# INTERROGATING THE ROLE OF BRAND VISIBILITY ON THE SURVIVAL OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN ECOWAS COUNTRIES

**NWOKORO, Uche C.**
School of Media & Communication,
City University, Phnom Penh Cambodia
+2348066655039; +2348034038252;
chrisunwokoro@gmail.com

**Abstract**
This study interrogated the role of brand visibility on the survival of private universities in ECOWAS. Stratified Sampling Technique was used to select two branded and visible private universities in Nigeria and two less branded and less visible universities in Benin. The validity of primary data collected through interviews was tested using secondary data collected through content analysis. The gathered data lent significant insight into the benefits of brand visibility programs in university survival. The Nigerian universities that engage in regular brand visibility programs enjoy public recognition, acceptance and increased enrolment; while the Benin comparison universities with low brand visibility activities suffer hostile government policies, low public acceptance and low student enrolment.

**Key words:** Survival, Private Universities, Branding, Brand Visibility, ECOWAS

## 1.0    Background to the Study

Most private universities in some small countries of the Economic Community of West African States like Benin, and Togo, are like commodity products and can hardly be effectively marketed as the attributes of brands are not felt. In Benin, they bear such abbreviated cluster names like ESGT, ESAE, ESCAE, EPS, ESEP, ESPAM, ECOTES, among others. Most of their logos manifest rioting colors, congested images, too many colors that constitute nuisance in the eyes and minds of their target audience. The only available marketing promotion tools in their control - website, and social media - are often left in the hands of toddlers. Considering the fact that they offer almost same courses and degrees; there is hardly any distinction between one university and another. Some operate

in low-cut buildings leading to being classified as glorified secondary schools by some Nigerians.

They perhaps avoid the mainstream media campaigns that will give them premium exposure, endorse their programs and enhance their image because they are unbranded, operate in a French speaking Benin even as they target the English speaking Nigerians. They rather prefer unorganized and uncoordinated disruptive marketing using social media, websites, handbills, and road shows to market sensitive products like university academic programs. Most of their message contents in the adopted media tools look alike, offensive and appear in irritating language and colors in most cases. The more they try to promote, the more they tarnish whatever image left in them. To this effect one hardly hear of any Unique Selling Points in their messages. This leaves their prospects angry, confused and indecisive. In most cases their students drift as the marketing persons that aided their admissions leave the university. As a result, students' population in most the universities in Benin runs below 500.

Little wonder, the Nigerian and Benin Governments have formulate what look like unfavorable policies against the universities. Last January, precisely 02/01/24, the Nigerian Government ordered the suspension of evaluation and accreditation of degree certificates from 45 private universities in Benin and Togo following an alleged degree racketeering in one institution (Channels TV, 2/1/24; The Cable, 2/1/24; Daily Trust, 2/1/24; the Guardian 2/1/24). In February 2023, not less than twelve private universities were shut down or suspended by Benin National Government for noncompliance to the rules. Two years ago, the same Government clamped down not less than two big private universities; while the biggest and what used to be the most popular, is at the verge of becoming a ghost town. The affected students, lecturers and support staff running in tens of thousands were thrown into frustration and despair adding more pressure to the economies.

Additional pointers to the pity state of the institutions include the blacklisting of some university programs and their certificates by the National University Commission (NUC) in Nigeria few years ago; and similar policies by the Nigerian Medical Council rejecting Nursing and Medical Lab graduates from Benin, Togo and Cameroon from writing the Council Exams and practicing.

On the other divide, Nigerian universities, private or public, are not left out in allegations of certificate racketeering, and graduation of questionable academic strength candidates. Some universities and Polytechnics have at one time or the other been accused of involvement of graduating unqualified candidates. As it is in Nigeria, so, we observe cases of certificate racketeering even in the developed countries of the world. Why has the Nigerian Government not shut any of the erring universities?

Akpotu and Akpochafo (2009) had earlier submitted that stakeholders in the university system have become disenchanted with the universities and their graduates perceived as half-baked. Even with the high fee structure, riots, epileptic power and water supply, high crime rate including terrorism, banditry, abduction, kidnapping, suicide in campuses, cultism, that bedevil private universities in Nigeria, Government kept managing the situations. Amidst the odds, most private universities still enjoy large student population hitting above 10,000; command public confidence; live big and long.

