

Marketing Strategy and Brand Awareness of Selected Private Universities in South-South Nigeria: A Digitalization Perspective

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Abstract

Higher brand awareness and a wider pool of potential students are typically displayed by universities with robust online presences, interesting content, and focused advertising strategies. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the digitalization of marketing strategies affected the brand awareness of a few private universities in south-south Nigeria. Four research hypotheses were put to the test. The study was driven by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). A cross-sectional online survey design was used. The study's participants were nineteen (19) private universities that were authorized by the NUC. Using Cochran's formula, a sample size of 384 respondents were selected from an unlimited population. The research tool was a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale. For data analysis, the multiple regression analytical tool was used with the help of SPSS version 23. According to the study, private universities' brand awareness is positively impacted by the four aspects of digital marketing strategy that were taken into account. Therefore, in order to reach a larger audience of potential students, we suggested, among other things, that universities give priority to digital marketing tactics like social media marketing, search engine optimization, and content marketing.

Keywords: marketing strategy, brand awareness, private universities, digitalization

INTRODUCTION

Private universities are one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors of tertiary education in Nigeria, and their establishment is on the rise due to the country's growing need for high-quality education and a desire for alternative teaching methods. Effective marketing techniques are essential in this changing climate if these institutions are to draw in eligible students, establish a solid reputation for their brands, and maintain long-term viability. The concept of marketing strategy is fundamental to the practice of marketing and is the conceptual

basis of the field of strategic marketing. Additionally, it is where a lot of the most urgent issues that CEOs and marketers are currently facing, like the idea of branding, come up (Morgan, et al, 2019). One of the most crucial elements affecting a product's commercial success or failure is its branding, which may also greatly affect how the public views the business that owns the brand. According to Kathuria et al. (2010), brand loyalty is a representation of both the firm and its brand. The level of consumer knowledge with a brand's existence and accessibility is known as brand awareness. It is quantified as the proportion of a niche market with prior brand awareness.

Both brand recall and brand recognition are components of brand awareness. While brand recall is the ability of a customer to retrieve a brand from his memory when given the product class/category, needs satisfied by that category, or buying scenario as a signal, brand awareness is the first step in learning about a brand (Barreda et al., 2016). This leads to brand appreciation, which is the ability of a customer to recognize prior knowledge of the brand when they are asked about it or shown that specific brand. Consumer awareness affects preferences and is necessary for brand recognition and recall (Sanjaigandhi, 2024). In the modern environment, trust and brand image are crucial for improving education marketing (Rahman et al., 2020). Consumer interest in purchasing a brand is influenced by its image, which builds credibility and reputation (Tariq et al., 2017). In this instance, clients—actual or prospective students—will select the private universities they are considering over ones that are less familiar to them.

In this instance, clients—actual or prospective students—will select the private universities they are considering over ones that are less familiar to them. According to Chandra et al. (2024), social media material introduces and reminds people of the brand and occasionally influences their brand awareness. According to research, social media consumer communication has increased more than ever before, making brands more dynamic, receptive to dialogue, and able to assist customers in promoting interaction (Godey et al., 2016). Research by Dabbous et al. (2020) indicates that interactions between brands and social media users positively influence brand awareness. Social media facilitates brand interactivity (Al-Htibat et al., 2019; Prasad et al., 2019). In other words, the motivational factor of this study is to bridge the existing Lagoon between organization's marketing strategy and professionalism in private higher institutions of learning. The purpose of this study is to examine the marketing tactics used by a few private institutions in South-South Nigeria and evaluate how they affect potential students' brand awareness. The South-South region offers a sizable market for institutions of higher learning because of its diversified population and expanding economy. Gaining knowledge of these universities' marketing strategies will help better understand their competitive tactics, obstacles, and chances for drawing in and keeping students. Therefore, how much does marketing strategy impact brand awareness for particular private universities in south-south Nigeria?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study was directed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which was put forth by Icek Ajzen in 1985. According to Ajzen and Martin Fishbein, the Theory of Reasoned Action

(TRA) was expanded to incorporate perceived behavioral control as a significant driver of intention and conduct. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is a psychological theory that links beliefs to behaviour. The theory maintains that three core components, namely, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, together shape an individual's behavioral intentions. In turn, a tenet of TPB is that, behavioral intention is the most proximal determinant of human social behavior. However, a careful application of marketing strategy in private higher institutions of learning may result to positive attitudinal change, brand equity, and subjective norms.

