MARKETING STRATEGIES AND ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES: EVIDENCE FROM SOUTH–SOUTH NIGERIA

Monye Michael[1], Anthony Iyekekpolor[2], Ehijiele Ekienabor[3]

[1]PhD Student, Business Administration Department, Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, Nigeria.

[2]HOD, Business Administration Department, Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, Nigeria.

[3]Sub-Dean, College of Business and Management Studies, Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how four marketing strategies including social media marketing, print advertising, referral programmes, and influencer partnerships affect the organisational performance of private universities in South–South Nigeria. Drawing on the Resource-Based View and Integrated Marketing Communications frameworks, a cross-sectional survey design was adopted involving 384 respondents from marketing, admissions, and administrative departments of selected universities. Data were analysed using multiple regression with HC3 robust standard errors to ensure inference validity. Results revealed that all four marketing strategies significantly enhance organisational performance, with social media marketing and referral programmes exerting the strongest effects. Influencer partnerships and print advertising produced complementary gains when integrated within a coherent marketing architecture. The findings suggest that performance gains are driven by marketing capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. The study contributes to higher-education marketing literature by offering comparative empirical evidence from an under-researched African context. It recommends that private universities institutionalise referral mechanisms, enhance alumni and influencer engagement, and adopt data-driven approaches to monitor marketing return on investment.

Keywords: Marketing Strategies, Organisational Performance, Social Media Marketing, Print Advertising, Referral Programmes, Influencer Partnerships, Private Universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions globally face intense competition for students, funding, and reputation. In Nigeria, the proliferation of private universities since 1999 has intensified this rivalry, especially in South–South Nigeria where tuition-dependent institutions compete for limited enrolments. Effective marketing has thus become central to institutional survival. Unlike public universities that benefit from government funding, private institutions rely heavily on student enrolments for financial sustainability. Therefore, developing strategic marketing capabilities is essential to maintaining performance.

Marketing in higher education goes beyond advertising; it shapes perceptions of quality, trust, and legitimacy. Universities increasingly deploy a mix of digital engagement, referral systems, influencer collaborations, and print campaigns to enhance visibility and enrolment. Yet, little empirical work in Nigeria evaluates the comparative impact of these strategies. This study addresses that gap by examining how social media marketing, print advertising, referral programmes, and influencer partnerships collectively shape the organisational performance of private universities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review looks at concepts, theoretical, and empirical review of the variables of the study.

2.1 Organisational performance

Organisational performance is best understood as a multidimensional construct, spanning financial results, market outcomes, internal processes, and learning/innovation, rather than a single indicator. Classic work distinguishes organisational performance from the broader notion of organisational effectiveness and shows that valid assessment requires multiple metrics aligned to strategy and context (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986; Richard, Devinney, Yip, & Johnson, 2009). This perspective is particularly salient in higher education (HE), where an institution may look "healthy" on enrolment but underperform on student success or staff capability, and vice-versa.

Two core insights from the performance literature translate directly to HE: (i) stakeholders judge success differently (students, parents/sponsors, employers, regulators, alumni), and (ii) performance unfolds on multiple time horizons (short-run recruitment and cash flow versus longer-run reputation and graduate outcomes). For this reason, researchers urge clarity about what is being measured, for whom, and over what period when making claims about "performance" (Richard et al., 2009).

For tuition-dependent private universities, a pragmatic performance architecture typically combines five result areas: Market/financial outcomes: Enquiry volume and quality, application-to-offer rates, yield (the percentage of admitted students who enrol), net tuition revenue, cost-per-enrolment and programme viability.

2.2 Marketing

Marketing is commonly defined as the process of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers while managing relationships in ways that benefit both the organisation and its stakeholders (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In the context of higher education, marketing extends beyond commercial transactions; it involves building trust, shaping perceptions, and persuading students and their sponsors to invest in educational services that are largely intangible and credence-based (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). This makes marketing in private universities fundamentally different from selling tangible goods because students cannot fully evaluate the quality of a programme until after enrolment and graduation.

