



Ensuring Student Enrollment and Retention Toward Sustainability of Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study would like to determine the marketing strategies implemented by marketing personnel of universities to increase enrollment and retention. It aims to find out whether there is an association of school brand to school enrollment and retention. Both quantitative and qualitative designs were used. Meta-analysis and interviews were applied as data gathering methods. Meta-analysis, a synthesis of studies related to the current topic to obtain the magnitude of the effect size, was conducted using the results of studies found in the Google Scholar and ProQuest databases, published from 2010 to 2021. Marketing personnel interviewed came from top-ranked American and Philippine universities. Results showed that 1) Marketing strategies boost enrollment and retention. 2) Retention and enrollment have a cyclical and mutual relationship. 3) Retention may equate to students' satisfaction; and 4) Satisfaction of students bolsters advertisement mechanism through word-of-mouth (WOM) to potential enrollees. Meta-analysis results showed that there is no significant association between school brand and enrollment with $p=1.00$ (95% CI, -0.02, 0.02). Similarly, the data indicated that school brand is not significantly associated with retention, $p=1.00$ (95% CI, -0.5, 0.5). Based on the findings, the researcher has developed an intervention program that will guide school personnel to achieve sustainable enrollment and retention levels.

Keywords: Enrollment, Retention, Marketing Strategies, Branding, Intervention

I. INTRODUCTION

Private educational institutions are regularly searching for sources of income to make them financially sustainable, particularly during this pandemic. What is a financially sustainable school? Somerset (2018) studied the attributes of financially sustainable schools, based on his interviews with stakeholders such as parents, auditors and bank accountants. Participants enumerated the following attributes: 1) The school needs to understand their product, have a market focus and keep track of their enrollments. 2) The school must adapt to situations 2) The school must have a strong operating profit in order to finance investments, debt servicing and replenish cash reserves. 4) Participants said that being financially sustainable depends on school management, market and strategic plan (p. 61).

Rascorla (2015) advised that the schools must set aside funds for repairs of facilities, upgrades in digital technology, training of teachers and non-teaching personnel. For example, schools buy laptops but do not have funds for repairs of these laptops.

Aside from the pandemic, the need to sustain schools was brought about by school competition. These competitions may be in the form of obtaining more student-clients, competition for financial resources, and competition for quality teachers. This competition has become global as illustrated by the presence of international students in each country (Hasse&Krucken, 2013; Musselin, 2018; Pucciarelli& Kaplan, 2016). As a consequence, schools have adopted strategies from business enterprises. School owners and administrators offer an intangible service, which is education, to serve their customers best. This study advocates the need to have a stable enrollment status and a retention level that would sustain their school to operate. Therefore, schools develop their own school brand as an educational strategy to differentiate themselves from other schools. It is the name of the school, the status of the degrees that it offers which provides the students better employment opportunities and opens chances of pursuing post-graduate studies (Bangari&Chaubey, 2017; Eldegwy et al, 2018; Lamboy, 2011; Priporas&Kamenidou, 2010).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Students are Customers

In this study, students in the secondary, collegiate and postgraduate levels are considered to be the main stakeholders in education. They are being studied due to being the decision makers in choosing their schools (Gonzalez, 2016; James, 2016; Oluwasanmi, 2016). Related studies have shown that these kinds of students are decision makers in the choice of school. Nadelson (2013), found out that these students are not influenced by their parents in the choice of schools. It is possible because these are teenagers aged 16 and older, who want to assert their independence. Related studies have revealed that there are different selection criteria of students, namely: brand recognition/reputation (Joseph et al., 2012; Priporas&Kamenidou, 2011), employment opportunities (Mitic&Mojic, 2020; Nadelson, 2013; Priporas&Kamenidou, 2011), amenities/facilities (Joseph et al., 2012) and faculty interactions (Joseph et al., 2012).

2.2 Enrollment

In the article written by Borghi et al. (2016), entitled, '*Why does the student enroll in a school?*', he stated that there are three reasons 1) to improve personal abilities with new knowledge acquired in school 2) to search for pleasant learning environment and 3) to obtain personal and professional growth. Based on Partenie (2019), students consider the school as a guarantee to provide employment after they graduate.