Concept of Marketing Strategy

A marketing strategy is the overall plan that directs a company's efforts to draw in customers and accomplish its marketing goals. It is the blueprint for how a company will position itself in the market, reach its target audience, and set itself apart from competitors (Ebitu, 2015). A marketing strategy can help a business succeed (Varadarajan 2010). A marketing strategy is a long-term vision that outlines a company's value proposition to its customers. Rather than detailing the specific actions needed in advertising campaigns, marketing strategies serve as a compass to guide marketing efforts (Katsikeas et al. 2016; Morgan 2012). This marketing concept is an outline of how a business or organization will communicate its value proposition to its customers (Varadarajan 2010). Typically, a marketing strategy outlines business goals, target market, buyer personas, competitors, and value for customers. It offers a long-term perspective for all marketing initiatives, frequently spanning many years. CoSchedule polled 3,599 bloggers and marketers in 2022 to find out what their best marketing strategies were. They discovered that the likelihood of marketers reporting success was 331 percent higher for those who recorded their marketing approach. Additionally, it was shown that the best organized marketers had a staggering 674 percent higher success rate.

Overview of Brand Awareness

According to Büyükdağ, (2021) Brand awareness is the first step to obtaining information about the brand. By claiming that brand knowledge is distinguished by two dimensions—brand awareness and brand image—Keller and Keller (2008) also refers to brand awareness as a crucial part of brand equity. A crucial part of brand equity is examining the parallels between these two conceptualizations: brand awareness (defined as consumers' capacity to remember and identify brands as belonging to a specific product category under various circumstances) and the degree of a brand's recognition in the consumer's mind (Aaker, 2010). Brand familiarity, which is brought about by frequent exposure to a brand, may be the cause of brand awareness.

Keller and Keller (2008) asserts that increased exposure to a brand may result in increased brand familiarity and awareness, and Crommelin et al. (2014) add that “anything that causes the consumer to notice and pay attention to the brand can increase brand awareness.” A number of marketing communication activities may be successful in raising brand familiarity and awareness levels by incorporating the brand identities into advertising campaigns, promotion vehicles, and various sponsorships. These brand identities include names, terms, signs, symbols, designs, or combinations of these, as well as logos, slogans, and other trademarks.

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Kohli et al. (2007) also mention names, logos, and slogans as three crucial elements of a brand's identity. By describing the brand and encapsulating its meaning, slogans—also known as brand signatures—can provide a distinctive and important contribution to a company's identity (Kohli, 2013). In addition to defining a brand's identity and supporting its positioning, effective slogans aim to raise brand awareness and fortify the brand attitude (Hodges et al., 2016). Consequently, the components of brand equity may be impacted by the marketing initiatives of the communication mix (Aaker, 2010).

Digital marketing strategy and brand awareness

The Internet is becoming a more congested place where hundreds of thousands of businesses are vying for users' attention (Dreze et al., 2004). Some of these businesses, like Yahoo! and Amazon, are well-known worldwide, while others are less well-known. All of these businesses want to strengthen their position, regardless of how active they are online, especially now that managers are being forced to defend their online behavior. to assist managers in evaluating their online presence and provide them with a means of evaluating their standing in relation to their rivals. The newest trend is digitalization. Physical archives are being converted to digital format by small enterprises, organizations, educational institutions, and even entire nations. Nevertheless, in the modern era, people's pastimes are becoming increasingly digital. Private higher education institutions must also adjust their techniques, from their administrative structures to their advertising strategies, in a world that is continuously changing, particularly in terms of digitalization. Private institutions must figure out the best way to connect with potential students in this sea of academic possibilities. Connecting with your customers at the perfect moment and location has always been the goal of marketing. Private universities must engage with potential students where they spend the majority of their time, as nearly all young people are now online. According to a 2016 Eurostat study on internet usage in Europe, 91% of young people (ages 16 to 29) use the internet daily, and based on past trends, this percentage appears to be rising annually. As a result, young people are becoming more accustomed to using the internet as their main research tool, exploring their academic options and looking at all the vital factors that will help them choose which university they want to attend, such as location, study programs, student life, career opportunities, and more. In order to ensure that students are finding their institution online, universities must therefore step up their efforts to reach this population on social media by maintaining a strong online presence (Bituleanu et al., 2021).

Online visibility: A modern, user-friendly website serves as the central hub for online information and interactions (Jankowski, et al, 2016). It should showcase the university's unique selling propositions (USPs), academic programs, campus life, and student testimonials. Also, engaging on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok allows universities to connect with prospective students, share news and updates, run targeted ads, and participate in relevant online discussions (Singhal, et al, 2022).

