrollment had decreased consecutively for over 5 years (NSC Research Center, 2019). In Spring 2019, the overall decrease in college enrollment was 1.7% or approximately 300,000 students. The decline in Fall 2019 was 1.3%, a reduction of approximately 230,000 students. The decline rate in the previous year (i.e., 2018) was 1.8%. The rate of decrease among 4-year public institutions was 0.9% and 3.4% in community colleges. However, 4-year private institutions drifted from the trend with a 3.2% increase rate. This deviation was attributed to changes in the institutions' business focus (NSC Research Center, 2019). The post-pandemic enrollment data continue to show a downward trend. The decline rate in Fall 2022 has slowed as compared to pre-pandemic rates. However, institutions lost 1.1% of undergraduates in Fall 2022, leading to a total 2-year decline of 4.2% since 2020. States with the highest decrease in college enrollments include Florida, Illinois, North Dakota, Kansas, Hawaii, California, Michigan, Alaska, and Pennsylvania. Alaska and Florida were recognized as the states with the most considerably decreased undergraduate enrollment rates (NSC Research Center, 2019).

The general decrease in undergraduate enrollment has initiated a discourse among leaders and managers of higher educational institutions to pursue strategic resources that could create competitive advantage and long-term enrollment sustainability. Over the years, these resources researchers have argued that these physical resources are imitable and effortlessly reproduced by other institutions; hence, they are unable to achieve market goals. Institutional brand reputation—a nonphysical inimitable asset—is perceived by strategic managers and scholars as a valuable resource to achieve long-term growth. Institutional brand reputation is the extent to which external stakeholders and the general market perceive an institution (Bhasin, 2019). According to Barney (1991), institutional brand reputation has valuable, non-substitutable, inimitable, and rare characteristics that form the basis for long-term institutional growth. This study explored how select administrative stakeholders at JJU (pseudonym)—a four-year public university in one of the states with the highest enrollment decline—utilize the university's brand as an inimitable resource to maximize undergraduate enrollment opportunities for growth. The study expands the existing body of knowledge and improves administrative practices regarding brand reputation and sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth. The study's research question was "How do JJU brand managers utilize the university's brand as an inimitable resource to achieve sustainable growth in undergraduate enrollment?"

### 2. Literature Review

Strategic management researchers (e.g., Ali et al., 2015; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Walker, 2010) have argued that one critical concern of institutions in a competitive global market is the type of resources that create a superior organizational performance or long-term sustainability. Brand reputation is considered a valuable, inimitable resource in marketing any service or product. In the context of institutional brand reputation, Fombrun and van Riel

(2003) explained that “Reputation is an intangible asset because it is complex and has multiple constructs; rare and inimitable, which needs a lot of time to accumulate, specificity, difficult to manipulate by the firm, with no limits on its usage and does not depreciate with use” (p. 128). According to Fombrun and van Riel (2003), institutional brand reputation is considered a resource that enhances stakeholders’ expectations about an institution. Similarly, Deephouse (2000) noted that brand reputation satisfies the requirement of a strategic resource. Deephouse argued the characteristics of brand reputation that make it a valuable and strategic resource include scarcity, specificity, inimitability, and immobility. With this background in mind, Munisamy et al. (2014) proposed that colleges and universities that leverage this strategic resource could foster student retention, create market entry barriers, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage. With a good reputation, universities and colleges could drive markets rather than be driven by the markets (Munisamy et al., 2014).

A higher educational institution’s brand reputation can measure its performance (Aghaz et al., 2015). According to Aghaz et al. (2015), the ability of an institution to manage its internal and external public relations determines its positive outcomes in the general market. The basic function of brand reputation, which acts as a mechanism to decrease risk and increase customer satisfaction, marketing effectiveness, and market share, is a critical measure of an institution’s performance (Kheiry et al., 2012). Similarly, Boyd et al. (2012) noted that a favorable brand reputation helps institutions minimize operational cost. Institutions with a good reputation recruit and retain a highly competent and skillful workforce with less contracting costs (Alessandri et al., 2006). Further, Ponzi et al. (2011) evaluated data from Fortune’s report of America’s most admired corporations and concluded that organizations with a good brand reputation sustained higher financial and market performance.