It's also worthy to note that starting small as felt in private universities in Benin may not be the problem as most of the first generation universities in Nigeria started in scanty building complex. Imo State University, for instance, took off from Madonna High School, IhiteUboma. Yet they commanded public respect and patronage.

As Bock, et al (2005) views it, in the higher education market where competition is fierce and where prospective students and their parents may select from among many competitive offerings, creating an identity through branding has become essential. In the general consumer market, branding is particularly important in helping to position a product in the minds of the product's target market. According to Kotler & Keller (2009), a successful brand campaign is not just about getting the target market to choose an organization or product over the competition, but rather getting prospects to see the organization/product as the only one that provides a solution to their problem. A good brand delivers the value proposition clearly, confirms an organization's credibility, connects the target market prospects emotionally, motivates the buyer, and establishes consumer loyalty.

Knox &Balmer (2001) investigated corporate branding, corporate identity and brand marketing and reported as follows: top managements of organizations never understood the power of branding until recently where

organizations have incorporated branding into their strategic goals and due to competition within the market, individual organizations use branding to distinguish itself from other competitors.

The power of a brand relies heavily on the ability to focus on the consumer's needs and that is why defining the target market helps to strengthen a brand's effectiveness. No matter what a brand's objectives are, identifying and gaining the devotion of the target market is believed to be a necessary means to realizing those objectives. Unfortunately, most private universities in Benin, either do not care about this truth or never recognized government as part of their target market and a major stakeholder.

University branding is a set of strategies that have objectives of positively influencing the reputation of the institution, tending to improve the university visibility and the growth of the environments (Del Pino (2019). Branding began as a channel of choice for consumers and has grown to include what an organization represents in worth and values. A good university corporate brand inspires confidence on employees, students and other stakeholders who develop association with the organization and attracts more students to the brand when they come in contact with it. Keller (1998) validates that consumer's perspective of brand's name is directly associated to psychological attributes which enable us to create meaning. Keller (1993) had earlier opined that customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand. Customer's preference and loyalty to a brand increases revenue and market share.

Schultz, (2005) research finding that show an association between brand loyalty and continuous demand validates the above views. This is because a satisfied customer buys more and buys longer. The long term relationships between consumers and a brand is an indication of long term economic survival of the brand and hence a sign of consumer satisfaction. Consumer satisfaction can be determined by a number of factors of which brand awareness is a constituent.
From the foregoing, brand awareness affects not only consumers' but also government decisions on matters involving the brand, private universities and their managers inclusive.

Most private university managers in Benin seem to be bereft of the concept of brand visibility. Thus, we hear of government approved universities being shut down in Benin, but hardly hear of any government approved university in Nigeria being shut down. While Nigerian government through the NUC will blacklist an unaccredited program, the Benin Ministry of Higher Education will shut down the entire system. In addition to the suspensions from Nigeria, the UK universities now reject graduates of Benin private universities in their post graduate programs intakes.

## 1.1  An Overview of the Problem
Amidst stiff competition for students' enrolment, exorbitant fees, irregular electricity and water supply, civil unrest, private universities in Nigeria thrive while their Benin counterparts with low fees, serene environment with regular electricity and water supply,  face extinction. The recent suspension of evaluation and accreditation of degree certificates from Benin and Togo by the Nigerian Government, as well as the rejection of certificates from Benin based universities by UK universities for post graduate admission are some of the sad reports.

Since most of the survival index discussed earlier including fee structure, environmental factors, crime rate, power supply seem to be in favor of Benin yet Benin based private universities suffer public rejections even as Nigerian comparison universities thrive. The study therefore critically examined the role of brand visibility in the disparity between the crisis private universities in Benin Republic face and the success of their counterparts in Nigeria.
The aim is to proffer solutions that would save private universities in small ECOWAS countries from extinction.

## 1.2  Objective of the Study
The overall objective of the study is to examine the role of brand visibility on private universities in West Africa with the view to establishing valuable means of ensuring their survival for life.

