Assessing the Influence of Advertising on Student Enrolment in Private Tertiary Institutions in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Private tertiary institutions have increasingly advertised their products in recent years to the general public in Ghana through various media. The desire to find out whether these institutions just copy other business entities blindly or that advertising actually helps in increasing their enrolments led to this study. The main aim of the study was to find out if advertising had an influence on students' enrolment decision in private tertiary institutions. Two private universities were selected and all the students along with the admission/marketing officers of the institutions were targeted. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data from the students and unstructured interviews were organised to gather data from the admission/marketing officers. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data. The results showed that advertising in addition to serving as a source of information to students also influenced the enrolment decision of some students. There were however other factors that influenced the enrolment decision of students such as family, friends, current students, etc that could be exploited by these institutions to their advantage.

1.0 Introduction

Tertiary education has been identified to be one of the vehicles in which nations can ride to the destination of economic growth and development. According to the Centre for Policy Studies (2005), all countries worldwide recognise the significance of tertiary education. Developed as well as developing nations are striving to obtain the highest levels possible when it comes to tertiary education. It is also evident from the rising levels of the cost of tertiary education and the growing numbers of prospective tertiary students that it will be difficult if not impossible for governments of even developed nations to provide tertiary education single-handedly. The need for the participation of private players who, in most cases, join the education industry as for-profit-institutions (Benjamin et al, 2007). Due to the effect of on every industry (Brown & Oplatka, 2006), including that of education, many educational institutions have already resorted to corporate principles to run their operations and to recruit their 'customers' that is the students (Beneke, 2011). This is more pronounced with the private institutions that, unlike their counterparts in the public sector usually overwhelmed by applications (Patrinos, 2000) due to government subsidy (Akintoye, 2008), have to strive to get students to enrol in them. They therefore employ all marketing communication tools most popular among them being advertising to bring to the knowledge of prospective customers (students and their families) the products they have to offer. But according to Kotler and Keller (2009), the communication environment is increasingly becoming very tough due to the drastic changes in the way consumers process communications.

1.1 Statement of Problem

The last several years have seen a tremendous growth in college marketing through the media (Ming, 2010). Over the years in Ghana, the media both print and electronic, walls in cities and other available spaces have been besieged by advertisements of all kinds. Among the prominent organisations involved in this mass advertising of late are educational institutions, most especially private tertiary institutions.

But according to Engel et al (1994), appealing to customers or potential customers that are not identified using the mass market is increasingly becoming problematic and risks not achieving its aim. The reason in

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their view is that, the traditional concentration on heavyweight mass communication campaigns has been replaced by more direct and highly targeted promotional activities using direct marketing and other personal communication tools with the intention of reaching the smallest of all target groups and the single individual. In a paper presented at the First International Conference on Business Economics, Management and Marketing in Athens in 2003, Kitchen observed that communication budgets had been moved away from mass media and traditional advertising to more direct consumer and trade promotions (Kitchen, 2003).

This study therefore has as objective to investigate the influence of advertising in the enrolment of students in private tertiary institutions in Ghana using two private universities in Kumasi.

The results of the study will be significant to the institutions in which it is being carried out and many others to enable them better communicate. To academia it will serve as a reference for future research and to the members of the general public who may want into the private tertiary education business it will serve as a guide as to how to reach out to their prospective clients.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Advertising
Today, definitions of advertising abound. But it must be noted that the definition as well as its practice has evolved over the years in consonance with time and available resources and technology. Starch (1923, p: 5), defined advertising as "selling in print". Starch's definition is limited to the print media. This is as a result of the fact that the only available media at the time was print media (Nan & Faber, 2004), and the other forms of media, as we know today, did not exist at that time. Richards and Curran (2002, P. 74) defined Advertising as" a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action now or in the future". They focus on the persuasive role that advertising plays in the communication process. Kotler and Keller (2009, p.538) see advertising as "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor". Dunn et al (1978), Richards and Curran (2002) and Kotler and Keller (2009) viewed advertising from its functional perspectives, hence they define it as a paid, non-personal communication through various media by business firms, non-profit organization, and individuals who are in some way identified in the advertising message and who hope to inform or persuade members of a particular audience. Morden (1991) is of the opinion that advertising is used to establish a basic awareness of the product or service in the mind of the potential customer and to build up knowledge about it.

