



INFLUENCE OF ORGANISATIONAL IMAGE ON STUDENTS' CHOICES AND DECISIONS TO ENROL IN UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study aimed to ascertain the influence of organisational image on students' choices and decisions in enrolment into federal, state and private universities in the south-west Nigeria. *The study used quantitative research method.* The population of the study comprised all universities in the south-west Nigeria. Eighteen universities which constituted the sample size were purposively selected on account of reputation and influence. Using Cochran's (1977) formula for categorical data and the second consequence, a total of 535 respondents were selected for the study and they were chosen through multistage sampling, which included purposive, cluster, stratified, systematic, random. Data were collected through copies of questionnaire. *Descriptive data were analysed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (Chi-Square test of significance) and statistical programme for social sciences (SPSS).* The results indicated that both tangible and intangible aspects of organizational image influence students' choices and decisions in enrolment into universities in south-west Nigeria though in their varying degrees. The findings revealed that the level of awareness among students was low, with 26.5% of respondents, and in contrast; the level of knowledge about organisational image among students was high, with 81.7% of respondents, who were familiar with the image/reputation of their university; among the elements of organisational image identified, quality of education, academic reputation and institutional prestige were prized high among students; and feedbacks, past/current students were part of valuable communication strategy in enhancing students' enrolment. The study, thus, recommended that universities should engage and direct their marketing and promotional materials to target audience like secondary schools and their students; leverage on and maintain their organisational image as strategy; focus more and improve on quality of education, academic reputation and prestige among other images that influence students' choices; and be active on the various channels of communication (like social media, newsletter emailing etc.) and focus on clear and honest communication that accurately represents their strengths.

Keywords: Organisational image, Student enrolment, university reputation, choices, South-West

Introduction

The process of decision-making on which university to enrol is one significant moment, which has never been a simple exercise making an informed and right decision in order to access university education. Since the prospective students may not be able to experience satisfaction of choice programme(s) before choosing and deciding to enrol, they must rely on organisational image. Organisational image becomes essential for even both the university and students while it fosters university reputation, it helps students' choices and decisions to enrol. For according to Gurhan-Canli & Batra (2004), many of today's consumers consider the image of organisations in making their purchase. Thus, it is necessary for universities in competitive market to know and take advantage of organisational image and improve on their reputation (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2015; Panda, Pandey, Bennett & Tian, 2019) as the universities' growth, relevance and sustainability are largely attached to their image before the prospective students.

The decision to enrol in a particular university is influenced by a multitude of factors, among which is the organisational/institution's image and reputation standing as a primary determinant. This research acknowledges that educational institutions may have their different standards, which may



indicate why some institutions are more successful or advantageous in their areas of strength or concentration. Over the years, these institutions may adopt and redefine strategies to bolster their image and allure to prospective students. This may be among some of the varied reasons why prospective students decide to choose specific institution, which they believe can help them develop, grow and gain appropriate knowledge and achieve their dreams. Therefore, there is a compelling need to examine how the image of these universities shapes the decisions made by students when selecting university.

Statement of the Problem

The students' practical awareness level about the organisational image and university reputation is limited and they are not adequately helped by awareness campaign by universities, especially the government universities, in making an informed decision. More so, with proliferation of universities in the country and South-West accounting for 69 universities, it becomes brain-draining for prospective students and getting confused of which university is best suitable for their career and dreams.

What is organisational image and university reputation without communication. On one hand, government universities tend to be complacent in communicating their image and reputation to prospective students in effort for them to choose their university and enrol. Owing to the general idea that students will always come, and in fact, students are too many to handle. They still need to communicate their image assets. On the other hand, the private universities tend to focus and invest so much on promoting their image in recruiting undergraduates compared to postgraduates. These being the case, this study investigated how universities' organizational image helps prospective students' enrolment choices and decisions.

Objectives of the Study

The study examines the influence of organisational image on students' choices and decisions to enrol in federal, state and private universities in the South-West Nigeria by identifying the elements of universities' image. It further explored the awareness and knowledge levels of students about their respective universities, and identified suitable communication strategies that enhance university image and students' choices and decisions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study;

1. What is the awareness level of students about organisational image informing their choices and decisions to enrol in universities in south-west Nigeria?
2. What is the knowledge level of students about organisational image informing their choices and decisions?
3. What are the elements of organisational image that influence students' choices and decisions?
4. What are communication strategies that can enhance university image and students' choices and decisions?

Hypotheses

1. H₀ 1: Students' awareness and knowledge about organizational image have no significant influence on their choices and decisions to enrol.
2. H₀ 2: University's organizational image has no significant influence on students' choice and decision to enrol.