## 1.3  Conceptual Clarifications
Brand – features of a product or corporate body including name, logo, house colors, that distinguish the product or firm from those of competitors
Branding – the process of creating distinct features that distinguish a product from competition

Brand Identities – unique features that conceive the way a brand is perceived by the target market

Brand Visibility – the rate at which a brand is visible to its target audience via various conventional and digital marketing channels

Private University –degree awarding educational institution owned by an individual, family or a group like the church and often run as business entity

Comparative Study –evaluating results of a structured study carried out in two different locations

ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States

BU – Babcock University, Ilisan, Nigeria

WAUU – West African Union University, Cotonou, Benin

Ad – advertising, advert

## 2.0   Review of Relevant Literature

This chapter critically reviewed relevant literature, identifying their sources, connections and gaps. The review covers: the concept of branding, brand management, brand visibility, etc.

## 2.1   The Concept of Branding

Branding may be as old as man. The Bible in Isaiah 3:24 declare, 'instead of beauty, branding (New Int'l Version). 'Burning' instead of 'beauty' had earlier been used in the same Bible text in King James Version. Burning and branding in the above text stands for artificial beauty not natural. Flemming et al (2003) assert that 'The original meaning of the word 'brand' seems to derive from an Old Norse word *brandr*, which meant 'to burn' (Interbrand Group, 1992). Yet in the etymology of the word, this idea of branding as a "permanent mark deliberately made with hot iron" now takes second place to "goods of particular name or trade mark" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1990).

The above definitions show that truly, brands are made; and that the concept of branding keep evolving. Oxford English Dictionary, views brand as a *label* "attached to an object to give information about it" (Larry Percy in Flemming et al 2003). Oxford definition failed to capture the real value of branding. Thus the American Marketing Association describes a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of competitors." AMA definition reminds us

of the *reason* for a brand: to enable a person to identify one alternative from a competitor ((Kotler, 1992). Del Pino et al (2019) assert "branding is a process that allows building brands and consumer products with high market acceptance …". All of this is true.

Going by the definitions offered by the AMA, and Keller (1998) contribution that consumer's perspective of brand's name is directly associated to psychological attributes which enable us to create meaning; a brand identifies the seller or maker. A legally registered brand guarantees the seller or maker exclusive rights to use the brand name in perpetuity. While copyrights and patents have expiration dates, brand names may be used for life. Even as Universities are lifelong brands most private university founders and government policies grossly negate this.

**A brand may convey up to six levels of meanings:**
- Attributes: A brand brings to mind certain attributes. Toyota suggests fuel economy, built for Nigerian roads, and durable automobiles.
- Benefits: Attributes are translated into functional and emotional benefits. The benefit derivable from a highly respected university degree could be that the holder is honored and may not shop for another university all things being equal.
- Values: Brand says something about the producer's values. Mercedes stands for high performance, safety, and prestige; just as Nigerian premier universities stand for quality
- Personality: The brand can project a certain personality. Mercedes may suggest a no-nonsense boss, or a reigning lion just as Cambridge degrees stand for class and standard
- Culture: A brand may represent a certain culture. Mercedes represents German culture which includes: organized, efficient, high quality.
- User: The brand suggests the kind of consumer who buys or uses the product. Graduates of City University are considered to come from rich homes.

**Managing Brands According to Their Classifications**
Brands are classified as functional brand, image brand, and experiential brands for easy communication.

* Consumers purchase functional brand to satisfy a functional need such as to relieve headache, to shave. PR does well in communicating this kind of brand. * Image brands arise with products or services that are difficult to differentiate, or to assess quality. Communication strategy for image brands includes creating a distinctive design, associating them with celebrity users, or creating a powerful advertising image. They are designed to say something positive about the brand user. Image brands rely heavily on advertising creativity; heavy advertising expenditures.

* Experiential brands involve the consumer beyond simply acquiring the product. The consumer often meet and interact with trained marketers who may offer them the brands free of charge or sell below market price. Experiential brands are best communicated using the vehicle of public relation.

Private Universities in West Africa fit into the three at one time or the other. For instance, newly established private universities in dare need of students may be classified as experiential brands. All private universities in Benin may be classified as image brands since they run similar courses and target almost same market. University education is a functional brand for it satisfies the functional needs of people.

Branding has become such a strong force that hardly anything goes unbranded. If salt, bananas, chicken and even sales outlets, corporate vehicles are today branded, how much more universities. Digital marketing of branded products has become a culture in many countries of the world and universities that ignore this may be attracting grave consequences like we observed in Benin.