Advertising's main aims are usually to make known the availability of a product, an idea or a science on offer to the target audience (Akanbi et al, 2011), and influence their awareness, attitude and buying behaviour (Ayanwale et al, 2005). Private Tertiary institutions therefore advertise to create the awareness of their prospective customers (the students) and their parents of the academic courses they offer in the schools, to persuade and remind them (Boone & Kurtz, 2001) of the advantages they would get in the advertising institutions than in other institutions offering same or similar programmes. According to Hossler et al (1990), television and radio advertising have proven to be particularly effective in helping institutions build their image and visibility especially in specific geographical areas. A survey carried out by Jansen and Brenn-White (2011) for DAAD on the Overview of Current Marketing Initiatives by Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and National Agencies within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) showed that most institutions use multimedia advertisements through print media, direct mail, outdoor (posters, banners and billboards), online advertisements and email advertising to make known their institutions and the programmes they offer.

2.2 Student Choice and Enrolment Process
If an organisation is to succeed, its central point of focus should be the customer (Peters & Austin, 1985). Therefore, every business has as purpose, to create, satisfy and retain customers.

The way students make choices when it comes to tertiary Institutions is likened to what Kotler and Fox (1995) term consumer buyer behaviour. This studies how individuals, groups and organisations select, buy, use and dispose of goods or services to satisfy their needs and desires and, the factors affect this behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008).

Studying the consumer buyer behaviour could provide answers to key marketing questions such as: what do consumers want to buy?, how do they buy?, and why do they select a specific provider? Providing answers to such questions could guide marketers towards more effective marketing approaches, bearing in mind that the aim of marketing is to meet and satisfy consumer needs and wants (Blackwell et al, 2001).

If tertiary educational Institutions are able to know the process of the student choice of institution and subsequent enrolment, then they would be in a better position to properly target them with appropriate advertising messages.

The process that students go through in choosing an institution is a complex series of activities (Litten, 1982). According to Al-Fattal (2010), five stages are identified as being the stages that students go through in their choice process. The five stages are needs and motives, information gathering, evaluating alternatives, decision and post-choice evaluation. In his view, a need or motive for higher education arises on the part of the student. The student then seeks Information on the various providers of the type of education he or she may want to acquire. The various alternatives are evaluated using the criteria best suitable to the student after which a decision to enrol is taken. After enrolment an evaluation is done as to whether the decision to enrol is worth it or otherwise. Figure 2.2 below shows the student choice and enrolment steps.
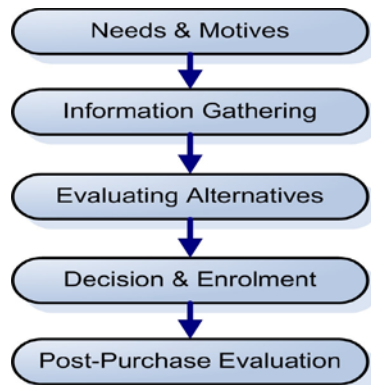

Figure 2.2: Student Choice Model (Adapted from Al-Fattal, 2010)

2.2.1 Need and motives
The realisation of a need usually begins the student's decision making process to make a choice (Al-Fattal, 2010). He asserts that, a need is activated when there is sufficient discrepancy between the actual and the desired state of the customer. According to Van Dam (1997), a PROBLEM arises from a perceived lack of something on the part of the customer.

A student's PROBLEM for university education could be triggered by many factors either within or outside the student concerned. Internally the professional career the student intends to get could be a motive for getting a university education. Family and or friends of students can also be a very important source of motivation for their WISHES for tertiary education (MacDermott et al, 1987; Choi et al, 2005). Corwin and Tierney (2007), Roderick *et al.* (2008), and Mullen (2009), mention teachers as playing a great role in inspiring students to pursue tertiary education.

Marketers of various tertiary institutions try to find out the unmet or unsatisfied needs of consumers (students) so they can find ways to satisfy them. Their ability to satisfy that needs or wishes attract students to their institutions.

Kotler and Fox (1995) observe that many educational institutions still make the mistake of predicting students' needs and design programmes that do not match those needs. Educational institutions can effectively design academic programmes only when they are able to ascertain what students actually want to study, and this can only be achieved through building strong communication channels with students (Al-Fattal, 2010).

Institutions and their marketers cannot create needs for students, they can however, help them to recognise their educational problems through awareness creation of unperceived needs or possible future problems that could arise if action, presented by these institutions in the form of solutions is not taken presently (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001). This can bring a lot of students to become potential students if they actually recognise their need as presented by the advertising institutions.