The role of marketing in private universities has grown in importance as competition intensifies, tuition fees rise, and the sector becomes increasingly dependent on enrolment for financial sustainability. Unlike public universities, which often rely on government funding, private institutions depend heavily on student fees as their primary revenue stream, making effective marketing strategies a matter of institutional survival (Ng'ang'a & Anjichi, 2025). Marketing therefore serves as a bridge between the university's offerings, such as programmes, facilities, and values, and the expectations of prospective students and their families.

In the digital age, the marketing role has shifted from being transactional to relational. Social media platforms, search engine optimisation (SEO), referral programmes, and influencer collaborations have created new avenues for two-way interactions that extend beyond one-time enrolment campaigns (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). These tools not only influence enrolment decisions but also contribute to the broader organisational performance of universities by enhancing visibility, reputation, and stakeholder trust.

Ultimately, marketing in private higher education is no longer about "selling seats in classrooms" but about communicating institutional identity, building credibility, and co-creating value with students and their sponsors. In this sense, marketing becomes a strategic capability that ensures private universities remain competitive, financially sustainable, and socially relevant in an increasingly globalised education market.

2.3 Marketing strategies

Marketing strategy is more than a set of promotional activities, it is the deliberate pattern of decisions and resource allocations that organisations use to attract, satisfy, and retain customers in a competitive environment. In higher education institutions (HEIs), marketing strategy is particularly critical because universities offer credence services: students and parents cannot easily assess quality before enrolment, and decisions often involve long-term financial and career consequences (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2018). For tuition-dependent private universities, marketing strategy becomes central to survival, shaping enrolment outcomes, institutional visibility, and long-term financial sustainability.

Kotler and Keller (2016) define marketing strategy as the organisation's integrated pattern of actions that align segmentation, targeting, positioning, and the marketing mix to achieve competitive advantage. In the higher education sector, this involves building strong institutional brands, designing attractive programmes, and creating seamless recruitment journeys that guide prospective students from awareness → enquiry → application → enrolment → retention (Ivy, 2008). Universities that treat marketing strategy as a holistic, integrated system, rather than a set of isolated activities, are more likely to achieve sustainable performance. Marketing strategy in HEIs is often articulated at three interconnected levels: Institutional/Brand Strategy, Programme/Portfolio Strategy, and Campaign/Execution Strategy.

Effective strategies are incomplete without proper measurement. Universities increasingly track indicators such as enquiry-to-application conversion rates, cost-per-enrolment, net tuition revenue, and student satisfaction. This data-driven approach ensures that marketing is not only creative but also accountable for its contribution to organisational performance (Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Vorhies & Morgan, 2005)..

2.3.1 Social media marketing (SMM)

Social media marketing in higher education is the purposeful use of social platforms to create, distribute, and interact with content that helps prospective students (and their influencers, parents, alumni, employers) understand a university's value and take action (e.g., enquire, apply, enrol). In mainstream marketing, social media are defined as internet-based applications built on Web 2.0 and user-generated content, now treated as a core element of the promotion mix rather than an adjunct (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

SMM works most effectively when universities design for the functional "building blocks" of social media, identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups, instead of broadcasting messages out of context (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Evidence specific to higher education indicates that how institutions behave on social media matters more than sheer posting volume. A study of 56 UK universities found that social interaction (two-way replies, comments) and social validation (likes, shares, third-party endorsements) were positively associated with recruitment performance, implying conversational, socially validated content supports acquisition more effectively than one-way announcements (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016). Likewise, prospective students consult social alongside official sites and prospectuses; segments differ in how they use platforms, so message–audience fit is decisive (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Content type and format also matter: analyses of university Facebook pages show that specific post types/formats systematically influence engagement, offering practical guidance for composing posts that travel further and prompt interaction (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