**Brand Identity and Brand Equity**
The effect of a positive brand attitude leads to something marketers call *brand equity*. What exactly is brand equity? Most marketers agree that it is that 'something' attached to a brand that adds value over and above the objective characteristics of the product. Whatever that 'something' is, it is embodied in people's attitudes towards that brand. It is dynamic, and subject to change over time. It attaches itself to the brand name, providing a current summary of people's feelings, knowledge and experience with that product (Larry Percy in Flemming, 2003).

For clearer understanding, Percy remarks: Think about chocolate for a minute. Basically, chocolate is chocolate. Or is it? Are some *brands* better than others? Why? What about washing-up powder? They all get the job done, and use the same basic ingredients. Or do you think some do a better job than others? What about toothpaste, underwear, or university? Where do the differences among brands in these product categories come from? How much of the difference is 'real' versus perceived? Why do you prefer one brand over another, especially if when looked at with a coldly objective eye? Brand communication creates the distinction even where there is none.

**Brand Visibility**
What is being said about a brand in the media, how frequently it is being said, and in what particular media it is being said constitute aspects of brand visibility. For a brand to be visible it has to create maximum awareness as well as command quality features that can register with ease in the minds of the target audience. According to Bhasin 2022 (marketing91.com) Brand visibility is the rate at which a brand is visible to its target audience via various conventional and digital marketing channels.
According to "How Sociable" (www howsociable.com) most valuable brands are not always the most visible in the media. We have monopoly brands like water corporations and other utility products that excel in business with low visibility. Even within the competitive brands, most valuable ones are less visible in the social media but more visible in the mainstream media. For example, Coca Cola, IBM, Microsoft, GE appear more visible in mainstream media and less visible in social media compare with five well-known social media brands, like Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

For a brand to be visible it has to create maximum awareness as well as command quality features that can register with ease in the minds of the target audience. Private universities in West Africa have found new haven in the use of social media to make their brands visible. To some scholars, what matters is how often the target audience views your product; the message reach; and all that. Experiences and investigations have however shown mix reactions. Whereas most private universities in Nigeria are successful at this; it is a disaster in Benin.

## Gathering and Measuring Brand Visibility Data

The data could be gathered in either of the following ways: first, someone could be given the responsibility of searching through vast amounts of data in the vast numbers of posts on the various social media platforms and counting and documenting this information. Alternatively, the data could be obtained from a service that regularly scans through the media electronically, and compiles and counts a brand's visibility.

The websites rendering services in gathering data include: How Sociable (www howsociable.com); Google Analytics, a free service offered by Google that generates detailed statistics about the visitors to a website, which are useful to online marketers; A.C. Neilsen, a marketing research company, provides a range of paid-for services to their clients that track various aspects of brand visibility in social media; Social Mention (www.socialmention.com), an interesting (currently free) tool that allows users to assess a brand's real-time status in a wide range of social media, in terms of the brand's strength, sentiments toward it, how passionate those who comment on it are, and the reach it enjoys. Another, though majors on mainstream media data gathering in West Africa is Media Reach OMD.

How Sociable tracks the visibility of any brand in 32 different social media, providing a score for the visibility on each, as well as an overall "visibility" score. The software scours the web for all mentions of the sought brand in a wide range of social media, counts these and assigns each mention to the particular social medium it occurred in, in order to achieve counts of the brands mentions across the 32 different social media considered. Simply by entering the brand name into a check box on the website, the user can obtain an overall visibility score and as well as visibility scores across the 32 different social media sites.

The overall visibility score assigned to a brand provides a quick way to compare the visibility of one brand to another. According to the site (Markwell, 2010) a visibility score is calculated by taking a set of benchmark results using one globally recognized traditional brand and giving it a score of 1000. To ensure that even small, local brands will have a chance of scoring, they use a sliding scale. For example, a brand such as Coca-Cola has around 8,000 times more photos mentioning it on the photo sharing site Flickr compared to another brand, but the other brand will still

get a score of 10 for having some photos rather than getting 0 (www howsociable.com).

## Brand Positioning

According to Percy, a brand position is a 'super communication' effect that tells the consumer what the brand is, who it is for, and what it offers. This reflects the relationship between brand positioning and the two core communication effects of brand awareness and brand attitude. It's easy to understand that one must have strong awareness if a brand is to be considered when the 'need' for that type of product occurs. Brand attitude, however, is not quite so easy to deal with as identifying who exactly *is* the target audience of your university enrolment campaign is a huge task. Is everyone looking for the same thing; or the same things all the time? What is important, and to whom? How are brands seen to deliver on the things important to the target audience? Answers to these questions are critical if we are to positively evaluate brand attitude.