Additionally, brand reputation is considered to have a multidimensional effect on an institution’s performance. As noted by Cardeal and Antonio (2012) and supported by Ansong and Agyemang (2016), stakeholders are not only concerned with the financial performance of their institutions but also the intangible resources, such as social responsibility, leadership, unique academic programs, and brand personality, that offer long-term growth to their institutions. With a balanced measure of financial and market performance, brand reputation helps institutions to create competitive barriers, sustainable competitive advantage, and enhanced stock market performance (Surroca et al., 2010).

The review of extant literature concludes that brand reputation affects an institution’s performance. However, some scholars (e.g., Rose & Thomsen, 2004; Surroca et al., 2010) have argued that an institution’s market performance rather influences brand reputation. According to Surroca et al. (2010), an institution’s current brand reputation is influenced by the past performance of the institution. The authors argued that financially sound organizations engage in social investments that contribute directly to their brand reputation. This argument aligns with Rose and Thomsen’s (2004) claim that institutional brand reputation and performance have a bidirectional relationship. Determining what constitutes brand reputation is highly significant for higher educational institutions (Kheiry et al., 2012). Kheiry et al. (2012) noted that institutions that provide educational services to the public use evaluative strategies to monitor the relationship between themselves and stakeholders. Regular monitoring of an institution’s position on the reputational map can help the institution identify potential issues that may affect its viability (Munisamy et al., 2014).

The absence of an exact definition and scope of brand reputation creates challenges for its measurement (Kheiry et al., 2012). This reasoning supports criticisms in the literature relative to the existing measurement constructs of reputation (Ponzi et al., 2011) and the scales used for its measurement. In a criticism, Feldman et al. (2014) indicated that subjective attributes characterize the current indexes for measuring institutional reputation in the market. The authors argued the source of subjectivity is based on the methods for selecting participants and the choice of assessment standards, of which most of the rankings lack a representative sample of the population.

Also, Feldman et al. noted that the measurement of reputation primarily focuses only on the perceptions of selected stakeholders, which creates bias and may affect the instrument’s validity. Additionally, the items chosen by most scholars when measuring reputation are mainly financial. According to the authors, this approach results in most instruments lacking content validity.

In addressing the inconsistencies associated with reputation measurement, Walker (2010) suggested that reputation measurement should be stakeholder group-specific and issue-specific. Reputation measurement should initially be based on the target group the institution selects and the subject matter it wants to assess reputation. According to Walker (2010), limiting the scope of reputation measurement to specific stakeholders and issues will increase validity. In line with this viewpoint, Fombrun et al. (2000) originally proposed using a reputation quotient, which consists of six components: products and services, emotional appeal, workplace environment, vision and leadership, financial performance, and social and environmental responsibility. This measurement tool has been recognized and validated by recent organizational reputation researchers such as Aghaz et al. (2015) and Ansong and Agyemang (2016).