Content marketing: Publishing informative articles on relevant topics, such as academic trends, career advice, and student life, positions the university as a thought leader and attracts potential students. Offering interactive virtual tours of the campus and facilities provides

prospective students with an immersive experience and allows them to explore the university from the comfort of their homes. Sharing stories of successful alumni and current students can inspire prospective students and build trust in the university's brand (Yang et al, 2019).

Online advertising: Optimizing the university website and content for relevant keywords helps prospective students find the university when searching for higher education options online. Running targeted ads on search engines and social media platforms can reach specific demographics and drive traffic to the university website. Placing banner ads on relevant websites and blogs can increase brand visibility and reach a wider audience (Farooqi, et al, 2018).

Online application: Streamlining the application process through online portals enhances the user experience and makes it easier for prospective students to apply. Hosting virtual events allows prospective students to interact with faculty, staff, and current students, providing valuable information and building relationships (Lu, et al 2005, Zhang, et al, (2004).

Table 1: Review of Empirical Studies

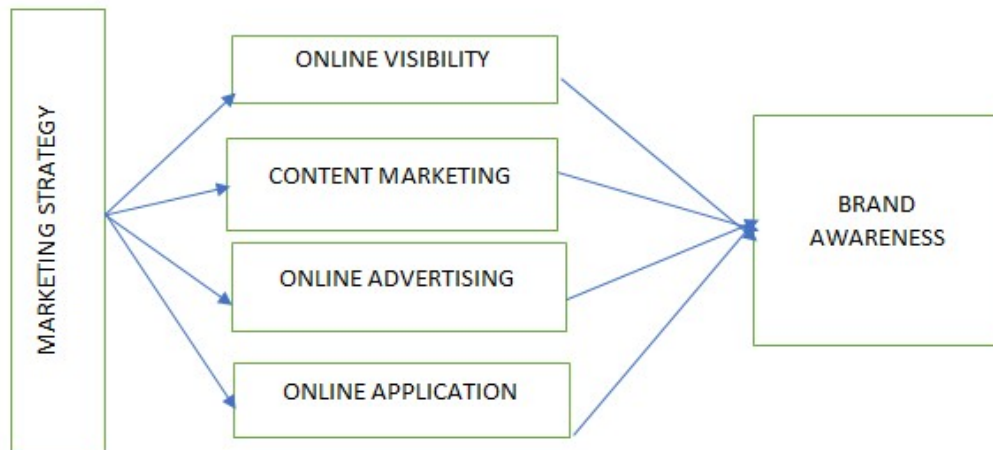
Name/year	Title	Findings
Anawade, et al, (2022)	“The Influence of Marketing Strategy on Business Results: An Empirical Study for Selected Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of Nashik Municipal Corporation (NMC)”	“The disclosures expose that the independent components (i.e., thing, progression, region, worth, packaging, and later arrangements organization) were immense joint signs of business execution to the extent usefulness, slice of the pie, benefit from adventure, and improvement. (F(6) = 14.040; R2=0.465; P.05). The independent elements explained 46.5% of the adjustment of business execution when taken together. Following that, SMEs directors were urged to make wonderful things, charge genuine rates, position their things suitably, utilize connecting with packaging, take part in later arrangements backing, and give other express functional

Name/year	Title	Findings
		benefits to buyers”.
Singhal, et al, (2022)	“An empirical study of marketing and strategy problems in social media and digital marketing”	“The need for digital marketing is observed for better customer engagement and market position to stand out. As per Mondal (2019) from the current research data analysis, it has been detected that engaging post is useful. To grab the attention of customers and keep them involved in the business has been identified”.
Inameti, et al, (2024)	“Marketing-Entrepreneurship: The Potency to consumers perception on transportation establishments in cross river state, Nigeria”.	“The findings revealed that, market research and innovation have a significant effect on consumers perception of transportation establishments”.
Jankowski, et al, (2016)	“A picture is worth a thousand words: an empirical study on the influence of content visibility on diffusion processes within a virtual world”	“The results show that prior visibility of distributed content is the strongest predictor of content adoption and its further spread across networks. Among other analyzed factors, the mechanics of diffusion, content quality, and content adoption by users’ neighbours on the social activity layer had very strong influences on the adoption of new content”.