2.3 Retention

Related studies deal with retention as that of transitioning from high school to college and satisfaction of a first-year student with regard to the school. Both the interpretive and positivist designs were implemented in the study. The interpretive design aims to give subjective interpretations of social phenomena from the participant's point of view. On the other hand, the positivist design "seeks generalized patterns based on an objective view of reality" (Bhattacharjee, 2012, par.1). The objectives of this study are: 1. What are the marketing strategies conducted by the marketing managers or personnel of universities to increase enrollment? 2) What are the marketing strategies conducted by the marketing managers or personnel of universities to boost retention levels? 3) Based on previous studies, is there an association between a) school brand and enrollment? b) school brand and retention? 4) Is there a recommended solution to sustain enrollment and retention levels of universities?

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The study applied both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research, which represents the interpretive design, is used "to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant" (Hammarberg et al., 2017, p. 499). This research design involves looking at social reality "as it is". It captures the opinions and feelings of the respondents. Its aim is to obtain better understanding of the phenomenon based on the view of the interviewees. "The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change" (Creswell, 2013, p. 45).

In contrast, quantitative research which is represented by positivist design, according to Melegrito and Mendoza (2016), are "inquiries about people's views in a structured manner so that hard evidences and statistics that may be used... can be generated" (p.10). Quantitative research has the ability to generate large amounts of data. It can give generalizations by using the statistical methods. It studies relationships between variables. It determines cause-and-effect relationships, such as online learning creates high grades. It can give the strength of the relationship whether it is weak or strong.

For the qualitative approach, in-depth interviewing was conducted. Silverman (2016) explained that this method gives the "evidence of the nature of the phenomena under investigation ... and the insights into the cultural frames people use to make sense of these experiences" (p. 57). In the in-depth interviews, four marketing managers or personnel from private schools in the Philippines and United States of America responded to the invitation for interview through Zoom and emails during the pandemic. They gave useful insights about branding and marketing. Themes, patterns and the meaning of their opinions, stories and experiences were reflected in the data analysis of these interviews. On the other hand, in the quantitative aspect, meta analysis was used. Meta-analysis is defined as follows:

- The quantitative integration of research findings with the help of statistical tools" (Duveneck, 2015)
- Statistical process used to combine this information to give an overall effect size (Davis et al., 2014).
- A form of research synthesis in which conclusions are based on the statistical analysis of effect sizes from individual studies (Card, 2012).
- A survey in which the results of the studies included in the review are statistically similar and are combined and analyzed as if they were one study" (Botanical Medicine for Women's Health, 2010).

The sample was composed of eleven (11) studies that met the inclusion criteria. Out of the total studies, meta-analysis was performed on ten (10) studies that discussed the variables of school brand and enrollment. In addition, meta- analysis was performed on two (2) studies that talked about school brand and retention.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Two frameworks guided the study. These are the Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the researcher's own developed model.

4.1 The Kapferer Brand Identity Prism

There are six parts of the hexagon. These are: personality, culture, self- image, reflection, relationship and physique. The sender or the school for that matter, looks at physique and personality. The recipient or the message or these students, for that matter, deal with reflection and self-image. The two sides deal with relationship as well as culture.

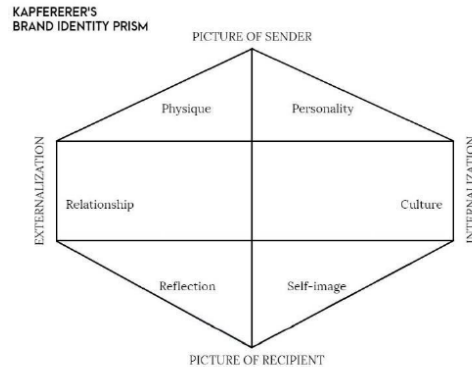


Fig. 1. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

First Part

Physique, according to Kapferer (2012), refers to the tangible features of the brand. Examples are the campus grounds, furniture and office equipment.

The Second Part

Personality is the possession of traits of a brand if it were a person. For example, a school can be considered to have a caring personality because it engages in community outreach projects.

The Third Part

Culture is an ideology. Strong brands can express their culture. Culture is the fundamental values a brand or organization possesses which guides the behavior of the employee to build identity (p. 46). This is the most significant part of the prism. Kapferer (2012) gives Nike as an example of "willpower with a dose of optimism as it says "just do it" (p. 160).

The Fourth Part

Self-image is the fourth part of the hexagon. It is what we think of ourselves. Example, those who wear Louis Vuitton, think of themselves as an elite person who can afford to buy the high-end brand.