## 2.1. The Case of JJU

JJU is a mid-sized 4-year regional comprehensive university located in the southeastern region of the United States. The university is mainly funded by tuition income and state funds. The graduate and undergraduate programs are spread across five colleges. Public information revealed that the university had over 12,000 students, comprising approximately 9,000 (76%) undergraduates. The university embraces a performance-based funding model that informs the financial investments the university receives from the state. The funding model is based on critical metrics. These metrics, approved by the board of governors, are used to evaluate state universities on several issues including student enrollment, retention, average wages of graduates employed full-time, and alumni success in the job market. Despite JJU's statewide recognition as one of the top-performing universities in the state, undergraduate enrollment decline is prevalent at the university. Publicly available information indicates that for the past 4 years, JJU has experienced a consistent decrease in undergraduate enrollment, which significantly affects the state's financial investments in the university. Using RBV as a theoretical lens, the study investigated how brand managers at JJU utilize brand as an inimitable resource in marketing, recruitment, and enrollment management to achieve sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Birger Wernerfelt's RBV served as the theoretical framework for this study. Wernerfelt developed the RBV in 1984 to augment Penrose's work on strategic resources and management in organizations. Wernerfelt's inspiration for developing the RBV was based on his dissatisfaction with the academic materials for his class at the University of Michigan (Ambrosini, 2003). Wernerfelt observed that the content of the academic materials had fundamental flaws. The existing literature he was supposed to use for the class illustrated that threats and opportunities of business organizations are utilized only through the firm's market positioning. In other words, the literature suggested that internal resources had no role in a firm's success. Wernerfelt opposed this argument. He argued that when organizations focus on market positioning instead of internal resources, they may be developing ubiquitous strategies that cannot yield competitive advantage. Wernerfelt, thus, proposed that exploring organizational performance from the perspective of unique internal resources and capabilities can contribute positively to the growth of the organization. Wernerfelt's (1984) main idea was to establish that the sustainability of an organization in a competitive environment is based on its unique resource endowments (i.e., relative advantage).

Although Wernerfelt was the original proponent of the RBV (Wernerfelt, 1984), Barney's (1991) intellectual work borne the constructs of RBV. Barney's viewpoint was grounded in the notion that organizational resources should be heterogeneous and must have (a) valuable, (b) rare, (c) inimitable, and (d) non-substitutable (VRIN) attributes. Barney (1991, 2003) argued that resources that possess the VRIN attributes could create a sustainable competitive advantage and high-level performance for an organization. These attributes are considered constructs of RBV (Barney, 1991, 2003). Consistent with Barney (1991), a resource is valuable if it allows an organization to create strategies that enhance organizational efficacy and effectiveness. Similarly, Rao (2014) noted that the value of an asset or resource is described in the context of organizational strategy and the external milieu in which the organization operates. Thus, the value of a resource is defined by how the resource creates benefits for an organization in the external environment.

Barney (1991) further explained that a valuable resource is sustainable if its attributes are rare. He stated, "a firm enjoys a competitive advantage when it is implementing a value-creating strategy not simultaneously implemented by large numbers of other firms" (Barney, 1991, p. 106). According to Barney, organizational resources that are common do not possess unique and valuable features to generate competitive advantage. With common resources, organizations can only achieve competitive parity. From the author's viewpoint, an organization without rare resources can only achieve an equal position comparable to other competitors (Cao et al., 2014).

The concept of inimitability augments the previous construct of RBV (i.e., rarity). Barney (1991) noted that if the development of a resource has negligible or no possibility for imitation, the resource will maintain its rarity. Valuable and rare resources enable an organization to realize above-normal success in the short- and medium-term (Barney, 2003). However, the inimitable nature of resources makes it challenging for competitors to imitate the strategies of organizations, thereby creating long-term sustainable performance (Barney, 1991, 2003). Non-substitutability is the final attribute that makes an organizational resource a source of sustainable performance and growth. Barney (2003) noted that an organizational resource should possess characteristics that make it impracticable for other organizations to find substitutes with the same benefits provided by that resource. Barney (2003) remarked that strategic resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable as well as non-substitutable to deliver sustainable competitive advantage.

Barney (1995) refined the RBV by replacing the fourth construct, "non-substitutability," with "organize." In his later work, "Looking Inside for Competitive Advantage," Barney (1995) called this new concept the VRIO (i.e., valuable, rare, inimitable, organize) framework. Barney's argument for this refinement centered on the idea that if

an institution is not well-organized to exploit resources and capabilities, that institution is not structurally positioned to take advantage of the VRI part of its resources. According to Barney (1995), a capability or resource that meets all four criteria, rare, valuable, inimitable, and organize, can generate superior performance and sustainable growth for the organization.

