

Students' Enrolment in Nigerian Private Universities: The Pull Effect of Corporate Image and Promotional Appeal

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Abstract

University's corporate image and promotional appeal are fundamental to students' decisions during enrolment into the private ivory towers in Nigeria. The proliferation and high-rate competition among private universities has warranted the adoption of marketing communication strategies that could capture and retain the attention of prospective students and their sponsors. The main objective of the study was to examine the influence of brand image and promotional appeal on students' enrolment decisions into Nigerian private universities. To accomplish this goal, a survey research design was adopted and 354 undergraduates from two (2) purposively selected private universities were sampled, using simple random sampling. data was collected using a structured questionnaire. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Regression, were used for the data analyses. The results show positive significant influence of university's brand image on students' enrolment at $F= 84.714$, $df= 353$, sig. at 0.000. Similarly, the finding also shows that promotional appeal influences students' enrolment at $F= 291.125$, $df = 353$, sig. at 0.000. This study contributes to the exiting knowledge in the area of brand image, promotional appeal and students' enrolment. The insights discovered from this study would help to facilitate, develop and focus on building corporate brand image that will encourage students' enrolment. This will also be useful for universities that wish to improve on the level of students' subscription into different programmes offered by the institutions.

Keywords: corporate brand image, promotional appeal, students' enrolment

Education has been described as one of the fastest growing sectors and a global service that every country, regardless of its economic status strives to provide for its citizens. The number of youth yearning for university education to acquire skills and knowledge is increasing on a daily basis. Both developed and developing countries are striving to obtain the highest levels possible when it comes to tertiary education. Evidently, the rising levels of the cost of tertiary

education and the growing numbers of prospective tertiary students has made it difficult if not impossible for governments to single-handedly provide tertiary education for their citizens (Benjamin et al., 2011). This has led to the establishment of private universities around the world.

In Nigeria, the private sector participation has brought about increase in number of educational institutions to serve the growing populace, programme quality, and general innovation in modern educational practices (Onyemaechi, 2013). The rapid growth in this sector is characterized by increased students' enrolment in both public and private universities. There are ninety-one (91) public universities and seventy-nine private universities in Nigeria, having students' enrolment figure stands at 1, 854, 261 out of which 102,500 enrolled in private universities. Specifically in Ogun state, 46,005 students enrolled in the 3 public universities in the state as at the time of the study, while 21, 347 enrolled in 11 private universities in Ogun state (NUC, 2019).

The level of student subscription to any university, particularly, private universities seems to depend largely on the image of such university. However, in the 21st century, competition among institutions of higher learning on how to attract good students from home-based and international levels is growing exponentially (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998). In the midst of this competition, universities and other higher education institutions have moved toward a business-like, competitive model of operation and embraced it as a service that could be marketed beyond national borders (Adeniji et al., 2019; Bunzel, 2007). However, universities with a unique corporate image and promotional appeal are likely going to survive the growing competition in the education sector particularly in Nigeria (Bloemer & Ruyter, 1998).

Universities, particularly private ones in Nigeria are competing with one another for enrolment of best students on their programmes but student intention to attend a university seems to depend largely on the reputation of such a university (Smaiziene & Jucevicius, 2013). The rivalry becomes very intense among the universities because they all go to the same source to attract good students from national and international platforms for possible enrolment (Weiwei, 2007). A very unique corporate image of a university makes it easier for students, parents and guardians to identify and remember the quality of service of a particular university.

Therefore, building corporate image has become more pertinent in promoting an institution's reputation which enhances students' patronage both at home-based and international levels which invariably generates additional revenue for the institution. Some universities in recent time have come up with strategic plans in various ways to attract prospective students across borders through vigorous marketing initiatives and public relations strategies in promoting their institutions and the uniqueness of the various programmes offered by the institution.

Meanwhile, universities consider principles of corporate image in assuring their position vis-à-vis their competitors. Moore (2004) admits that the

ability of the patrons to differentiate among institutions depends on recognition of the core attributes and the categories in which they operate, in addition to what makes them different from one another. However, for universities and other institutions of higher learning, the quality of teaching, research, reputation, collaborations, linkages, innovation and community impact among other factors represent their corporate image (Rosenthal, 2003). The way the university image is projected will provide an opportunity for the prospective clients to identify and distinguish it from others.