Conceptual Review

Organizational image, in the context of education, is what such institution has and projects to its publics, which includes elements like academic calibre, campus atmosphere, faculty repute, amenities, social responsibility, and institutional prestige (Ismail, 2012). reputation could be seen as the general opinion or impression that stakeholders have of an institution based on its tangible and intangible elements. Organisational image and organisational reputation are concepts that are related, for instance, image being a key antecedent to reputation (Melewar, 2003; Panda et al., 2019) while some scholars use them interchangeably (Chun, 2005; Carroll, 2013) even when they are distinct as Melewar (2003) would opine that reputation has to do with stakeholders and has to be developed over time through consistent images and experiences while images can be created relatively through communication. From the lens of Carroll (2013), one can see the interchangeability of image and reputation underlined by communication as it plays a fundamental role in the conceptualizing, messaging, and interpretation of corporate reputation, which is broadly designed as a widely circulated, oft - repeated message of minimal variation about an organization revealing something about the organization's nature.

Be that as it may, image and reputation can be seen differently as image resides in the view of the organisation (university) and reputation resides in the corridor of the customers (students). Image can deal with no experience whereas reputation has experience as a foundation, image could be quick and instant but reputation is built over a period of time, reputation is more durable than image, image is a mental interpretation while reputation is behavioural, image may be good for immediate and short-term decisions while reputation is useful for long-term decisions such as choosing which university to study ((Bennett & Gabriel, 2003; Fillis, 2003; Melewar, 2003; Chun, 2005). Just as Nguyen & LeBlanc (2001b) put it succinctly that the university brand image is the portrait made in the mind of the stakeholders while reputation is the degree of trust/distrust in the university's ability to meet stakeholder's expectation.

An organisation can possess one without the other, that is, may have a good image and not possess positive reputation - what the organisation projects is not the reality or do not meet expectation. This study adds its voice in "crusading" for true image and reputation of organisations, especially universities. This is very important because once the student reconciles his/her own expectations about the university (i.e. the university brand image) with that of others' (i.e. reputation), he/she is able to arrive at a certain level of certainty that helps her make an informed decision about the enrolment issue (Panda et al., 2019). Thus, this study understands and argues that image and reputation should be lived as same.

Students' Choices and Decisions

Students undergo the process of decision-making, about which university to attend and what course to study. "Choices", in the sense that such student has plethora of options to choose from and "Decisions", because they decide on these choices made that they may enrol. In another case, decision may entail changing to another preferred university or course after spending one or two years in the present university or course of study when expectations are not met.

Effort to determine a particular foundation of the choices made and its impact can be difficult as prospective students are bundles of experiences and cultivation of beliefs. These experiences and beliefs could be cultural, social, psychological and organisational factors (Rika, Roze, & Sennikova, 2016). According to Henriques, Matos, Jerónimo, Mosquera, da Silva, & Bacalhau (2018), based on Chapman's (1981) longitudinal model of choice, the factors that form foundation to choices and decision-making can be classified into two, namely: institutional and personal. Institutional factors, basically, include all what the university can offer, the various characteristics of the institution, in other words, organisational image. Then, the personal factors are put into consideration like the students' thought pattern, influence from close associates, socio-economic background and so on. Diamond, Vorley, Roberts & Jones (2012) explained the dynamics of students' choices from the



perspective of behavioural economics, built on the concept of utility, that students fundamentally choose universities as they weigh up the costs and benefits. It is evident, therefore, that choices and decisions about which university to enrol are largely dependent on organisational image.

Elements of University Image/reputation Influencing Students' Enrolment

The study acknowledges that university image/reputation influences students' choices and decision to enrol in any type of university. Though, the process by which students choose their university and finally decide to enrol may be complicated as it is impacted by several variables. When choosing a university, some researches indicate that students consider several aspects of image/reputation (Duarte, Alves and Raposo, 2010; Ramsaran-Fowdar & Fowdar, 2013; Aghaza, Hashemia, and Atashgaha, 2015; Mora, 2015). This study conceptualises university image/reputation, both tangible and intangible, to include seven elements - academic reputation and quality of education, institutional prestige and ranking, affordability and financial considerations, location and accessibility, facilities and infrastructure, campus culture and diversity, and alumni network and career opportunities.

Academic Reputation and Quality of Education

In the Nigerian higher educational system, academic reputation and perceived quality of education are taken as the foundation upon which every other elements of reputation may be built, for the primary service of a university is education. This pursuit is woven unto the very fabric of the importance of the existence of universities and they could be major elements influencing students' choices of school and decisions to enrol in such university. Ajayi & Ukpabi (2019) stated that prospective students consider various criteria, including programme offerings, faculty expertise, research output, and accreditation status. Students looking for a demanding and respectable education are more likely to be drawn to universities with a solid academic reputation and top-notch curricula.