The author chose the RBV because of its applicability to the study's purpose and research problem. The research problem warranting the need for this study is the persistent decline in undergraduate enrollment at JJU. In such challenging situations, the effective use of organizational resources is considered critical to improving performance (Kong & Prior, 2008; Rothschild & White, 1993). By applying the VRIO framework, as proposed by Barney (1995), I was able to explore how the administrative departments at JJU leverage the university's strategic intangible resources to achieve sustainable growth in undergraduate enrollments. I used the first construct of RBV (i.e., valuable) to frame the research questions. This question yielded detailed information about how the selected departments utilized the university's brand reputation as a strategic internal resource to address the declining trend in undergraduate enrollment.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study was founded on a constructivist philosophical worldview. The idea for assuming this worldview was to explore the subjective meaning participants assign to issues or objects. These subjective meanings inspired the study to explore the complexity of perspectives about the research problem instead of confining meaning into a few ideas or categories. I assumed a relativist ontology, subjective epistemology, and balanced axiology. Based on this philosophical orientation, a qualitative methodology was suitable for exploring the study's purpose and addressing the research questions.

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that researchers use a qualitative research approach to explore an in-depth understanding of human or social phenomena within a natural setting. One essential advantage of using qualitative research methodologies is its strength to operate within flexible structures. Researchers can use unstructured approaches to elicit specific as well as detailed data from participants. However, this approach uses a limited sample size, which affects the generalizability of findings (Merriam, 1998). Further, I employed a particularistic case study design (Merriam, 1998) as the appropriate methodological subtype to address the study's purpose and research questions. A particularistic case study means "the case study focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). The specificity attribute of particularistic case studies makes it a good methodology for investigating practical problems. As Merriam noted, adopting a case study research approach offers comprehensive and holistic descriptions of the phenomenon, whereas a particularistic case study design narrows the focus of the phenomenon. A particularistic case study method was apposite because it focused the study on how a particular group of people within the university dealt with the problem under investigation. This methodological approach also provided a more in-depth and holistic inquiry into the operations of JJU's administrative departments responsible for managing the university's brand reputation.

The participants included in the study comprised officers in two administrative departments at JJU: The Office of Undergraduate Admissions and the Office of Institutional Communication. I adopted the critical case sampling technique to select eight participants. This technique involved choosing participants who could "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p. 236). Data were derived from interviews with selected administrative stakeholders as well as documents. I developed and field-tested an original interview protocol for the data collection. I employed Merriam's (1998) conventional content analysis approach to analyze the data. This process began with data preparation, which included transcribing the interview data, jotting down ideas, and re-reading the transcript to make sense of the data. Then, I created codes to identify categories and performed a constant comparison of categories until patterns or emergent themes evolved.

##### **4.1. Compliance with Ethical Standards**

Permission to access the data collection site was obtained from the author's Institutional Review Board prior to conducting the study. The author obtained permission from the participants before conducting the interviews by asking them to complete and submit an informed consent form. The following essential items were included in the informed consent form: the type of study, the role of participants, research purpose and objectives, my positionality, and how the research findings will be published. The informed consent process was to ensure participants understood the potential benefits and any uncertainty before participation. Any revealing information from the data collected was excluded to maintain participants' anonymity. The author also asked the participants to sign a form granting permission to be digitally recorded. The participants were permitted to ask questions about the possible risks associated with their participation, to which the author responded that there were no risks involved.

#### **5. Data Analysis and Discussions**

The study's purpose required collecting data from participants with extensive knowledge in higher education branding, marketing, communication, public relations, and recruitment and enrollment management. All participants described their roles at the university relative to these content areas. The interview questions emerged

from Barney's RBV concept of inimitability. The participants revealed that inimitable resources to achieve sustainable undergraduate growth included the rich history of the university's location, a complex combination of brand elements, and living-learning experiences. The data analysis produced three emergent themes (Figure 1). The participants revealed that they undertake the following three actions to ensure undergraduate enrollment growth:

- (1) leverage on the historic and geographic location of the university,
- (2) focus on social growth, and
- (3) align JJU's brand elements with brand campaign guidelines.