2.2.2 Information Gathering

After the student has identified his/her educational problem to study in a tertiary institution, the search for information about the providers of such services (tertiary education) begins. This search can either be internal or external. Internally the student begins to search from his own memory the various providers of the types of education he seeks. According to Palmer (2001), this internal search is usually based on the student's own experience and knowledge. The student's quest and PROBLEM level for the information and his or her involvement are the determinants of the amount of information gathered (Menon et al, 2007). Some students will be satisfied with a little amount of information whilst others would want to have a whole great amount before they can conveniently and confidently make a choice. Menon (2004) posits that the student's level of involvement has a direct link with the student's socio-economic background - those with lower socio-economic backgrounds are more involved than their counterparts with higher socio-economic backgrounds. The level of involvement of a particular student in the decision to be taken is seen in the information gathering process (Al-Fattal, 2010). A student will be highly involved in the decision to attend the university since it will have a great impact on his or her future life prospects (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Hesketh & Knight, 1999, Drummond, 2004).

After the internal search, if the student realises that the information gathered is not enough to base on and make a decision, external sources of information are considered. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2008) the sources of information available to prospective customers are as follows: (i) personal non-marketer controlled sources. These include family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, colleagues etc; (ii) personal marketer controlled sources whose examples include sales representatives; (iii) non-personal non-marketer controlled. Publicity in the mass media is an example of this source; (iv) non-personal marketer controlled, examples include but not limited to advertisements, prospectuses, websites.

Students start by exhausting the personal sources of information before supplementing it with the non-personal sources. There are a lot of sources that students gather information from to help them make decisions. Taylor (1992) is of the belief that friends' advice is the major source of information influencing students' choice of tertiary educational institutions. James et al (1999) and Foskett (2009) point out the importance of the role played by career advisers in the provision of information on higher educational institutions. An institution's own members of staff, through telephone conversations and email correspondences to prospective students, also play a major role in influencing student choice decision (Evans, 1995). Most students also turn to their families for advice as to which institution to choose (Pimpa, 2005). Other literature such as Pasternak (2005) seeks to suggest that the information given by the institution's own printed materials is also very influential in student choice process.

Despite these numerous sources of information, there is still a general lack of adequate information for prospective students and their parents to make meaningful comparisons among universities offering the same or similar academic programmes (Eckel, 2007). He attributes this to poor promotional materials designed by educational institutions that are less informative.

3.0 Methodology

The main objective of this study was to investigate the influence of advertising on the enrolment decision of students in private tertiary institutions. The target population was all the students of the selected private institutions irrespective of gender or program of study and the marketing officers of the institutions selected. A sample of one hundred and twenty-six student respondents and six admission/marketing officers was targeted. Messah and Immaculate (2011) conducted a similar study in Kenya with a sample size of one hundred and twenty-five respondents which yielded conclusive results. This makes the researcher confident that this sample size will be able to generate conclusive results that could be used for generalization. Convenience sampling based on ease of access was adopted in the case of student respondents whilst purposive sampling was used in that of the admission/marketing office.

Two separate sets of self- administered questionnaires were designed for the students and the authorities (admission, public relations or marketing officials) of the institutions. Unstructured interviews were also conducted to draw more information from the admission/marketing officers.

4.0 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents
Demographic characteristics such as age and gender are important if not mandatory if accurate decisions are to be taken in terms of marketing communication and it tools. These are needed to be able to determine which communication tools and their corresponding media particular gender and age groups are attracted to before rolling out a communication campaign to one's target group.

Table 4.1 Gender of Respondents

Gender	N	%
Male	69	57.5
Female	51	42.5
Total	120	100.0

Source: Researchers' field work, 2012

Table 4.1 above shows the gender statistics of the student respondents. 57.5% (n=69) of the respondents who filled the questionnaires were male students whilst the remaining 42.5% (n=51) were females. As the marketing communication activities of the private tertiary institutions are aimed at both male and female prospective students, knowing which sex group is influenced by which marketing communication tools is absolutely necessary for proper planning and targeting.

Table 4.2 Age Range of Respondents

Age Group	N	%
18-27 years	54	45.0
28-37 years	50	41.7
Above 37 years	16	13.3
Total	120	100.0

Source: Researchers' field work, 2012

From Table 4.2 above which represents the age groups of student respondents, 45% (n=54) of the total number of respondents were between ages 18-27 years. This was followed by the age range of 28-37 years which represented 41.7% (n=50). Those above 37 years represents 13.3% (n=16). This is very relevant to the study and the institutions because though as tertiary institutions they are open to people of all ages, the dominant age group of students in the tertiary institutions is 18-27 years. This is in line with the educational structure of Ghana such that a person completing the senior high school would fall in the range of 17-27 years. The institutions will therefore need to know the communication activities and media this age range is attracted to in order to well communicate and get the required response.

4.2 Source of Marketing Information to Prospective Students
Marketers send out information about their products and services through different communication tools and media, both personal and non-personal (Jennifer, 1998). These tools include but are not limited to advertising, Public Relations, Personal Selling and many others including some that are not controlled by the marketer such as word of mouth and publicity.