2.3.2 Print advertising

Print advertising in higher education (HE) encompasses planned use of newspapers and magazines, out-of-home (OOH) formats (e.g., billboards, transit), leaflets/handbills, prospectuses, and addressed or unaddressed direct mail to influence awareness, consideration, and conversion along the recruitment funnel. Unlike purely digital touchpoints, print has tangible form, household circulation, and persistence, attributes that extend attention and memory. For private HEIs, the strongest case for print today is not "print vs. digital" but print with digital. Attention-rich, tangible formats (prospectus, direct mail) provide durable cues and family-level circulation; OOH efficiently sparks online activation; and mixed-media plans can deliver more than additive effects when sequenced and measured properly.

2.3.3 Referral programmes

A referral programme formalises naturally occurring word-of-mouth (WOM) by inviting alumni, current students, staff and trusted partners to recommend prospects through simple, ethical mechanisms (e.g., a web form, unique link/code, or named scholarship). Decades of marketing science show that referred prospects are typically better fits, remain longer, and create more value than many paid-channel acquisitions because trust and similarity ("people like me") travel with the recommendation (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Schmitt, Skiera, & Van den Bulte, 2011).

In a landmark panel study, referred customers were ≥16% more valuable and had higher retention than observably similar non-referred customers, with effects persisting over time (Schmitt et al., 2011). Related work demonstrates that WOM often produces larger short-run lifts and longer carryover than traditional advertising, strengthening the case for structured referrals alongside paid media (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009; Villanueva, Yoo, & Hanssens, 2008).

Referrals reduce perceived risk for applicants and families. Network research shows that tie strength and homophily (shared background, interests, aspirations) shape who talks to whom and whose advice carries weight (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Thus, a trusted alumna who says, "I thrived there, and here's why," transfers information and credibility, helping the prospect judge fit and lowering uncertainty (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Trusov et al., 2009).

2.3.4 Influencer partnerships

Influencer partnerships are structured collaborations with credible creators, current students, alumni, faculty, and trusted local micro-influencers, whose audiences overlap with priority segments in the student-recruitment journey. The literature defines social media influencers as independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through persona-driven, networked communication (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Their persuasive effects arise from classic source-credibility cues, expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990), and from brand–endorser fit (the "match-up" hypothesis), whereby congruence between the endorser and the promoted offering enhances evaluations (Kamins, 1990). Contemporary studies add parasocial relationships, one-sided yet affective bonds built over repeated exposure, which make messages feel personal and authentic and predict downstream intentions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A growing empirical base demonstrates that influencer attributes and campaign design materially affect outcomes: Across Instagram/YouTube contexts, perceived influencer credibility and parasocial interaction significantly predict purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). A 2024 study using an elaboration-likelihood lens shows authenticity, informativeness and homophily strengthening parasocial bonds and, in turn, brand credibility and intention (Liu, 2024). On Instagram, very high follower numbers can reduce perceived uniqueness and dampen brand attitudes when there is "product divergence," while smaller creators often appear more authentic, supporting a micro-influencer emphasis for nuanced choices such as degree programmes (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Promotional actions and perceived self-presentation affect credibility and followers' behavioural responses (Belanche, Casaló, & Flavián, 2021). Opinion leadership on Instagram is explained by content quality, interaction, and community standing (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Meta-analytic work also confirms overall positive effects of influencer activity on marketing outcomes (Han, Tan, & Ooi, 2024).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts tow interrelated theoretical perspectives:

The Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that firms achieve superior performance through unique capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). In higher education, marketing-related competencies such as brand storytelling, data analytics, and alumni advocacy as strategic assets. Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) theory complements RBV by emphasising the synergy of coordinated communication across multiple platforms (Naik & Raman, 2003). Together, these frameworks explain how marketing strategies create sustainable competitive advantage and performance.

2.5 Empirical Review

Studies worldwide link marketing strategy integration to improved organisational outcomes. For example, Peruta and Shields (2018) found that active social media engagement enhances student loyalty and reputation. Referral systems build credibility and improve conversion rates (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009), while influencer collaborations boost brand authenticity (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). However, Nigerian research remains fragmented, often focusing on individual tactics rather than integrated marketing capabilities.