#### 5.1. Leverage on the Historic and Geographic Location of the University

Data from the study revealed that JJU's geographic location in the region is an essential brand component that other universities in the state cannot imitate. This finding validates the third construct of RBV. Barney (1991) indicated that one of the three conditions under which an institution's resource cannot be imitated is the unique historical position of the institution.

According to Barney (1991) and corroborated by Grant (2010), an institution's uniqueness is dependent on its place in time and space, which no other institution can duplicate. The city where JJU is located is considered among the largest metropolis within the region of the Gulf Coast. Publicly available information indicates that the city served as the site for the first Spanish settlement in the United States in the 1550s and hosted five different governments during the European settlements. The city has several historical monuments, including cultural landmarks and museums.

Also, the city boasts of having one of the most beautiful beaches in the Southeast. While many universities in the state could claim to have high-impact practices similar to that of JJU, no institution can affirm to be situated in a historically and culturally rich city such as JJU's location. Participant 1 narrated, "Many universities will claim to have something similar to high-impact practices, which is a big part of a brand: Get out of the classroom, go get your hands on what you're learning."

Participant 1 continued that no other school can claim that a group of their undergraduate and graduate students, along with professors, went on a dive and found a shipwreck that made their city America's first full-time year European settlement. JJU can boast of this accomplishment; "we have so much history." Participant 4 agreed that JJU's location is a significant brand component that is inimitable. She remarked that the location of the main campus is "a big factor for a lot of students as it provides a space of comfort and tranquility because students can just step outside and they are immersed in nature, which no other institution can copy." According to Participant 4, JJU's strategic location gives the university a competitive edge over other institutions in the state. As noted in the literature, assuming competing institutions can copy and duplicate the characteristics of this resource, JJU could only achieve a temporal competitive advantage (Grant, 2010). Participant 4 claimed the university's proximity to the beach is a good hub for business organizations, which makes it easier for JJU graduates to get jobs in specific employment sectors after college. Also, she stated that JJU is a good choice for students who want to stay local, and it opens doors for students who want to explore the world. Participant 4 commented "It is a great community. For students who are thinking of enrolling in nursing, we have three major hospitals. If you want to go into business, we have a massive Navy federal call center. It is a good location if you want to stay local, but it also opens doors if you want to branch out and go global." Participant 2 also noted that JJU's location provides a great institutional advantage. She explained, "Our location is a good advantage that we have. We are close to the beach, which is unique for a lot of the institutions. We are also close to Alabama and Mississippi and Louisiana and Georgia. And so, we have students who come from out of state as well. We have a very diverse population; I think that makes us different as well."

Participant 1 further added that the current geographic location provides an "immersive experience" for students. Students can have a practical feel of what they have studied in the classroom. She asserted that JJU's proximity to the sea and aquatic habitat enhances biodiversity education for biology, environmental science, and marine biology students. The geography and history all tie back to the university brand that any other university cannot imitate. Participant 1 narrated, "There are so many hands-on things here that are tangible. I do not know any other spot where you can find this much biodiversity for our students. I think the geography and history the city provides to JJU cannot be copied by any university in the state. You cannot emulate that, and I think that can all be tied back to the brand as honoring our history."

Students not only want to hear or read about an experience but also be part of the experience or history-making (Moore, 2014). According to Participant 1, the location creates a positive brand perception of the university because students see what will be a practical experience. "They will not be in a lecture hall all day, every day, multiple times a day. They are going to see that it is active and hands-on, and they can be a part of making history." The findings indicate that the administrative stakeholders in both departments can easily tie the university's geography to any of its branding elements, typically the high-impact practices and community-feel culture, during enrollment marketing and recruitment campaign initiatives.

The literature recognizes the importance of unique historical events as the basis for institutional performance and growth. Several resource-based theorists and scholars (e.g., Aghaz et al., 2015; Barney, 1991) often referred to an institution's historical location and unique conditions under which a new management team assumes a position as critical determining factors of an institution's long-term growth. According to Barney (1991), an institution that considers its historical geographic location valuable and unique possesses an inimitable physical capital that gives the institution an inimitable advantage over competing institutions. Thus, if an institution obtains essential and unique resources because of its distinct history, it can implement value-creating strategies based on those resources, which other institutions cannot duplicate.