Building an excellent corporate image in universities has become a strategic tool for attracting students' patronage because it provides them with a sense of pride and belonging to an institution with a history of excellence (Gathungu & Karoki, 2010; Moore, 2004). As far as higher institutions are concerned, the decision of students and faculty members on which institution to apply depends on the reputation and image of such a university. However, the university brand, academic properties, serene academic environment, ranking position, academic programmes, public and social relations, sports facilities, well equipped library, conducive learning environment and other infrastructural facilities are determining factors in creating good impressions which will invariably influence the decision-making process of the public (Paden & Stell, 2006).

Statement of Problem

Universities in the 21st century are characterized by massive expansion, and wider participation to provide education because of public demand for university education, thus, giving room for the emergence of new universities. Evidently, public universities cannot meet up with the demand of people yearning for university education. Hence, opportunities now exist for private providers to meet the growing demand of university education and this has led to rapid expansion and proliferation of private universities around the globe in general and Nigeria in particular. However, student enrolment in the newly established private universities is still very low. For instance, two of the older generation (established within the last 15-20 years) private universities in Ogun state accounted for 70.6% of the total enrolment among the nine universities (NUC, 2019). This could be attributed to the inability of the younger generation (established in the last 10 years) universities to create awareness and to project the quality-of-service delivery obtainable in their various institutions to the target prospect. It is also important to note that appealing to potential customers that are not identified using the mass market is increasingly becoming problematic thus not achieving its aim. The reason is that, the traditional concentration on mass communication campaigns has been replaced by more direct and highly targeted promotional activities using direct marketing and other personal communication tools with the intention of reaching the smallest of all target groups and the single individual.

Moreover, the National Universities Commission demands that private universities measure up to standard before approval for operation, as a means of ensuring quality in their academic programmes. Also, despite attempts of most

private universities to reach their target prospects by use of modern infrastructures in their institutions and adoption of strategic approaches to create awareness, the problem still continues as many private universities cannot attract enough students. Statistics from the National Universities Commission (2019) revealed that 8 out of the 11 private universities in Ogun state could barely attract 3, 973 students. This accounted for 18.7% of the students' enrolment. Some Universities in a bid to have more students' enrolment extend admission to students who did not choose the university as institution of choice. All these can be attributed to lack of favourable image, reputation, identity and promotional appeal of the universities. The study therefore attempted to find out the influence of corporate image and promotional appeal on students' enrolment in Ogun state-based private universities.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses stated in a null form were tested during the course of this research:

H₀₁: University's corporate image has no significant influence on students' enrolment

H₀₂: University's promotional appeal has no significant influence on students' enrolment

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. As at the time of the study, there are 11 private universities in Ogun State. A purposive sampling technique was used to select two (02) universities based on the year of existence which is within 15 to 20 years (old generation private universities). The entire 3, 365 (200 level) students in the two universities constituted the population. The choice of this segment of the students' population was based on the realities in the universities, having surpassed the attrition syndrome after the first year. Simple random sampling technique was used to select three hundred and fifty-four (354) undergraduates which represent 10.5 percent of the population.

A structured data gathering instrument named Students' Enrolment Decision Questionnaire (SEDQ) with three sub-scales was specifically designed to accomplish the objectives of the study. Meanwhile, the sub-scales namely: Enrolment Decision Scale, (EDS, $r=.82$) Brand Image Scale (BIS, $r=.78$) and Promotional Appeal Scale (PAS, $r=.74$) consist of items regarding the constructs of the variables (Students' enrolment decision, Brand image perception and promotional appeal). The sample items include: *I know that my university is one of the best private university Nigerian; When I hear the name of this university, I immediately recall a particular academic programme; The advertisement of various courses of the university is appealing.* A four-point Likert scale (4- Strongly Agreed, 3- Agree, 2- Disagree -1, Strongly Disagree) that best describes the extent to which the respondents agreed with each item in the questionnaire was applied. In testing the internal consistency of the instrument, the questionnaire was administered on twenty (200 level) undergraduates of one of

the private universities in Ogun State that is relatively old, having 14 years of existence. A test-retest method was used within an interval of 2 weeks interval. The data was analysed with Cronbach's alpha and the resultant coefficients of .82, .78 and .74 were obtained respectively. Inferential statistics was used to analyse the hypothesis formulated. Specifically, Analysis of Variance and multiple regression were employed to determine the level of influence of brand image and promotional appeal on students' enrolment decision.