Ng'ang'a and Anjichi (2025) examined market development strategy and the performance of chartered universities in Kenya. The study adopted descriptive–correlational research utilising stratified samples. Regression analysis was carried out and findings revealed that market development strategy significantly predicted performance metrics (enrolments, revenue diversity). The finding of this study aligns with that of our study emphasising on the marketing strategies in enhancing performance of institutions.

Olumeru, Ajike and Kabuoh (2025) examined the effect of social media marketing on enrolment growth of selected private universities in South-West Nigeria. The study utilised cross-sectional survey of 241 marketing/admin staff across 22 private universities. Analysis was done using multiple regression with SPSS 23. Social media marketing dimensions used were brand awareness (SMM), audience engagement, lead generation, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), conversion rate optimization. Findings revealed SMM significantly predicted enrolment growth (Adj. $R^2 \approx 0.369$, F significant). Brand awareness ($\beta \approx .213$, $p < .05$) and conversion rate ($\beta \approx .332$, $p < .05$) were the strongest predictors; e-WOM and engagement were not significant when modeled jointly. Although e-WOM and engagement were not significant in this study, social media marketing still remains one vita strategy for enrolment growth as revealed in our study.

Chan, Mahadi, Adamu, Ng and Fadzilah (2025) examined integrated marketing communication and university reputation in Malaysian private HEIs. Utilising cross-sectional survey and PLS-SEM, findings showed IMC consistency and message integration significantly enhanced institutional reputation, an antecedent to applications and acceptance rates. Overall, the evidence reinforces the integrated marketing communication and university reputation nexus in the specified context.

Phan, Hok, and Long (2025) examined marketing mix as factors impact on student's enrollment in private higher education in Cambodia. Employing quantitative survey (n=600 across Y1–Y4) and analysing using CFA and SEM. Findings showed that product, price, promotion, people, process positively predicted enrolment; place and physical evidence were not significant. Overall, the findings reinforce marketing mix as factors impact on student's enrollment in private higher education nexus in the specified context.

3. METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional research design was adopted, focusing on private universities in South–South Nigeria. The population included staff involved in marketing, admissions, and administration. Using Cochran's formula, 384 respondents were proportionally sampled. Data were collected via a validated questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha values (0.79–0.88) confirmed reliability. Data were analysed using multiple regression with HC3 robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity and multicollinearity.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Regression Results

Table 1: Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Std. Error (HC3)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Social Media Marketing	0.411	0.042	9.79	0.000
Print Advertising	0.182	0.039	4.67	0.001
Referral Programmes	0.365	0.041	8.91	0.000
Influencer Partnerships	0.213	0.045	4.73	0.000
R² = 0.71	**F(4,379)=62.47, p<0.001**			

All four strategies significantly predicted organisational performance, jointly explaining 71% of variance. Social media marketing and referral programmes emerged as dominant drivers, consistent with prior studies showing that interactivity and trust-based communication strengthen student engagement and institutional reputation.

These results validate RBV assumptions: marketing strategies act as intangible assets that enhance competitiveness. Print advertising, though traditional, remains relevant for credibility and local reach. Influencer partnerships improve perceived authenticity and bridge digital engagement with social proof. The integrated marketing configuration thus maximises both reach and persuasion.

5. CONCLUSION

Marketing strategies significantly influence the organisational performance of private universities in Nigeria. Social media and referral mechanisms yield the strongest impact, while influencer collaborations and print media amplify visibility and trust. To enhance competitiveness, universities should: 1. Institutionalise alumni/parent referral systems with CRM tracking. 2. Strengthen social media engagement through interactive and authentic content. 3. Integrate influencer and print campaigns within a unified IMC plan. 4. Employ marketing analytics to assess cost-per-enrolment and ROI.

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