## 5.2. Focus on Social Growth

One of the unique brand elements that JJU focuses on to ensure increased undergraduate enrollment is the emphasis on social growth. Most participants (e.g., Participant 5, Participant 2, Participant 6, Participant 2, Participant 1) indicated that the university underscores social growth in addition to academic experiences. Participant 6 believed that exposing students to a diverse population with similar interests provides a more enriching learning experience. Participant 6's claim affirms Moore's (2014) and Tsai et al.'s (2008) viewpoints that allowing students to interact, exchange ideas, and process feedback builds stronger student relationships for success. Participant 2 specified that JJU offers a living-learning environment that supports students in achieving their academic goals. She stated, "We emphasize social growth within our programs as well. I think most universities or programs may only focus on the academic experience, but we also want them to grow socially. So, we provide a living-learning environment or community where students who are part of our honors program, when they join this program in their first year, all stay in the same residence halls. In that resident hall, they live and learn with the same students. We believe that helps the transition for every student and enhances their relationships." Participant 5 added that the student life at JJU is close-knit and engaging. Students acquire rich social experiences because they engage in close or small groups. She shared, "Because we are a small university, we have a really close group of student life and involvement. We can create smaller brands and cater to each student with each event."

Participant 5 continued that "compared to other universities with big events, they are kind of intimidating. It is like people can get involved and get leadership positions and stuff." Participant 2 supported Participant 5's claim that the close-knit social environment at JJU makes social engagements attractive and provides a rich social experience for students. Once students are engaged, they develop favorable attitudes and perceptions towards the brand (Tsai et al., 2008; Willms, 2000). Participant 2 stated "I think students definitely want to be involved, unlike the bigger universities where it might be overwhelming. Here, students can and will have that opportunity to get fulfillment."

Participant 1 also indicated that JJU has several student organizations and student involvement opportunities. These organizations include various cultural-specific fraternity and sorority groups, community partnership associations, and academic research groups. These value-based organizations help to develop meaningful student relationships, create a life-long network, enhance students' leadership skills, and guide students to engage in meaningful service and philanthropy efforts in a social context. Participant 1 remarked, "These different student life, activities, events, and organizations provide a lot of networking opportunities for students to meet people in whatever field they may want to go in, or people who share the same interests. Having all these different things, although other schools may have those as well, I think ours are a tighter knit because of our size. It creates a good environment for our students to explore socially."

Previous studies (e.g., Andrews & Clark, 2011; Willms, 2000) have established that social engagement and growth are essential determinants of student retention, with positive outcomes for both academic achievement and social support. In Andrews and Clark's (2011) study, most students who participated (i.e., 75%) were concerned that they could not make new friends in school, which affected their motivation to succeed academically. Their study also revealed that socialization influenced students' decision to persist until completion even when the students faced personal and academic difficulties.

## 5.3. Aligning JJU's Brand Elements with Brand Campaign Guidelines

Most of the participants proffered that consistent use of the university's brand components in alignment with the university's brand standards and guidelines is a unique brand element that is inimitable.

The analysis of JJU's Graphic and Brand Identity Standards Manual revealed that the university has brand protocols and guidelines that support all branding campaigns. The guidelines and standards, incorporated into a portal, provide a holistic approach to communicating the institution's brand consistently. The brand portal provides JJU communicators with the tools and resources necessary for consistent branding materials. In response to how JJU uses its brand as an inimitable resource for sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth, Participant 2 confirmed that the consistent use of the university's brand elements in accordance with the university's brand standards is critical to achieve this success. Participant 2 revealed, "I would say that having the brand remain unique and inimitable is about using the assets consistently in accordance with brand and campaign guidelines. Flagging something, if it is not used appropriately, sending things to institutional communication saying, hey, this

company is doing this, we want you to be aware and they handle that typically. In achieving undergraduate enrollment growth, I think the consistent use of the brand elements may work. It is not necessarily those marks specifically; the consistent use of them achieves those brand perceptions.”