Results

The following are the results of the data analyses:

Hypothesis 1:

University's corporate image has no significant influence on Students' enrolment

Table 1:

Simple Regression Showing the Influence of University's Image on Students' Enrolment

REGRESSION Model Summary ^b	ANOVA ^a					
		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
R = .440 ^a	Regression	13.138	1	13.138	84.714	.000 ^b
R ² = .194	Residual	54.593	352	.155		
Adjusted R ² = .192	Total	67.731	353			
Std. Error = .39382						

a. Predictors: (Constant), Corporate Image

b. Dependent Variable: Students' Enrolment

The results from Table 1 reveal the extent to which the variance in the dependent variable (students' enrolment) is explained by the independent variable (Corporate image). In this case the R² is .194, if expressed by a percentage will be 19.4%. This connotes that 19% of the variance in students' enrolment can be explained by the variance in university corporate image. The adjusted R² shows that .194 that is 19.4% variability of students' enrolment while the standard error of the estimate indicates .394 which signifies error term. This means that a unit increase in university corporate image will lead to an increase in students' level of enrolment. The ANOVA shows that the F value is 84.714 at .000^b significance level. The implication is that university corporate image has a significant influence on students' enrolment; hence the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 2:

University's promotional appeal has no significant influence on students' enrolment

Table 2

Regression Showing the Influence of University's Promotional Appeal on Students' Enrolment

REGRESSION Model Summary^b	ANOVA^a					
	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
R = .673 ^a	Regression	30.660	1	30.660	291.125	.000 _b
R ² = .453	Residual	37.071	352	.105		
Adjusted R ² = .451	Total	67.731	353			
Std. Error = .32452						

a. Predictors: (Constant), Promotional Appeal

b. Dependent Variable: Students' Enrolment

The results from Table 2 reveal the extent to which the variance in the dependent variable (students' enrolment) is explained by the independent variable (promotional appeal). In this case the R² is .453, if expressed by a percentage will be 45.3%. This connotes that 45% of the variance in students' enrolment can be explained by the variance in university promotional appeal. The adjusted R² shows .451, that is, 45.14% variability of students' enrolment while the standard error of the estimate indicates .325 which signifies error term. This means that a unit increase in university promotional appeal will lead to an increase in students' level of enrolment. The ANOVA shows that the F value is 291.125 at .000 significance level. The implication is that university promotional appeal has a significant effect on students' enrolment, hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Discussion

Findings from the analysis of hypothesis one shows that a university's corporate image has significant influence on students' enrolment. The result revealed that measures of a university's corporate image are statistically significant in predicting students' enrolment. The findings of this study validate the study of Cretu and Brodie (2007) who found out that universities are likely to attract brilliant students into their schools if they have good corporate image (Beneke, 2011). Some universities in the world like Harvard University, Yale University, Cambridge University among others are leveraging in their corporate brand image. It is important to emphasise that corporate reputation and identity are some of the indices of corporate image among others. Hence, the combination of university's reputation and identity project the image of the universities favourably or otherwise. Upcoming universities are also expected to build sustainable brands that will single them out among many universities in the world. The finding also corroborates the study of Ming (2010) who posited that the ability of a university to build a strong image will be an added advantage to bring together the crops of brilliant students from all spheres of life enrolling for one programme or the other.