Institutional Prestige and Ranking

Students' opinions and choices about attending university can also be influenced by institutional prestige and ranking. In a study published in 2016, Ndaghu & Adeyemo emphasised the critical impact institutional image plays in influencing students' decisions on which Nigerian universities to attend. According to the data, prospective students tend to favour universities with a solid reputation and historical heritage, such as Obafemi Awolowo University and the University of Ibadan, because of their perceived prestige and importance in research.

Affordability and Financial Considerations

Students' choices and decisions to enrol in Nigerian universities are often heavily influenced by their financial situation, which reflects the socio-economic makeup of the nation. Odeleye & Adedoyin (2016) highlighted the importance of the financial difficulties that many students and their families experience, emphasising affordability as a crucial consideration when choosing a university. Given Nigeria's economic circumstances presently, tuition costs could frequently be among the major factors for potential students. It is a general knowledge that these different universities, that is, federal, state and private universities run on different scale of tuition, which tend to be high, higher, highest respectively. Probably, this may account for the reasons why lots of potential students choose to enrol in the government universities.

Location and Accessibility

One important element that takes into account a variety of socio-economic and pragmatic factors is the impact of location and accessibility on students' enrolment choices and decisions in Nigerian universities. According to Aluede, Imhonde & Omoregie (2012), students' preferences for specific universities are influenced by factors such as safety concerns, ease of access to home, and transportation options. This implies that students' university selection process can heavily be influenced by location considerations.



Facilities and Infrastructure

The opinions and overall experiences of students in Nigerian universities may be greatly influenced by the availability of contemporary facilities and infrastructure as they are necessary for conducive learning. Ndaghu & Adeyemo (2016) emphasised the significance of amenities like laboratories, libraries, classrooms, and recreational spaces in influencing how well students perceive their universities. Modern facilities are a sign of a university's dedication to giving students a comfortable learning environment and improving their entire academic experience.

Campus Culture and Diversity

Campus culture and diversity may have been identified as huge influences also on students' choices and decisions to enrol in Nigerian universities because they enhance the overall educational experience and sense of community. Aluede et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of inclusion, tolerance, and cultural variety in drawing students to higher education. Universities in Nigeria that actively uphold these principles are more likely to draw in students looking to be exposed to a range of viewpoints and experiences.

Alumni Network and Career Opportunities

One important factor is the view of career opportunities and possibilities after graduation, which can be influenced by alumni networks and job development chances. Various socio-economic factors have affected the labour market that jobs are lost, work experiences are required and fresh graduates are given little or no chance of expertise. According to National Bureau of Statistics, giving report of Nigeria Labour Force Survey Q2 2023, states that the unemployment rate among youth aged (15-24 years) in Q2 2023 was 7.2% having been at 6.9% in Q1 2023. This is the age bracket many young enter into university and graduate. Ajayi & Ukpabi (2019) emphasised the value of collaborations with industry stakeholders and a robust alumni network in expanding students' access to networking, internship, and job placement possibilities.

Empirical Review

Akintola, O., Abosede, S., and Itiola, M., (2021) conducted the study, noting that university's corporate image and marketing are pivotal to create influence in the choice of university, private university in particular. With the emergence of many private universities, there is need for scouting for prospective students and make efforts to win them over by way of marketing communication strategies.

A study on the relationship between corporate image and student enrolment in universities in Nigeria by Ajilore & Suleiman (2020) established the relationship between the two variables as well as the predictability of student enrolment from organizational identity. They examined corporate image on students' enrolment in selected 18 Nigerian universities, noting that students' enrolment into universities in Nigeria required the projection of distinct corporate identity and strong corporate image as to become academic centres of excellence, to attract students and increase their enrolment figures.

Por, N., Say, C., & Mov, S. (2024) had the study that assessed the factors influencing students' decision-making when choosing a university. Within the work, eight factors like parental or guardian influence, high school teacher recommendations, graduate quality, colleague recommendations, location, school fees, learning environment, and university reputation were proposed and found out that all of them have influence on students' university choices in their degrees.

Sarkindaji, B. (2019) made a research, which underscored that institutional image is a very critical concept that nations globally are benchmarking and capitalising on as a strategy to ameliorate the alarming increase in competition for students' admission and dependency amongst institutions at varying levels. This is based on the fact of the study that academic reputation and campus appearance are reputable image model constructs that have significant positive influence on students' admission.