The Fifth Part

Reflection is the fifth part. Kapferer (2012) emphasized that "Reflecting the customer is not describing the target; rather the customer should be reflected as he/she wishes to be seen as a result of the relationship of using a brand" (p. 162).

The Sixth Part

Relationship is the last part. Kapferer (2012) defines service as a relationship. This is the relationship of the service provider and customer. The person becomes a customer depending on their "closeness of relationship to the brand" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 193). The market can be classified into: 1) buyers who are involved 2) buyers who buy more often 3) buyers who buy from time to time 4) buyers who would like to buy but cannot 5) buyers who are not consumers without any specific reason to buy 6) buyers who are not consumers because brand is underperforming and 7) buyers who dislike the brand.

4.2 The Researcher's Own Model

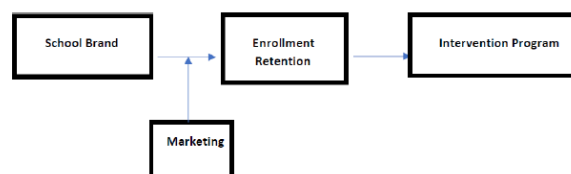


Fig. 2. School Brand: Its Association to Enrollment and Retention

The figure illustrates three variables: school brand, enrollment and retention where the school brand is considered as the independent variable and enrollment and retention as the dependent variables. The study hypothesized that school brand increases enrollment and retention. The school brand articulates the school's mission,

vision and objectives and is clearly communicated to the students who are the primary customers of the school. They are the top consumers of education, the service offered by the school.

This study looked also at the role of marketing in increasing enrollment and retention or whether it moderates the association between school brand and enrollment and retention. The output of the study is shown as an intervention program. The intervention program consists of recommendations, such as practical marketing activities or materials in attracting students to one's school.

4.3 Marketing Strategies to Increase Enrollment

Participants 1 and 2 talked about marketing as a way to increase enrollment. Participant 3 discussed marketing to increase retention. Each participant's school tailor fits its marketing activities. There are three studies that show that marketing activities help increase enrollment: Gardiner (2020), Onk and Joseph (2017), and the Philippine researchers Arante et al. (2016).

Gardiner (2020) found out that there were some Catholic schools in Washington, DC area, that conducted marketing activities to make students enroll in their schools. Prior to the pandemic, in years 2003 to 2016, one school opened its doors to the community and hosted athletics, concerts, art fairs, etc. These events increased their applications for admissions, which eventually increased their total school admissions. Another school conducted a survey among families in the community to gather information on how to plan for the admission process and how to involve the community in school events. Another school advertised their literature, art and athletic program to the community. These events were announced thru social media, flyers, and website.

According to school administrators interviewed (A-01, A-13), this process proved effective based on the feedback from family surveys they received and resulted in an increase in attendance at different events (Gardiner, 2020, p. 73).

Likewise, Onk and Joseph (2017), studied the international students' market. They discovered that the marketing materials must be aligned with the international students' needs.

Similarly, Arante et. al, (2016) found out that inter-high school competition or competition among schools in Batangas was the effective marketing strategy, together with using the school's Facebook page. The strategy resulted in target students eventually enrolling in the school. Marketing to the community where the school is located is similar to the business strategy of selling to the KKKK- *kapatid (sibling), kamag-anak (relative), kaibigan (friend), kapitbahay (neighbor)*.

Participants 1 and 3 use social media. Lambert (2021) discovered that the Philippines is the country where residents spend the most number of hours in social media. Filipinos spend an average of 255 minutes or 4 hours a day. In general, Lambert discovered that those aged 13 to 24 and 25 to 34 years old are the biggest users of social media at 32% each. Looking at the ages, these are the ages of Junior High School, Senior High School, college and graduate school students. Lambert said that the news is the main reason why users use social media. However, enrollment is not one of the reasons why students use social media. This finding is aligned with Conklin (2014) in which 53% of his respondents said that they do not use social media sites in their enrollment decisions.

Reinforcing the Lambert study, Best Colleges (2021) found out that Harvard University, Stanford University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for different purposes. Harvard posts school news on Facebook, first year students' experiences in Instagram and alumni and faculty achievements in Twitter. Stanford uses Facebook to post faculty and alumni achievements, Instagram for first- year student experiences and Twitter for faculty and alumni achievements and alumni donations. MIT uses Facebook to post student projects, Instagram for faculty achievements and Twitter for research innovations and organizational partnerships. Again, there is no enrollment topic in these universities.