Studies reported that reputation as an index of corporate image attracts students and influences their decisions on which university to attend (Pasternak, 2005; Benjamin et al., 2011; Muslim, 2012). The implication is that the survival

and failure of any university in the growing competition of the educational sector depends largely on the image of the university. Furthermore, the identity index of a university's corporate image which include logo, core values, teaching facilities, unique culture, functioning websites with updated information, attractive advert on media among others are capable of attracting the attention of the target prospects. Hua (2011) affirms that a university's identity and prestige shape the decision of students to either subscribe or leave the university. It has been noted that some existing students leave universities for other universities because of the corporate reputation and identity of such universities. Meanwhile, the findings from the data analysed in the current study also validate those of some scholars that institutions of higher learning with endearing image will be able to attract, enrol and retain good students (Ming, 2010; Benjamin et al., 2011). The implication of this finding is that any university or institution of higher learning that fails to give adequate attention to the corporate image will find it difficult to attract and enrol good numbers of students.

The findings from the analysis of hypothesis two show that a university's promotional appeal has significant influence on students' enrolment. It was discovered that promotional appeal via different platforms would help in promoting a university and the various programmes it offers. The study corroborates the findings of Uchendu et al. (2015); Yuksel et al. (2014); and Wind et al. (2013). In a related development, De-Boer et al. (2009) and Hussainy et al. (2008) noted that promotional appeal is a strategic means through which universities sell the services they render to the public. The implication of this is that once the public is aware of a university and its notable achievements in the past, potential students are encouraged to enrol for one programme or the other. It is not enough for a school to be effective; it must also project a favourable image to parents and stakeholders through promotional techniques and strategies. It has been observed that adoption of promotional strategies would be an effective tool in overcoming decline in students' enrolment in institutions of higher learning, particularly private institutions.

Furthermore, Murtala et al. (2019) observed that since the target parents/sponsors in the contemporary society belong to a generation that is active on social media, there is the need for schools to stamp their presence on social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, twitter, YouTube, among other promotional techniques. Apparently, Uchendu et al. (2015) advocated for the use of social media, websites, face to face talk and media adverts as promotional techniques and communication link between schools and target markets. Also, Public Relations (PR), expos and brochures were identified as promotional tools that are geared towards image management and reputation building which have been found to be very effective and common in the promotional activities of educational institutions (Mehrdach et al., 2012).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study offers valuable framework of facts and figures that can be adopted by educationists, researchers, governments and other stakeholders in the

educational sector to understand and manage the dynamics and resultant influences of corporate image and promotional appeal on students' enrolment in private universities in Nigeria. It provides strategies that can be adopted to understand the unique dimensions of relationships and significant influence of corporate image on students' enrolment in Nigerian private universities. This is one of the few empirical research projects that gives accounts of the practical correlation between corporate image and promotional appeal, and student enrolment in private universities in the developing society. This will help the stakeholders to develop models that will help in attracting students for enrolment particularly private universities in Nigeria. Based on the foregoing the following recommendations were made:

- Since services offered by a university go a long way to create an impression – whether positive or negative – about the image of the institution and the impression determines the decision to enrol or not to enrol in such a university by prospective candidates, it is recommended that universities should work on their corporate images that will make potential students have interest in choosing them as the most preferred institutions for possible enrolment. It is also important to say that universities should come up with robust and all-encompassing multidisciplinary curricula with modern sophisticated teaching and research aids. All these will help in attracting good home-based and international students.
- Management teams of private universities should realize that corporate image is the overall perception of what an organisation stands for and that expectations of individuals are about how they benefit from the university's products and services. The university corporate image can affect its credibility and effectiveness in reaching key internal and external agenda. Management must work on some factors that positively affect a university's image which include its ability to communicate, transparency, and ability to innovate and impact the host community positively.
- Management of universities should ensure that professionalism is adhered to in a way the universities relate to the public through communication, behaviour, symbols via logos, signage, websites, product quality, staff behaviour, media comment, among others. It is also recommended that universities should publicize the outstanding achievements, broadcast their important programmes, quality of programmes, beautified school environments, sufficient modern teaching equipment, social networks and websites. This will help in reaching out to vast audiences and by so doing it will help to facilitate students' decision to enrol for any programme of their choice.

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