Adefulu, A., Farinloye. T. & Mogaji, E. (2020) studied factors influencing Postgraduate students' university choice in Nigeria as they recognised that the rapid expansion of the enrolment of undergraduates has also stimulated students' enthusiasm for postgraduate studies and it was fundamental that even for postgraduate students, university reputation continues to influence their choice and decision

Fakhrudin, A., Fatmawati, I. & Qamari, I. (2024) systematically reviewed some earlier studies that had theoretical test on relationships between university image, university performance, and university choice. In their review, they corroborated the earlier literature of university image having influence on students enrolment choice.

Available literatures suggest gaps in knowledge as not so much has been done on the influence of organisational image on students' enrolment choices and decisions as it comes to federal, state and private universities in the South-west Nigeria in one study; the majority of the literatures examine foreign universities and when it is of the country, it is outside the south-western region. Thus, this research significantly makes valuable addition to existing knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

This study is founded on the theoretical frameworks of signalling and social identity theory. Signalling theory was propounded by Spence (1973) in his work titled, Job Market Signalling. Basically, signalling explains how individuals and groups communicate information to influence how the other party act. So, there is the Signaler (the sender - person, institution etc.), the signal (information), the Signalee (the receiver - observes, interprets the signal and chooses), and then, the feedback (enrolment) because a behaviour is intended.

The process of decision-making is greatly affected by the information at hand. And where there is information asymmetry, for instance, between the university and potential student, signalling communicates two types of information - information about quality and intent (Stiglitz, 2000). For Spence, quality is the unobservable ability of the individual, and the notion of quality shares some characteristics with terms such as (image/) reputation (Kreps & Wilson, 1982). Universities utilise organisational image/reputation as information about quality to prospective students because they are not fully aware of the school's qualities and for the intention that they may enrol and be admitted. Organizational image functions as a signalling mechanism, in the context of university enrolment, conveys to potential students the institution's image and offer.

Social identity theory (SIT) was formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979. The basic assumption or premise is that people have the innate psychological need to belong to a group. Thus, they explained SIT as people's sense of self largely shaped by the social organizations they belong to, and for our study, like universities. Vinney (2024) explained further that the theory aimed to illuminate both the cognitive processes that lead people to define their group memberships and the motivational processes that enable people to maintain positive social identity by favourably comparing their social group to other groups.

When talking about processes, Tajfel & Turner (1979) identified three processes one goes through in classifications of in-group and out-group. In-group is the group one belongs while out-group is the group adversely in conflict with. The processes are social categorisation - the process of organising people into their social group, for instance, (federal) university enrollee; social identification - is the process of identifying as a group member and behaving as such, for instance, University of Lagos (Unilag) alumni; social comparison - is the process by which people compare themselves with others in terms of the (university's) image and reputation, for instance, federal university graduate to private university graduate. One could see how students' identification with the institution and likelihood of enrolling are influenced by organizational image, which is a crucial factor in determining in-group distinctiveness and attraction (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009). Thus, a theoretical foundation for comprehending how organizational image affects university student enrolment decisions is provided by social identity theory.



Methodology

The study adopted quantitative research method with descriptive research design approach, employed to investigate the influence of organisational image on students' choices and decisions to enrol in universities in South-West Nigeria. The present students of the universities in South-West constituted the population of study, from which eighteen universities were purposively selected based on univeristy reputation. The study used Cochran's (1977) sample size formula for categorical data and second consequence to draw its sample size of 535 respondents. Then, multistage sampling was utilised, which included purposive, cluster, stratified, systematic, random and lastly used convenience sampling technique. Data were collected through the administration of copies of questionnaire.

The content validity was adopted through the use of Cronbach alpha statistic, which was obtained upon carrying out a pilot study of 30 respondents while the reliability was measured using the five-point Likert scale and the technique of asking few same questions in another way and in another section. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics, SPSS version 25. The results were presented in tabular forms and charts with frequency and percentages used to describe the data. A chi-square test was used to test the stated hypotheses.

Data Analysis

Out of the 535 respondents, a total of 521 were received, representing a response rate of 97%.

Table 1: Demographic information of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	160	30.7
	Female	361	69.3
Age group	Less than 20 years	27	5.3
	21 – 30 years	294	57.3
	31 – 40 years	142	27.7
	41 – 50 years	37	7.2
	Above 50 years	13	2.5

This distribution suggests that the study engaged a younger, female-dominated population, providing insights largely reflective of this demographic group.