Table 4.3 below illustrates some of the sources of marketing information to the respondents.

Table 4.3 Source of Marketing Information

Source	N	%
Advertisement	42	35.0
Recommendation by family, friend or colleague	32	26.7
Recommendation by current student	18	15.0
Campus Visit	5	4.2
Special Publication	3	2.5
Advertisement and Recommendation by family, friend or colleague	12	10.0
Advertisement and campus visit	2	1.7
advertisement and Recommendation by current student	3	2.5
Total	117	97.5
Other	3	2.5
Total	120	100.0

Source: Researchers' field work, 2012

From Table 4.3 above, different numbers of respondents said they were informed about the institutions that they have enrolled in by different sources. Advertising has the biggest percentage of 35% (n=42) as being a source of information to the respondents. This confirms what Akanbi et al (2011) asserted that advertising serves to inform potential customers about the availability of products or services as offered by the advertising marketer.

Following advertising is recommendation by family, friend or colleague with a percentage of 26.7% (n=32). This indicates that family members, friends and colleagues are also a very potent and important source of information to potential students seeking admission to tertiary institutions. These findings are in line with those of MacDermott et al (1987); Choi et al (2005); Pimpa (2005) and Taylor (1992) that family and or friends of students can also be a very important source of information and or motivation for their need for tertiary education and the institution they would enrol in.

Current students are also said to be a source of information for potential students. 15% (n=18) of the total respondents said they got their information about the school from current students. Some potential students see their peers who are already in tertiary institutions as role models and would therefore listen to what they say about which institution to enrol in. This indicates that the public relations (PR) machinery of the institutions is quite functional as current students and employees are part of the PR machinery of a company.

Campus visit also had a significant percentage of 4.2% (n=5) as being the source of information to respondents before they enrolled. This gives the impression that personal selling as a communication tool is also practised by these institutions.

Special Publications such as brochures, magazines and others printed by Institutions also proved to be a source of information to potential students. These together represented 2.5% (n=3) of the respondents on their source of information. This confirms the suggestion by Pasternak (2005) that the information given by the institution's own printed materials is also a very influential source of information to prospective students and their choice process.

A total of 14.2% (n= 17) of the respondents had more than one source of information. It should however be noted that all these included advertising in their sources of information. If this is added to advertising's percentage of 35%, the total percentage of respondents who heard about their institutions through

adverting rises to 49.2% making it the leading source of information to potential students as per the findings of this study. This finding seems to go contrary to the assertion of Kitchen (2003) that mass media advertising is rapidly making way for more personal form of communication such as personal selling and direct marketing. It is however worth noting that Kitchen's environment (America) is absolutely different from that (Ghana) in which this research was carried out and this could account for the discrepancy.

A percentage of 2.5% (n=3) of respondents said they got their information from other sources. Two of those respondents said they got the information from church announcements whilst the last one has a lecturer of the school as the source of information. This last respondent's source confirms Evans (1995) observation that an institution's own members of staff can be a good source of information to potential customers.

4.3 Advertising as a Source of Information and Influence of Enrolment Decision

As evidenced by the information on Table 4.3 above, a greater percentage of 49.2% of respondents said they got the information about their school through either advertisement alone or advertisement and some other source. Different respondents chose different media as being the source from which they got the information. Below is a figure showing the different media sources and the percentages of respondents who chose them as being their sources of information.

Figure 4.1 Type of Advertising Media
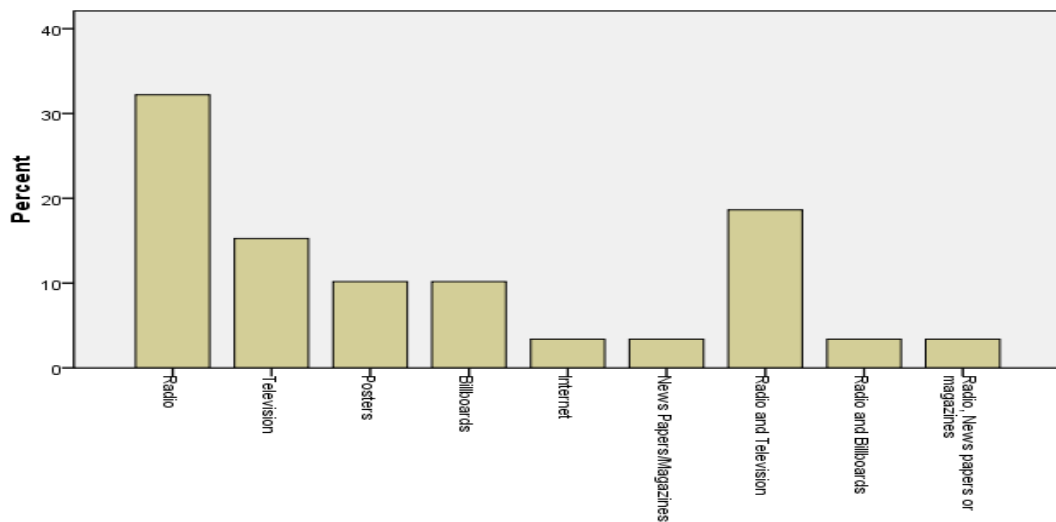
Source: Researchers' field work, 2012