Conceptual model of the study

Source: Researchers’ Desk, 2024

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the study



The above conceptual model explained the dimensions of marketing strategy and brand awareness as a measure in digitalization perspective. This study focused on four dimensions of digital marketing strategy of private universities which include: online visibility, content marketing, online advertising, and online application that generate brand awareness among the publics.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted online cross-sectional survey design for collection of data. The population of the study comprised nineteen (19) NUC accredited private universities in south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Sample size was drawn from infinite population through Cochran's formula. Thus:

$$n = (Z^2 * \delta^2) / e^2$$

n= sample size (?)

z= z-score (1.96)

δ= population standard deviation (50)

e= error term (5)

$$n = 1.96^2 * 50^2 / 5^2$$

$$n = 3.8416 * 2500 / 25$$

$$n = 9604 / 25$$

$$n = 384.16$$

$$n = 384$$

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Students and non-students were given a standardized questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale. Demographic data, perception marketing strategy elements, and brand recognition metrics for private institutions in Nigeria's south-south geopolitical zone were all addressed in the survey. To validate the survey instrument, the study used the content validation approach. To make sure the statements aligned with the goals of the study, copies of the questionnaire were distributed to professionals in the fields of entrepreneurship and marketing. The Cronbach Alpha technique was used to assess the instrument's dependability. Thirty entrepreneurs participated in a pilot poll. Software called SPSS version 23 was used to calculate the data and provide the standardized coefficient and alpha. Table 2's findings showed that the research tool was dependable for the study because it was consistent. Multiple regression was used to statistically test the study's presented hypotheses using the following model in order to provide findings:

$$Y = a + \beta_1\text{ONLINEVIS} + \beta_2\text{CONTMKTING} + \beta_3\text{ONLINEADV} + \beta_4\text{ONLINEAPP} + e$$

Where:

Y = Dependent variable (Brand Awareness)

a = the intercept

$\beta_1\text{ONLINEVIS}$ = Coefficients of online visibility

$\beta_2\text{CONTMKTING}$ = Coefficients of content marketing

$\beta_3\text{ONLINEADV}$ = Coefficients of online advertising

$\beta_4\text{ONLINEAPP}$ = Coefficients of online application

e = Error Margin (5%)

TABLE 2: Cronbach's coefficient Alpha reliability estimate for the study instrument (n=30)

S/n	Variables	No of items	X	SD	Reliability
1	Online visibility	3	10.46	3.324	0.764
2	Content marketing	3	10.37	3.641	0.865
3	Online advertising	3	10.86	3.834	0.855
4	Online application	3	10.84	3.106	0.883
5	Brand Awareness	3	10.81	3.843	0.874

Source: SPSS OUTPUT, 2024

ESTIMATION OF RESULTS

We drawn 384 copies of completed questionnaire distributed online, out of which 367 representing 95.57 percent were considered appropriate while seventeen copies representing 4.43 percent were canceled.

Hypothesis one

Ho: Online visibility has no significant influence on brand awareness of private universities

Hypothesis two

Ho: Content marketing has no significant influence on brand awareness of private universities

Hypothesis three

Ho: Online advertising has no significant influence on brand awareness of private universities

Hypothesis four

Ho: Online application has no significant influence on brand awareness of private universities

Decision rule: Accept the alternative hypothesis if ($P > .05$) and reject the null hypothesis, if otherwise.

Table 5: Model Summary of the influence of marketing strategy on brand awareness

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.420 ^a	.176	.167	2.478

a. Predictors: (Constant), online visibility, content marketing, online advertising, online application

Source: Authors' analysis via SPSS, 2024

Table 6: ANOVA of the influence of marketing strategy on brand awareness

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	482.807	4	120.702	19.652	.000 ^b
	Residual	2260.260	362	6.142		
	Total	2743.067	366			

a. Dependent Variable: brand awareness

b. Predictors: (Constant), online visibility, content marketing, online advertising, online application

Source: Authors' analysis via SPSS, 2024

Table 7: showing Coefficients^a of the influence of marketing strategy on brand awareness