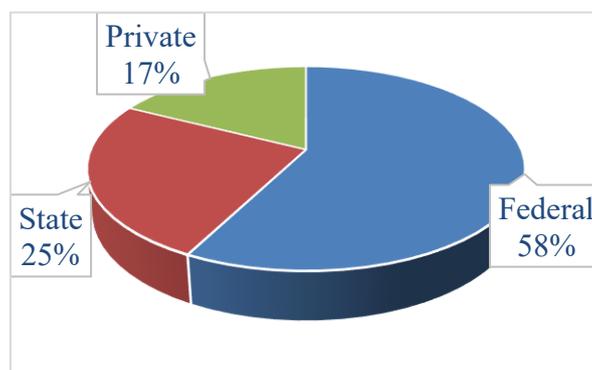


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by type of university

The diverse educational backgrounds provide a more comprehensive understanding of the varying experiences and viewpoints across different types of higher education institutions in Nigeria.

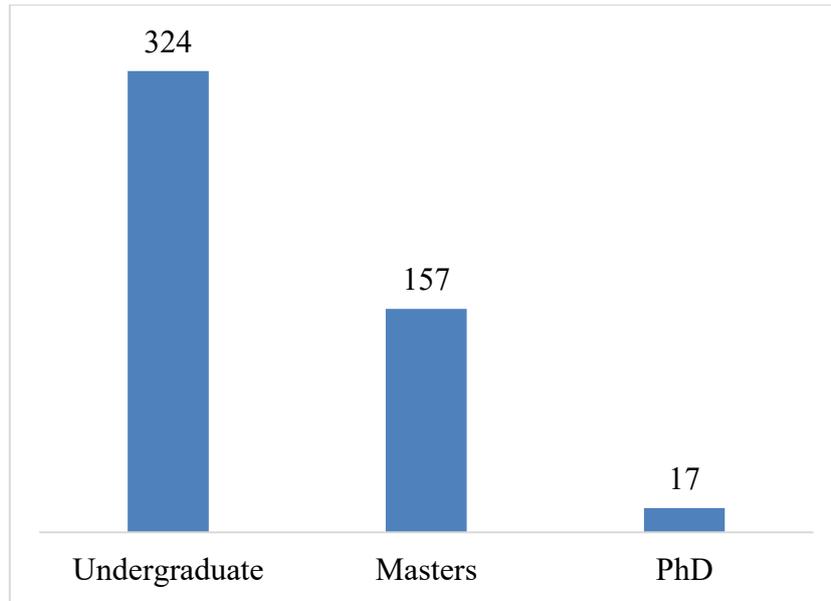


Figure 2: Distribution of respondents by programme of study

Notably, undergraduate students accounted for 65% of the study, while postgraduate students, comprising of master’s and PhD students accounted for a combined 35% of the study.

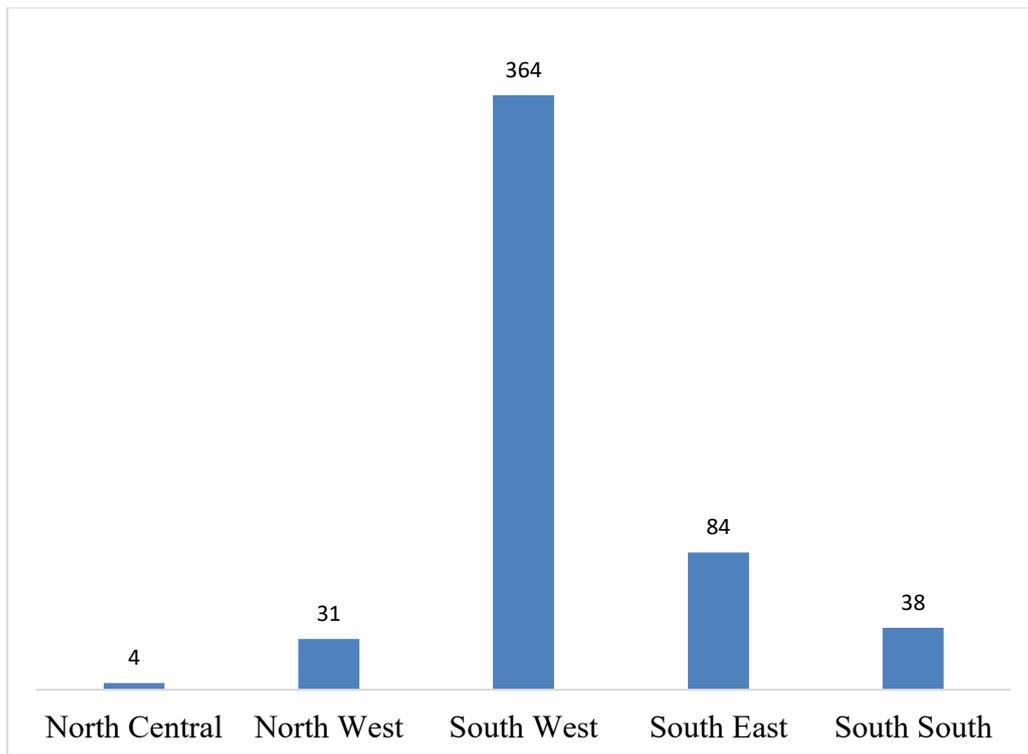


Figure 3: Distribution of respondents by region of domicile

This pattern underscores a regional bias among southerners, who tend to favour educational institutions within their domicile regions, reflecting both cultural ties and logistical convenience.