Participant 3 also indicated that in her role to ensure the university’s brand remains unique in achieving undergraduate enrollment growth, her team always referred to the institutional communications department to ensure their brand messaging campaigns are consistent with institutional standards. She shared, “We always go to the institutional communication office before using any of the branding items. We cannot just send off an email that does not match what institutional communication requires of us. So, our communication coordinator ensures that everything we send out matches the brand that is being used at the time.” Participant 6 also mentioned that consistency is critical when communicating the university’s brand to create lasting positive impressions. This finding validates previous studies establishing that consistency in communicating brand components depicts a strong and unified organization, which positively influences stakeholder decisions (Judson et al., 2009). Participant 6 believed creating messages that aligned with the central brand values and consistent across various marketing platforms and touchpoints is a way to get the brand ingrained in the minds of consumers.

Participant 6 further elaborated, “One thing that we have in our department and our undergraduate admissions department is our own marketing coordinator. What she does is to keep us on the cutting edge when it comes to presentations, videos, and the visual look of our department. So, she continues not only to help us in that area, but also guides us in the styles and ways to communicate with students. To ensure consistency in our messaging when it comes to communicating with students, we do not only communicate through the base communications of email and text messages, but we also reach out through social media. We send out additional touchpoints, such as postcards as well.” Participant 6 maintained that the purpose is to ensure “We are communicating the same message constantly across all platforms and touchpoints to create the impression we desire.” The responses from the three participants aligned with Participant 2’s claim that “Using brand components based on guidelines set by the institution ensures all messaging is relevant and related to the brand goals.” The findings from the data confirm existing literature (e.g., Joseph et al., 2017; Judson et al., 2009), establishing that brand guidelines keep an institution’s brand identity consistent across all touchpoints, reinforcing the institution’s mission statement and core values. According to Joseph et al. (2017), using brand guidelines protects the strength of the brand to create value for the institution continuously.

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

The findings support the conclusion that brand promotion campaigns that focus on core values achieve sustainable undergraduate enrollment growth. Several participants consistently and repeatedly asserted that core values play a significant role in brand management for long-term growth. According to the participants, branding for enrollment growth involves incorporating the university’s mission statement, vision statement, and core values into the university’s strategic plan. The participants’ perception of core values in branding aligns with the extant literature establishing that core values are critical for credibility, continuity, and consistency in the value-creating process (Gray & Balmer, 1998; Yoganathan et al., 2018). Institutions that develop brand promotion campaigns based on core values can create unique experiences for students as well as faculty and staff. These unique experiences become satisfying for stakeholders, which in turn enhances their long-term association with the brand. This conclusion corroborates extant literature advocating that core values contribute to a more consistent brand that enhances an institution’s presence in the public domain and ultimately yields the growth it requires (Luxton et al., 2017). Branding theorists and strategic management scholars have also made several arguments in favor of this core values approach to branding. The findings indicate that JJU attempts to incorporate its core values into every university-organized recruitment and enrollment initiative. For instance, based on the core value of caring, the recruitment team and event planners connect new students with continuing students who do not create acquaintances just for a day but meet with them continuously during their study. The participants mentioned that they always create a caring environment that makes students feel they can meet their potential.

However, the findings did not reveal any systematic brand-building process at JJU based on these core values. In this light, the study proposes a core-value brand positioning framework (Figure 2) for sustainable performance based on institutional core values. The core-value brand positioning framework suggests that core values should be central to an institution’s internal and external brand-building and value-creation process. This framework can serve as the scaffolding upon which institutions build their brand. Institutional core values should inform the processes of transforming inputs into heterogeneous programs and services that appeal to external stakeholders. The framework has three main components: (a) the internal brand-building process, (b) core values, and (c) external brand-building process. The internal brand-building process involves utilizing strategic internal resources efficiently and effectively to create value propositions (i.e., programs and services intended to make the institution attractive to consumers). These internal resources include brand elements such as location, brand icons, and visual identity. The internal resources are managed by internal stakeholders and serve as inputs in the value-creation process.