Effective communication strategy requires an understanding of what that belief structure is, and how it builds brand attitude. Within the overall positioning that result from this understanding, we must determine what the benefit emphasis and focus should be. To begin with, it is important to remember that purchase motive is really the *underlying* basis of benefit. Purchase motives are the fundamental 'energizers' of buyer behavior. These same motives also energize the usage of products. Motive-based positioning requires a *correct* answer to the question of why consumers in the category are *really* buying particular *brands*. Unfortunately, the inexperienced think benefits must include everything the brand offers in one message.

One must also be careful to distinguish between motives that drive product category decisions rather than brand decisions. People may enroll in a morally loose university because they want fun (a negative motive); another group may prefer a disciplined one because they want to study without distractions. Benefits like comfort or low fee relate to negative motives, and are unlikely to drive *specific brand* purchases. Yet, someone may be looking for a good price in the category, but *not* at the expense of 'standard.' The reason this is such an important point is that positive motives suggest marketing communication where the execution itself actually becomes the product benefit. Here more than ever a truly unique

execution is required where the brand owns the 'feeling' created by the advertisers for the brand. You can't 'prove' you have a more 'stylish' or popular shoe, but you can make people *believe* you do (Percy 2003).

We can conveniently conclude here that brand positioning may not occur without communicating distinct brand features. The recent experience of private universities in Benin, shows marketers cannot position a brand using negative motives as it attracts morally loose users which may attracts government wrath. Leading brands see positioning a task that cannot be compromised.

## Negative Visibility in Branding

Coca Cola and her Advertising Agency define Advertising as "truth well told". The definition basically viewed advertising from the perspective of levels of screenings advert messages pass through before their exposure to the public. The Copywriter's extensive research in search of facts; the media planner's research on media facts; the Ad Agency team reviews and proposal; the client's critique at presentation; pre-testing exercises; the regulatory agencies screenings on ad message and brand claims; the screening by the media house; among others may have necessitates Coca Cola's view. Most major advertising campaigns are carefully pre-tested on trial audiences before launch. With the rigorous screening, brand miscommunication still happen.

A reviewer in the 1950s UK cigarette ad that failed felt that brand visibility mistake today would be unlikely to happen as most major advertising campaigns are carefully pre-tested on trial audiences before launch. But this is not true as records of brands that have suffered from negative visibility in the 21st century abound. Dove 'Racist' Ad (2017); Cultural Blunders in Ad Coke in China and Cuba, Pepsi in China ('Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead' –translation) https://www.presencegroup.eu 2023; just to mention a few.

## Theoretical Framework

Institutional theory addresses the expansive boundaries and normative environments within which universities, industry, and students interact. It suggests a field of organizations and actors comprising of rules, reward systems, cognitive-cultural meanings, and taken for granted understandings (Campbell 1997; Scott and Davis 2006). Institutional theory according to

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) does not frown at universities emulating one another on their website contents by way of derivative pressures based on meeting students' needs. Taking understanding for granted is the cause of the conflict between private universities and governments in Africa.

**Brand personality in theory**
Brand personality is borrowed from theories on human personality. Humans are unique and have their own unique personality. Brand personality has something to do with the way humans differ from each other. Personality is 'the thing' that makes someone a person; it's the part of an individual that most of the time is consistent and durable. Often, we interact constantly with persons and objects and differ in different situations (Lippa, 1994). Brands that want to survive must distinguish themselves.

## 3.0    Research Design
The study is a Qualitative Research and data collection was carried out using triangulations approach involving interviews and contents analysis. Triangulations enabled the researcher to collect data from different sources to ensure more reliable results. The data were categorized for easy analysis. To examine the Role of Brand Visibility on the Survival of Private Universities in West Africa, two universities each from Nigeria and Benin Republic were selected. None of the universities enjoy government subventions. Structured interview research design was adopted on two universities while the mainstream, social media and websites activities of all the four were studied. Data collected from interview were validated using findings from their websites, Facebook pages, and mainstream media presence -covering contents, updates, website visitor friendliness, frequency, language, style and substance.

The structured interview was self-administered. The self-administered interview method enabled the researcher to probe into the past and present activities, ideas, thoughts, opinions, and what motivates the universities. It also enabled the researcher to see and assess things physically.