Presentation of Thematic Questions

RQ 1: What is the awareness level of students about organisational image informing their choices and decisions to enrol in universities in south-west Nigeria?



Table 2: Awareness of the organizational image of the school

Questions	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
I came across the university through adverts and/or of my school media	56 (10.9%)	80 (15.6%)	253 (49.4%)	30 (5.9%)	93 (18.2%)
Current/former student/lecturer at my university convinced me to enrol	53 (10.2%)	100 (19.2%)	230 (44.2%)	35 (6.7%)	102 (19.6%)
I am aware of the vision and mission of my university before I enrolled	61 (11.7%)	189 (36.3%)	212 (40.8%)	26 (5.0%)	32 (6.2%)

Table 2 above highlights various levels of awareness they were exposed to, which could have influenced their decisions to enrol in their universities.

RQ2: What is the knowledge level of students about organisational image informing their choices and decisions?

Table 3: Knowledge of the organizational image of the school

Questions	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
I know some of the reputations of my university	112 (21.5%)	313 (60.2%)	77 (14.8%)	6 (1.2%)	12 (2.3%)
I did not consider any reputation of my university; I just chose it or someone chose it for me	51 (9.8%)	123 (23.7%)	261 (50.2%)	33 (6.3%)	52 (10%)
I know the difference between federal, state and private universities	321 (61.7%)	160 (30.8%)	39 (7.5%)	0 (0)	0 (0)
If I had known what I know now about my school, I would not have chosen my present school	32 (6.2%)	99 (19%)	261 (50.2%)	35 (6.7%)	93 (17.9%)

Table 3 above highlights the levels of knowledge they were exposed to, which could have influenced their decisions to enrol in their universities.

RQ3: What are the elements of organisational image that influence students' choices and decisions to enrol in universities in south-west Nigeria?



Table 4: Elements of organisational image/reputation

Elements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
Academic reputation	3.98	0.831	2
Quality of education	4.12	0.724	1
Prestige of education	3.87	0.911	3
Affordability	3.68	1.035	4
Proximity to my place of domicile	3.28	1.112	9
Road network	3.67	0.97	5
Facilities and infrastructure	3.54	0.915	6
Campus culture and embrace of diversity	3.49	1.049	7
Alumni network and postgraduate employment opportunity	3.3	1.11	8

Table 4 provides insight into the elements and the extent of university image influencing students' choices and decisions in enrolment process. The ranking above suggests that quality of education, academic reputation, and prestige of education are the most important factors for most people when choosing a university.

RQ4: What are the communication strategies that can enhance university image and students' choices and decisions to enrol in south-west universities?

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents' Opinions on University Marketing Strategies, Communication Platforms, and Awareness Before Enrolment

Questions	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Should your school market and run adverts on what they can offer to prospective students	132 (25.3%)	296 (56.8%)	90 (17.3%)	3 (0.6%)	0 (0)
Do you think if your recommendations are passed unto your school, your school will accept and work on them	55 (10.6%)	185 (35.5%)	243 (46.6%)	10 (1.9%)	0 (0)
University should have channels of communication like social media platforms where prospective students can ask questions directly from the school	285 (55.1%)	222 (42.9%)	10 (1.9%)	0 (0)	0 (0)
I do not have enough knowledge about my school before enrolment	61 (11.7%)	200 (38.4%)	222 (42.6%)	23 (4.4%)	15 (2.9%)

Table 5 provides insights into students' perspectives on university marketing, responsiveness to recommendations, communication channels, and their pre-enrolment knowledge of the institution.



Hypothesis 1

H_o : Students' awareness and knowledge about organizational image have no significant influence on their choices and decisions to enrol.