Furthermore, social media is not used by students for contacting teachers and as academic tools in the classroom, according to the study of Cohen (2011). Varadarajan (2016) revealed that the use of social media should be used wisely to be able to tell the school's stories. Although the specific marketing activity was not revealed in the interview, Participant 2's response is to have different strategies for each target market. The participant has outlined a guide prior to making strategies. This is knowing what you are as a school (*"know who you are as an institution"*) and what your students are.

Our target market are people who want to make a difference for themselves and in the world.(P2)

Participant 2 does not call the strategy as a strategy. It is called a value, a principle.

The teaching style (will retain the students). We don't call it a strategy. We call it a value. We try to take care of the whole person. Now because that is the value, we try to exercise a lot of understanding, compassion. You call that a strategy. We call it a principle. (P2)

Participant 2's answer is the same as Clark (2020)'s study. The study encouraged the use of more than one advertising medium to promote the school so that each medium will reinforce the message that the student will decide to choose the particular school. It is called "call-to-action marketing message" (Clark 2020, p. 81). Dennis et. al.

(2016) suggested that universities need to develop target strategies to various student groupings. Mogaji (2019) said that students can create content by telling stories about their experiences which can positively influence others.

Having an in-depth knowledge of the students is important. Participant's 2 response is in agreement with Beloin (2018), that schools must have intensive knowledge about their students, assess the state of school-student relationship, "extract a call to action and prompt student activities" (p. 39). To summarize, marketing boosts enrollment.

4.4 Marketing Strategies to Increase Retention

It can be highlighted that the school must give the students satisfying experiences in the form of quality instruction, customer service-oriented support services from the registrar, student accounts, guidance counseling, among others. Satisfied students graduate from the school will likely recommend the school to their family, relatives and friends. Word-of-mouth (WOM) means sharing of these satisfying experiences.

Participant 2 did not give any specific marketing strategies. But the teachers are the ones who are marketing the school to the students. Snyder (2019) gave some suggestions about marketing to students through the following methods: 1) keep communication lines open 2) evaluate if students need help 3) determine if student has plans of enrolling again 4) intervene with additional resources.

Participant 3 mentioned the use of the alumni and emails. Alumni are satisfied with student affairs which is the reason why they chose to donate. In addition, alumni identify themselves as belonging to a certain school. Elliott (2014) labels this as relationship marketing between the school and the students. Moreover, Participant 3 used email marketing. Email marketing is a low-cost way of keeping in touch with students and other stakeholders, according to Humphrey (2018). This makes students feel a sense of belongingness in school and a feeling of importance as a student.

Another evidence that marketing boosts retention is the situation of the Northside Christian Academy in North Carolina, United States of America. The school hired an enrollment consultant in 2013 because the enrollment declined, from 800 down to 385 students. The consultant suggested some marketing tools such as "increased retention of current families and the recruitment of additional new students", using "web-based marketing, word-of-mouth marketing, internal marketing." The results of these marketing methods increased enrollment to 432 students (Enrollment Catalyst, 2013). To summarize, marketing boosts retention.

4.5 Association Between School Brand and Enrollment

The results indicate that school brand is not associated with enrollment at 0.00 (95% CI, -0.02, 0.02). A correlation value of 0 indicates no linear association between x and y (Bonnet, 2017, p.8). Furthermore, the null hypothesis is accepted because the correlation is 0 (Borenstein, 2009, p. 27). In addition, the *p*-value (*p*=1.00) which is greater than 0.05 level of significance reveals that the meta-analytic effect is statistically not significant. This means that school brand and enrollment are not statistically significant. McLeod (2019) explains that a *p*-value higher than 0.05 (*p* > 0.05) is not statistically significant and indicates strong evidence for the null hypothesis.

This result is aligned with the use of word-of-mouth as a factor in considering enrollment to a school (Clayton 2013; Ghanayem 2016; LinkedIn 2015). Sources of these word-of-mouth come from family, peers and alumni.

Although branding initiatives may build awareness and shape the image... personal interaction during campus visits, word of mouth from friends/family, university representatives and /or high school counselors continue to play an important role in disseminating information to prospective (college) students." (Joseph et al., 2012, p.9).

This implies that high school and college students are influenced by their peers because as teenagers, they want to be independent from their parents. In summary, there is no association between school brand and enrollment.