## 3.1    Population of Study
**The work is a comparative study** covering majorly four private universities in Nigeria and Benin. As at2020/2021 academic session, there were about 74 listed private universities in Benin.

*Source:* Ministere De L'Enseignement SuperieurEt De Recherche Scientifique, Republique Du Benin; Guide D'orientation Universitaire 2020-2021.

Nigeria has over 99 private universities as at March 2021. Source: https://www.nuc.edu.ng/Nigeria-un.  Put together about 173 private universities operate in the two countries.

 Scope of Study: four private universities were studied -two from each countries. The researcher could not study beyond this size due to time and financial restraints.

## 3.3    Sampling Procedure

Two private university duly accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education in Benin and two by the National Universities Commission in Nigeria were selected. In Benin, Universite De L'UnuonOuest African (WAUU), and EPS LA-CITE University all in Cotonou; in comparison, Babcock University, Ilesan, and Caleb University Lagos, Nigeria. The four are major players in their category as private universities in the two countries. While Babcock and Caleb were two of the most branded private universities in Nigeria; WAUU and EPS are two of the most branded universities in Benin. Both university targets primarily Nigerian youths.

The Sample Study Size is about 2.31 percent of all accredited private universities in the two countries. This sample size is statistically representative of the population and it is chosen for the sake of time, convenience and resource.

## 3.4    Sampling Technique

The universities are selected using the stratified random sampling technique. This technique enabled for greater precision as population of study was selected based on stratum. This is to reduce sampling error, ensures relevant variables are adequately represented, and that selection is made from homogeneous group.

The study samples are selected based on the following identified variables:
Status at Inception: The two universities covered through interviews started low. Babcock started as a seminary school, got affiliated with other institutions, later cleared by NUC to run university programs and award Degrees. WAUU started as a couching center for Ordinary Level WAEC

and JAMB; coordinating study center of a university Diploma program in Nigeria, and later licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education in Benin to run university programs and award Degrees. Caleb and EPS started big.

*Accreditation:* The four are duly accredited to run first Degree programs in their respective countries

*Stratum:* While Nigeria represents the Anglophone, Benin represents the Francophone countries.

**Ownership:** All the Universities are privately owned.

*Age fit:* None of the university is less than ten years

*Target Market:* the universities target mostly Nigerian youths and are also in need of students' enrolment

*Programs:* They offer identical academic programs in a highly competitive market

*Brand Visibility:* All have needs for branding and brand visibility programs.

*Location:* While Babcock an Caleb are located in Ogun and Lagos States that serve as hobnobs of private universities in Nigeria, WAUU and EPS are located in Cotonou –the hobnob of private universities in Benin.

### 3.5 Sources of Data

The work is a field based study meant to discover its own facts and figures. Though a primary research that sought primary data, secondary data were also sought to validate the primary data.

Primary Data were sourced through interviews, while secondary data were sourced through the university websites, blogs, facebook pages, and mainstream media presence.

### 3.5.1 Collection of Data

For primary data collection, the marketing / corporate communication directors of the two universities were interviewed through a personal interview by the researcher. Secondary Data were collected on all four universities.

### 3.5.2 Measurement of Variables and Data Analysis Strategies

Each response in a Group is given a figurative value of two. Each group response share equal value. Total response is derived from total value divided by the number of Groups that attended the question usually 2. Data collected were analyzed using qualitative research approach.

## 4.0 Discussion of Findings

The study interrogated the Role of Brand Visibility on the Survival of Private Universities in the ECOWAS countries. The highlights of the findings show that: both Nigerian and Benin universities studied have brand identities; create advertisement messages; have websites and carry out social media marketing programs. But while Nigerian universities brand identity creators are full time staff, Benin counterparts used outsiders to create theirs. They are law abiding and engage in social responsibility programs. The validity of these reports were confirmed by the extracts from the websites and social media handles of the four universities. This answers research question 1 that sought to know the level of brand consciousness among the managers of the universities in Nigeria and Benin and shows that university managers in the two countries understand the concept of brand visibility

However, while Nigeria has rigid university education policy that encourages branding, Benin policy on private university education can change with new leadership; while universities in Nigeria command good corporate image to context unfavorable government policy, the Benin counterparts lack such image. It was also reported that Nigerian universities have functional marketing communications and ICT units manned by experts for their programs promotion, as against the anybody can pouch students syndrome practiced in the Benin comparison universities.This answers research question 2 that sought to know the hindrances to university branding and brand visibility in the two countries and show that unfavorable government policies create uncertainty in the minds of university owners in Benin resulting to low investment in the sector.