From Figure 4.1 above which illustrates the type of advertising media and the corresponding percentages of respondents that got their information through them, 32.2% (n=19) of those who chose advertising as their source of information heard it from only radio advertisement. 15.3% (n=9) heard it through Television advertisement, 10.2% (n=6) through posters, 10.2% (n=6) through billboards. The internet as well as newspapers/magazines had 3.4% (n=2) each. Those who heard their information from both radio and television represented 18.6% (n=11). Radio and billboards and radio and newspapers/magazines both got 3.4% (n=2) each. In all, the total percentage of respondents who chose radio advertisement as their source of information is 57.6% making radio advertisement the dominant source of information to prospective students. Television advertisement is the next highest single source of information to prospective students with a percentage of 15.3% followed by billboards and posters. Newspapers/magazines and the internet performed quite poorly with a percentage of 3.4%. This is either as result of the fact that our part of the world is not so internet inclined and so prospective students don't usually visit the net or that the institutions do not advertise on the internet. With small percentage recorded by newspapers/magazines, respondents probably have not developed the culture of reading newspapers. It is observed that the

dominant age group of respondents is 18-27 years whose interest is not found in the reading of new papers as compared to listening to radio or watching television.

A larger number of respondents who chose radio as the medium through which they heard the advertisement fell in the age group of 28-37 years. This is probably due to the fact that people in this age group are most likely to be in the working class and so would be listening to the radio whilst at work than watching television or reading newspapers. In the same vein, a larger number of respondents whose enrolment decision was influenced by advertising fell within this same age group (28-37 years) and also chose radio as the medium of advertisement through which they heard the information about the school.

4.3.1 Influence of Enrolment Decision by Advertising

Though 57.6% of respondents said they heard about their institutions either through only advertising or advertising and other sources, not all those respondents were influenced by advertising to enrol in the institution.

Table 4.4 Influence of decision by advertisement

Influence	N	%
Yes	50	84.7
No	9	15.3
Total	59	100.0

Source: Researchers' field work, 2012

From Table 4.4 above, out the total number of respondents who heard about their institutions through advertisement, 84.7% (n=50) of them were influenced by advertising to enrol. Only 15.3% were not influenced by the advertisement they heard. This strongly confirms the assertion of Ayanwale et al (2005) that advertising influences the buying decision of customers.

Table 4.5 Extent of influence of enrolment decision by advertising

Extent of influence	N	%
Totally	10	19.6
Very Much	28	54.9
Much	9	17.6
Not Much	4	7.8
Total	51	100.0

Source: Researchers' field work, 2012

Table 4.5 above illustrates the extent of influence of advertising on respondents' enrolment decision. 19.6% (n=10) of respondents influenced by advertising had their enrolment decision totally influenced by advertising. A greater percentage of 54.9% (n=28) had their decision influenced very much by advertising. 17.6% (n=9) had much of their enrolment decision influenced by advertising and 7.8% (n=4) had their enrolment decision not much influenced by advertising.

The results of the study indicate that advertising serves as a source of information about the advertising institutions to students and also influences the enrolment decision of students in private tertiary institutions. However, not all students who were informed about the institutions through advertising were influenced by it to enrol. It is worth noting that there are other equally important factors such as family and friends that influence the enrolment decision of students.

Limitations and future research

The study, just like all others, can not claim to be without any limitations. There were a number of limitations and these limitations can serve as areas for future research. First of all, the study focused on only

two private institutions. Future research could be wider in scope to cover other private institutions. Secondly, only one marketing communication tool (advertising) was investigated. Future studies could be designed to cover several other communication tools.

Conclusion

The study had as its main aim to find out if advertising influenced the enrolment decision of students in private tertiary institutions. The results indicate that advertising, in addition to serving as a source of information to prospective students also influenced the enrolment decision of many students. It is therefore imperative for advertising institutions to strengthen their messages and widen their media of advertising to reach out to more prospective customers and attract more students to enrol.

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