The foundation of the framework involves the institution’s values, along with its culture, mission, and vision. The external brand-building processes include directing and controlling the value propositions to address consumer needs and influence their perceptions. At this stage, brand reputation should be managed to ensure sustainable brand association and brand equity. The framework adds to the existing scholarship on strategies for developing brand architecture for an effective internal and external brand-building process.

Based on insights from the study’s findings and the competitive advantage literature, this study suggests using core values in the development of any brand-building process at JJU. The study revealed that core values are central to developing brand reputation. Most participants noted that during university-organized recruitment and enrollment events, such as campus tours, they endeavor to incorporate the university’s core values into every message and activity. In this light, the study proposes using core values as the central constituent of JJU’s internal and external brand-building and value-creation process. Brand and communication managers should incorporate core values into the architecture of branding processes to promote brand geniality and equity.

Figure 1

Emergent Themes

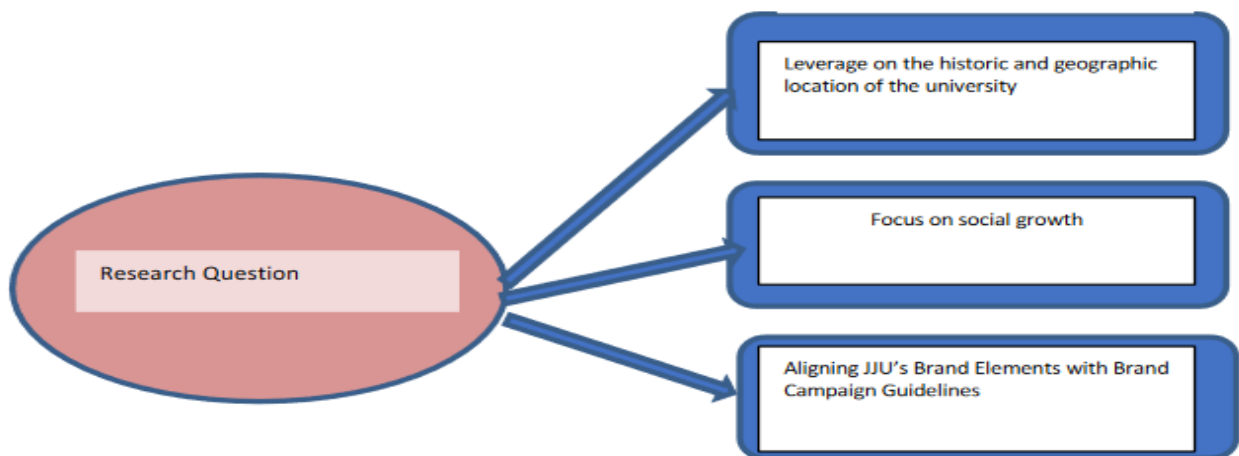
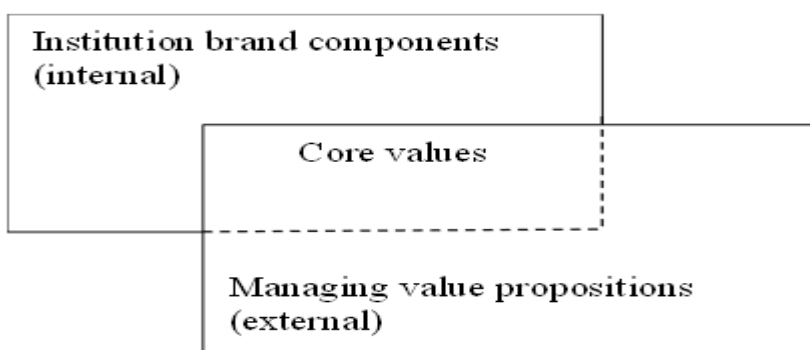


Figure 2

A Core-Value Brand Positioning Framework



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