Lastly, while the Nigerian universities have easy to recall logo with just two - three colors, a website manned by technically skilled ICT persons who upgrades website contents and features regularly, and communicates their brand features using social and mainstream media regularly; the comparison universities have traders who cannot develop marketing programs and toddlers in ICT with less attention paid to website contents, upgrade; and scarcely communicate their brand features leading their marketing. Consequently, the universities in Benin suffer very low student enrolment, government harassment, low public acceptance and recognition. This answers research question 3 which sought to address the role brand visibility play in the survival of universities in the two countries, and shows

that expertise handling of brands and their features attract not only huge sales but public respect.

In summary, findings show that positively visible brand commands public loyalty, acceptance, respect, and in turn head-off negative reports on a brand, while less known shoddy brand attracts damnation even from government. What grows a university is not just creating brand messages but being conscious of brand features and communicating the right brand features using the right media. The findings were in agreement with Bock et al (2014), and Joseph et al (2012) research findings on branding impact on student recruitment.

## 5.0    Conclusion

Based on the above discussion of findings, the researcher concludes that positive brand visibility attracts recognition; public trust and acceptance which increase sales and curtail hostile government policies. These are part of what private universities in small ECOWAS countries need to survive.

Following the above conclusion, the researcher recommends as follow:

To restore public confidence and value to their certificates, small private universities in the ECOWAS countries of the subcontinent should embark on image laundering campaigns.

To survive stiff competition and hostile government policies, private universities in West Africa should engage the services of marketing communications experts –retirees can do.

ECOWAS should harmonize academic standard across board to douse the doubts of university founders in Benin in developing the sector.

A comparative Quantitative study to examine the impact of brand visibility on student enrolment in private universities in West Africa (from the students' perspective) is recommended.

## REFERENCES

Aaker, D. (2010). Building Strong Brands. New York: Pocket Books

Armstrong, G. and Kotler, P. (2009). Marketing, an introduction. London: Pearson Educational Int'l.

Bovee, C. and Arens, W. (1989). Contemporary Advertising. Illinois: Irwin Inc.

Clow, K. et al (2007). Integrated Advertising, Promotion, and Marketing Communications. Michigan: Pearson Prentice Hall

Dawes & Brown (2002). Indonesian Privatization Programs & Regulations Handbook. US, IPB Inc.

Kotler, P. and Keller, K. (2008). Marketing Management. Australia: Pearson Education

 Kotler, P. and Armstrong, G. (2004). Principles of Marketing. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India Private Limited.

Pedersen, P. (1st Edition). Strategic Sports Communication, Human Kinetics. USA, Amazon

Percy, L. et al (2008). Strategic Integrated Marketing Communication: Theory & Practice. UK, Routledge Amazon.com

## JOURNAL

Bakar, R et al (2019), Sustainability of Higher Education: A Global Perspective … Malaysia, PernebitUniversitiSains

Binsardi, A. &Ekwulugo, F. (2003). International Marketing of British Education: Research on the Student Perception and the UK Market Penetration. A – Z Journal, 2006-2021

Del Pino et al (2020), Improving University Reputation through Academic Digital Branding, Spain, IGI Global

Papadimitriou (ed) (2018), Competition in Higher Education Branding and Marketing, palgravemacmillan, ISBN 9783319585260, DOI 10.1007/9783319585277

Ministere De L'EnseignementSuperieurEt De RechercheScientifique, Republique Du Benin; Guide D'orientationUniversitaire 2020-2021.

## ONLINE

www.calebuniversity.edu.ng
www.babcockuniversity.edu.ng
https://epsuniversite.com
https://www.thewauu.com
https://www.presencegroup.eu 2023
https://www.thecable.com/2024/01/fg-suspends-accreditation-of-certificates-from-benin-togo
https://vanguardngr.com/2024/01/nigerian-universities-also-guilty-of-certificate-racketeering/
https://www.presencegroup.eu/2023/pepsi-will-bring-your-ancestors-back-from-the-dead
https://www.marketing91/Bhasin/2020/brand-visibility