Table 6: Cross-tabulation on awareness and knowledge on university choice

			I know some of the reputations of my university					Total	
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
I came across the university through adverts and/or of my school media	Strongly Agree	Count	28	27	1	0	0	56	
		% within	50.0%	48.2%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	Agree	Count	25	52	3	0	0	80	
		% within	31.3%	65.0%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	Neutral	Count	28	167	56	0	2	253	
		% within	11.1%	66.0%	22.1%	0.0%	0.8%	100.0%	
	Disagree	Count	4	16	4	5	1	30	
		% within	13.3%	53.3%	13.3%	16.7%	3.3%	100.0%	
	Strongly Disagree	Count	19	51	13	1	9	93	
		% within	20.4%	54.8%	14.0%	1.1%	9.7%	100.0%	
	Total		Count	104	313	77	6	12	512
			% within	20.3%	61.1%	15.0%	1.2%	2.3%	100.0%
value = 159.189				d.f = 16		p-value = 0.0000			

The Chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 159.189$, degrees of freedom = 16) and the p-value of 0.000 indicate a significant association between how students first came across the university (through advertisements or media) and their awareness of the university's reputation. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected that there is no relationship between these variables. The result suggests that students who encountered their university through advertisements or school media are more likely to be aware of its reputation. Even those who were not influenced by advertisements still show some level of knowledge, indicating that other factors contribute to students' knowledge of their university's reputation. Overall, the data implies that exposure to media and advertising is positively correlated with students' awareness of their university's reputation, to which universities must pay more attention to communicating their reputation to their stakeholders through various outlets of media and advertising. This corroborated with the findings of Uchenna et al., (2015) when he opined 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.



Hypothesis 2

H₀: University’s organizational image has no significant influence on students’ choice and decision to enrol.

Table 7: Cross-tabulation on consideration for academic reputation

			I was aware of my university’s ranking in comparison to other universities before enrolling					Total	
			Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
I considered academic reputation while making the choice of my university	Strongly Agree	Count	87	49	23	2	12	173	
		% within	50.3%	28.3%	13.3%	1.2%	6.9%	100.0%	
	Agree	Count	34	101	83	8	9	235	
		% within	14.5%	43.0%	35.3%	3.4%	3.8%	100.0%	
	Neutral	Count	0	26	48	5	12	91	
		% within	0.0%	28.6%	52.7%	5.5%	13.2%	100.0%	
	Disagree	Count	0	0	0	2	0	2	
		% within	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%	
	Strongly Disagree	Count	0	0	0	0	10	10	
		% within	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	Total		Count	121	176	154	17	43	511
			% within	23.7%	34.4%	30.1%	3.3%	8.4%	100.0%
	value = 302.756			d.f = 16			p-value = 0.0000		

The Chi-square test result ($\chi^2 = 302.756$, degrees of freedom = 16) and the p-value of 0.000 indicate a highly significant association between students’ consideration of academic reputation and their awareness of their university’s ranking before enrolling. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected that there is no relationship between these variables. This finding suggests that students who prioritize academic reputation are more likely to be informed about university rankings, while those who place less importance on academic reputation tend to be less aware of rankings. The strong association implies that academic reputation and university rankings are closely linked in students’ decision-making processes, particularly for those who strongly value academic prestige when choosing a university, making up strong university reputation that influence the students’ choices and decisions.

Discussion of Findings

Demographics

The demographics revealed important insights in the decision-making process of students’ choices and decisions of universities in the south-western region of Nigeria. The overwhelming female representation suggested that female students are more inclined to participate in academic studies or are more populous in the university environment within the surveyed region, which may further imply that female child does have access to higher education in the South-West. In terms of age distribution, nearly 60% of respondents fall within the 21-30 age bracket, which aligns with the



typical age group of university students in Nigeria and provides a clear view into the primary motivations and considerations of students at the early stages of their academic journey.

The survey also highlighted the dominance of federal universities in attracting students, compared to state and private institutions. This preference is likely influenced by factors such as lower tuition fees and wider recognition of federal institutions. Furthermore, the findings indicated that a majority of the respondents originally reside in the south-western region, reinforcing the tendency for students to opt for universities closer to home.

Elements of University image/reputation

The study found that only a small proportion of respondents stated that they came across their university through advertisements from the school or school media. One could infer that it is either the universities did not give enough exposure of their image and reputation or their communication strategies did not meet the targets, that is, the students. This creates lacuna in the decision-making process, more so, in the region that has lots of universities to choose from. The theoretical framework of signalling projects, in its natural behaviour, the universities to send persuasive signal that raises views of its attractiveness and boosts enrolment chances by communicating information about its quality, reputation, and value offer. This signal is and should be observable, that is, should be able to meet the targets, and the signal repeated. By this way, prospective students can know about the reputation and quality of the university through the awareness created by the institution itself, the direct source.

Further finding showed a nearly half of the students remained neutral on being aware of the influence of organisational image on their choices and decisions. This suggests that promotional channels played a limited role in students discovering and deciding to enrol in their universities, owing to the fact that there could have been other sources, through which they were aware of the influence of organisational image on their choices and decisions. On the flip side, a combined 29.4% of respondents indicated they were aware and influenced by organisational image of their universities through current or former students or lecturers. This suggests that while word-of-mouth is somewhat impactful, that internal stakeholders, like students either present or past, are important in creating awareness about universities' organisational image and they are valuable in the process of choosing and deciding what university to enrol into. This is one reason why universities need to look into quality service delivery.