4.6 Association Between School Brand and Retention

The findings show that school brand is not associated with retention at 0.00 (95% CI, -0.5, 0.5). A correlation value of 0 indicates no linear association between x and y (Bonnet, 2017, p.8). Furthermore, the null hypothesis is accepted because the correlation is 0 (Borenstein, 2009, p. 27). In addition, the *p*-value (*p*=1.00) which is greater than 0.05 level of significance reveals that the meta-analytic effect is statistically not significant. This means that school brand and enrollment are not statistically significant. McLeod (2019) explains that a *p*-value higher than 0.05 (*p* > 0.05) is not statistically significant and indicates strong evidence for the null hypothesis.

This finding that school brand is not associated with retention is in alignment with Participant 3's response. One dimension of branding is the reputation of the school in the form of rankings and board exam results. Students do not consider these school's credentials, based on Participant 3's responses:

Students do not ask the credentials of the school or achievements of the school. The students can remember that they were treated as family members. Most of the students like to study here because of the alumni, school location is near the house and tuition fee (P3).

This perception is in agreement with Haverila, et al. (2020) who found out that "the image of the institution is important during the initial selection of students but when the selection has been made, its importance as a retention variable fade away" (p. 372). In summary, there is no association between school branding and retention.

4.7 Proposed Intervention to Increase Enrollment and Retention

The Intervention program is called “Old Students are Gold”. The currently enrolled students, industry partners, community linkages have to obtain a satisfying experience first. Then through their recommendation, new students will enroll. “Old students” also symbolize the alumni because the latter were once upon a time, new students.

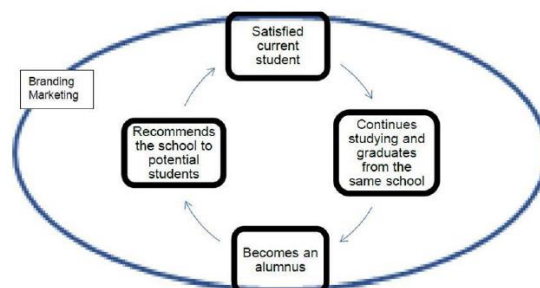


Fig. 3. Proposed Mutual Relationship Framework of Retention and Enrollment

Figure 3. shows the proposed framework to better understand that a satisfied student who is currently studying in school, will continue studying in that school until he graduates. Then he becomes an alumnus upon graduation and recommends the school where he graduated from to a potential student. That potential student may be a family member, relative, neighbor or friend. In the sales lingo, these are called KKKK- *kapamilya*, *kamag-anak*, *kapitbahay* and *kaibigan*. This implies that word-of-mouth is the first way of promoting the school

However, the blue circle symbolizes that branding and marketing are present in each stage of the student's life, from being a current student until he recommends the school to a potential student. The matrix was based on the findings of the study. The proposed outputs are as follows:

1) creation of a research group that is focused on research about stakeholders of the school, namely:

- a. Students
- b. Parents
- c. Teachers
- d. Non-teaching staff
- e. School administrators
- f. Alumni
- g. Industry Partners
- h. Community outreach partners

4.8 Specific Marketing Strategies for Each Market

As per the findings of this study, participants recognized marketing as a way to increase enrollment and retention. The school must be able to approach each market with a different strategy. The student, for instance, must be exposed to marketing in all the stages of the student's life, even after his graduation. Participant 2, in particular, recommended knowing the kind of market in order to expose them to different marketing strategies.

4.8.1 Reaching Out To The Alumni

The Alumni Office is suggested to communicate regularly with the alumni, not only during the University Week but on a monthly basis. There are topics to be communicated: current events, successful alumni who will serve as inspiration, achiever students and their credentials, etc. Funds for the dissemination of information will come from the membership fees that are paid annually.

4.8.2 Evaluation of Current Marketing Materials

Armed with the information gathered about the 8 stakeholder groups mentioned above, the marketing materials can now be assessed as to their alignment to the needs of these 8 groups; development of new materials to help in enrollment and retention, as well as for the alumni encouragement to donate.

V. CONCLUSION

In the light of the findings, the study concluded the following:

1. Participants have varied marketing strategies to increase enrollment. This depends on the kind of students that they target and the kind of students who are currently enrolled.
2. Participants have marketing strategies to boost retention levels, aligned with the appropriate target market.
3. There is no association between school brand and enrollment. There is no association between school brand and retention. Both of these associations are not statistically significant.
4. The proposed intervention is an attempt to capture the mutual and cyclical relationship of retention-enrollment- retention- enrollment.

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