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	19.999	1.757		11.383	.000
Online visibility	-.340	.067	.385	-5.936	.000
Content marketing	.257	.064	.284	-3.557	.000
Online advertising	-.251	.093	.428	-2.497	.000
Online application	.262	.073	.199	3.742	.000

a. Dependent Variable: brand awareness

Source: Authors' analysis via SPSS, 2024

Tables 5, 6, and 7 displayed the results of the multiple regression analysis carried out on the influence between marketing strategy on brand awareness of private universities. The model summary depicted in table 5 shows a strong influence of marketing strategy on brand awareness, with a value of 42 percent. The R² value of 0.176 signifies that nearly 17.6 percent of the variance in brand awareness can be anticipated based on the marketing strategy. The statistical results in Table 6, reveals by the F-test (19.652, P< .05), demonstrates that, the independent variable effectively predicts changes in the dependent variable. This confirms that, marketing strategy significantly affects brand awareness of private university. Table 7 shows that, all the dimensions tested (online visibility, content marketing, online advertising, online application) exhibit significant predictive power for brand awareness of private universities [online visibility (t = -5.936; p-value = .000 < .05), content marketing (t= -3.557, p-value = .000< .05), online advertising (t = -2.497, p-value = .013 < .05), online application (t = 3.742, p-value = .000 < .05). Hence, the regression results are summarized thus:

1. Online visibility has significant influence on brand awareness of private universities
2. Content marketing has significant influence on brand awareness of private universities
3. Online advertising has significant influence on brand awareness of private universities.
4. Online application has significant influence on brand awareness of private universities

Discussion of Findings

The outcome of analyzing hypothesis One revealed that, the online visibility significantly predict positive brand awareness of private universities. This finding is consistent with the finding of Jankowski, et al, (2016) which revealed that, prior visibility of distributed content is the strongest predictor of content adoption and its further spread across networks. The second outcome stemming from hypothesis two shoes that, content marketing significantly affects brand awareness of private university. The result is in consonant with Yang et al, (2019) which shows that, knowledge, interest and emotional short video content play an important role in driving consumers' purchase intention. Consumers' product involvement plays a part of regulating role, while brand identity plays a part of intermediary role in the whole process. Also, Julaeha (2024) and Efeairoro, et al, (2024) reveal that, content marketing emphasizes the

importance of consumer engagement, perceived value, and two-way communication in fostering brand loyalty. The third hypothesis revealed that online advertising significantly affect brand awareness of private university. The finding align with Farooqi, et al, (2018) which shows that, The outcome shows a positive impact of advertising on consumer's mind. The fourth hypothesis shows that, has positive and significant effect on brand awareness. This results opposed Lu, et al (2005) which stipulated that, perceived risk indirectly impacts intentions to use an online application under security threats. Also, Zhang, et al, (2004). findings support the importance of service in an online shopping environment. Service affects not only customer loyalty, but also perceived usefulness of online shopping.

Policy/Managerial Implications

This study's findings have significant implications for policymakers and university administrators in Nigeria:

- **Digital Literacy and Infrastructure:** Policymakers should prioritize initiatives that enhance digital literacy among students and faculty, ensuring equitable access to technology and reliable internet connectivity. This could involve investments in digital infrastructure, teacher training programs, and affordable internet access schemes.
- **Quality Assurance in Online Education:** As online education gains prominence, policymakers should establish clear quality assurance frameworks to ensure the quality and integrity of online programs offered by private universities. This could involve accreditation processes, quality benchmarks, and regular reviews.
- **Digital Transformation:** University administrators should prioritize the digital transformation of their institutions, investing in modern technologies, upgrading infrastructure, and developing digital skills among staff.
- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Leveraging data analytics to understand student behavior, track marketing campaign effectiveness, and make informed decisions regarding resource allocation and program development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explores the complex relationship between brand awareness and digital marketing tactics in the context of a few private universities in South-South Nigeria. According to our research, these organizations use a wide variety of digital marketing strategies, including more recent ones like digital advertising and social media marketing. The report underlines the important significance of effective digital marketing techniques in molding brand perception and boosting student registration. Higher brand awareness and a wider pool of potential students are typically displayed by universities with robust online presences, interesting content, and focused advertising strategies. The report also emphasizes how crucial clear brand identification and consistent messaging are to creating favorable brand connections and increasing student loyalty. The study's conclusions provide insightful information for university administrators and lawmakers alike. These insights can be used by policymakers to create laws that support the use of creative marketing techniques in the higher education industry. These

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results can be used by university administrators to improve their marketing strategies, raise brand awareness, and eventually meet their enrollment and institutional objectives. We acknowledge all the respondents who found time to response on the study's survey instrument.

We made the following suggestions in light of the study's findings:

- To reach a larger audience of potential students, universities should give priority to digital marketing techniques including content marketing, social media marketing, and search engine optimization.
- Attracting and retaining potential students requires a well-designed and educational university website.

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