The study also revealed that a strong majority (81.7%) of the respondents were familiar with the image (reputation) of their university, that is, they know about organisational image in their choices and decisions to enrol in universities in south-west Nigeria. This, thus, indicates that organisational image/ reputation was a key consideration in their decision-making process in choosing their university. This affirms the previous researches (Fakhrudin, et al., 2024; *Cynthia, et al., 2023*; Kwartawaty, 2023; *Adeoye, et al., 2022*; Akintola, et al., 2021; Ma, 2021; Wara, et al., 2021; Ezeuduj, et al., 2020; *Pampaloni, 2010*) on the influence of organisational image on enrolment but the emphasis of this study is the level of knowledge of the prospective students about organisational image as it influenced them to choose and enrol in their present universities, of which this study contributes to the body of knowledge.

The study revealed the varying degrees of influence of the elements of organisational image on students' choices and decisions to enrol in universities, with distinct patterns emerging across federal, state, and private universities. The survey showed the ranking of these elements by their impact on students' choices, with quality of education receiving the highest mean score (4.12), followed closely by academic reputation (3.98) and institutional prestige (3.87) among others. This ranking underscores the importance students place on receiving a high-quality education and associating themselves with institutions that are well-regarded academically. This suggests that academic reputation is an important factor across all types of universities, but it is particularly emphasized in Federal institutions where nearly 84% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed. The findings



imply that while academic reputation is broadly important, the level of emphasis varies depending on the type of institution, with Federal universities placing the most weight on this factor. Federal universities are still with reputation and prestige, this corroborates the rankings over the years from Times Higher Education World University Ranking of having federal universities as top universities, except for Covenant University that is a private university.

The findings from the hypotheses revealed a significant relationship between students' initial exposure to their university through various communication strategies and their knowledge of the university's image/ reputation, which suggests that consistent engagement with marketing and communication materials can reinforce the perception of an organisation's reputation among potential students that 98% of respondents agreed that universities should have channels of communication like social media platforms in encounter with prospective students.

Conclusion

The researcher made the following conclusion, based on the findings of the study as overwhelming 98% of respondents showed, that organisational image influenced students' choices and decisions to enrol in universities they are in presently in south-west Nigeria. Invariably, these universities have positive reputation and prestige among other elements of organisational image the prospective students saw and considered, to be identified with. Equally, the study underscored the importance of aligning communication strategies with marketing efforts as universities project their true image coated with actual service quality delivery to enhance students' choices and decisions to enrol into these universities.

Recommendations

Universities should have ways of communicating or campaign to their prospective student by hitting the targets, the secondary schools / students, and liaise with school proprietors. Universities can leverage on Career Day programme in secondary schools, whereby they can let the students know they can best help them achieve their intended career and their dreams. They can begin with the schools in their states as survey showed that many students prefer to go to university close home.

Even though a great number of students know about the university image, there exist gap between their knowledge and reality on ground in the universities. There should be true and sincere communication of university image, and not just about making money. And addressing the gap between expectations and experiences, this requires better feedback mechanisms and student support services. Universities should regularly assess student satisfaction and make necessary adjustments to improve academic and non-academic services.

Universities should tailor their communication strategies based on the specific needs and priorities of different student demographics, whether be it affordability, location, or prestige, in other to enhance the effectiveness of these marketing efforts. Based on the finding of this study, universities should leverage more, among others, on their academic reputation, quality of education and institutional prestige in promotional materials, especially when targeting students' enrolment.

Given the strong influence of media in shaping perceptions, universities should invest in digital marketing strategies that create consistent, strategic and positive exposure and the public relations office are quick to action. This includes engaging content on social media, publicising their achievements, targeted advertisements, and interactive platforms that highlight institutional strengths. There can be specialised messages to the graduates. For instances, the Deans of faculties can communicate through email newsletters to graduates about school achievements, testimonials, need to consider same school for postgraduate study; likewise the Dean of postgraduate studies to the alumni about alumni networks, school activities and limelight, and real-life success stories to enhance their reputation.

Apart from organisational image as principal influence for students' enrolment, the study revealed internal stakeholders like current and past students as valuable assets. Thus, we recommend that



universities pay attention to the concerns of their students, for it is a satisfied customer that will become loyal.

Limitation of the Study

This study was carried out researching universities in the south-western region of Nigeria, whereby further research can be done on universities in other part of the country. Physical access to students in one of the private universities was denied the researcher.

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