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A Qualitative Inquiry into Marketing Strategies in Increasing Student Enrollment: Mind-Share Marketing Analysis of Latecomer University

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ABSTRACT

Background

Higher education institutions - particularly latecomer or private university - are under growing pressure to differentiate themselves and attract sufficient enrollment to sustain operations and growth due to the heightened competition, shifting demographics, and changing student expectations in open and digital landscape.

Purpose

This study seeks to critically examine the role of marketing strategies in enhancing student enrollment at Nahdlatul Ulama University of Yogyakarta, a latecomer university in Indonesia.

Design/method/approach

The study proposes an integrated marketing framework specifically tailored for higher education, grounded in mind-share marketing management and interpreted to the lens of higher education. This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing an ethnographic approach to enable an immersive exploration of the social and cultural dynamics within the research context.

Results

Contrary to prevailing assumptions in existing literature, this study reveals that Nahdlatul Ulama University (UNU) Yogyakarta does not predominantly employ conventional marketing techniques such as advertisements, posters, or television campaigns, which are commonly adopted by many higher education institutions. Instead, UNU Yogyakarta emphasizes the development of sustained, strategic partnerships with key stakeholders - such as Islamic boarding schools, Nahdlatul Ulama-affiliated secondary schools, governmental agencies, and industry representatives - who hold significant influence over its long-term institutional growth.

Contribution/value

This marketing approach effectively cultivates customer loyalty, thereby ensuring a stable and potentially increasing student enrollment, particularly for latecomer university or private university.

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INTRODUCTION

Private higher education in Indonesia has undergone substantial growth over recent decades. It now comprises approximately 66,27% of all higher education institutions nationwide, with a total of 4,554 institutions recorded as of 2025 (PDDikti, 2025). This rapid growth reflects a continual increase in the number of higher education institutions established annually. This trend inevitably intensifies competition among universities, compelling them to demonstrate academic excellence and institutional distinction in order to secure their position within an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

To secure a stable position within the competitive landscape of higher education, institutional sustainability is strongly influenced by the degree of public interest in enrollment. A high level of interest from high school graduates - regarded as prospective students - serves as a key indicator of an institution's market relevance and overall appeal. To foster such interest, higher education institutions must prioritize the quality of their academic offerings and student services. As stated by Kendrick (2023), one measurable indicator of educational quality is student enrollment. Institutions that consistently demonstrate growth in both enrollment and student retention are typically perceived as successful in providing valuable academic programs and a supportive learning environment. This consideration is particularly critical for newly established private universities, where positive enrollment trends not only support institutional development but also enhance the institution's public profile and competitive positioning within the higher education landscape.

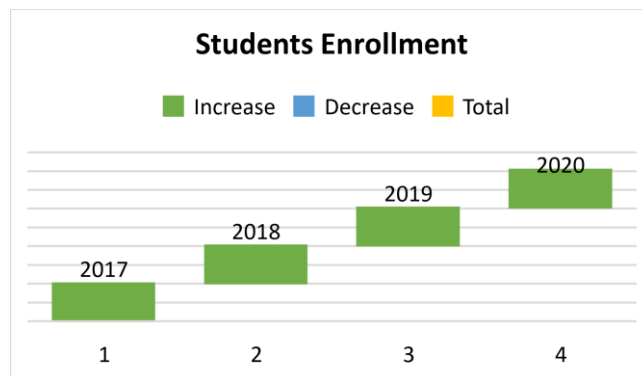
Amidst the crisis and open digital ecosystem, student enrollment patterns have undergone significant disruption, with one of the most pronounced declines observed in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. According to the Higher Education Database (PDDikti) by the 2020, the number of new student enrollments at private higher education institutions (known as *Perguruan Tinggi Swasta*, or PTS) in the region dropped to 59,981 - substantially below the average intake recorded in previous years. A primary factor contributing to this decline is the rising cost of education, which continues to pose a substantial barrier to access for many prospective students, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds.

This phenomenon aligns with recent findings on student enrollment behavior, which indicate that prospective students tend to prioritize admission to public universities (known as *Perguruan Tinggi Negeri*, or PTN), largely due to their perceived prestige and greater affordability. Only a minority, typically those not admitted to PTN's consider enrolling in private university (PTS), and even then, they tend to favor institutions with perceived academic superiority. This dynamic fosters intense competition among private universities to attract qualified applicants. Several factors have been identified as influential in students' decision-making processes when selecting a university. These include the variety and relevance of academic programs, perceived educational quality, career prospects, campus facilities, and the credibility of the institution's academic offerings (Moody, 2020; Sedahmed & Noureldien, 2019). Moreover, financial considerations - such as tuition affordability -

alongside access to scholarships, internship and career development program, facilities and institutional culture, significantly impact enrollment decisions (Matsolo et al., 2018).

Remarkably, the decline in new students enrollment above did not similarly affect Nahdlatul Ulama University of Yogyakarta (UNU Yogyakarta). As a new latecomer university in Indonesia and a newly established private higher education at Yogyakarta, UNU Yogyakarta represents a distinctive case.

Officially operated by 2017 and had not yet produce graduates by 2020, the institution achieved significant early milestones in building its reputation and public visibility. Its ability to attract interest from prospective students is underscored by its enrolment performance, reaching 1,124 new students by 2020. This figure is particularly noteworthy given the institution's recent establishment and the broader challenges faced by new private universities in attracting student interest during their initial years of operation (as shown in graph 1).



Graph 1. The rising number of UNU Yogyakarta's New Entrances

Source: Accountability Report on New Student Admissions at UNU Yogyakarta

The data illustrates that, despite prevailing global challenges, UNU Yogyakarta has continued to demonstrate enrollment growth - an outcome that positively contributes to its institutional development. This trend is particularly distinctive when contrasted with the struggles faced by many other private higher education institutions (PTS), which are grappling with declining student numbers worldwide. Consequently, there is a critical need for further research into marketing management strategies within the higher education sector. In particular, examining how such strategies can effectively support student recruitment at newly established private universities may provide a valuable foundation for institutional development and long-term sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urgency of Marketing Strategy in Higher Education

To ensure long-term competitiveness in the higher education landscape, higher education should formulate its strategic management. Strategic management within the

higher education context refers to a structured, participatory, and forward-looking process that aligns institutional policies with dynamic external and internal conditions (Fitriana et al., 2021; Yureva et al., 2016). It emphasizes the systematic utilization of organizational resources and capabilities to capitalize on opportunities while mitigating potential threats in the external environment (Cherepovska et al., 2021). Institutions that adopt effective strategic management approaches are better positioned to navigate market complexities, enhance institutional performance, and ensure long-term viability - without compromising their foundational educational mission.

In higher education context, a critical component of higher education strategic management is marketing management. It encompasses all strategic efforts undertaken by higher education institutions to promote their academic offerings to prospective students (Lim et al., 2020). These efforts aim to align educational programs with the needs and expectations of the target market, utilizing effective pricing, communication, and distribution strategies to engage and motivate potential students (Shobri & Jaosantia, 2021; Sri Haryanti et al., 2023). As founded by Nuriadi (2021), the more effectively marketing strategies are implemented in private university, the greater the institutions capacity to attract and retain its intended audience.

The discussion above highlights that marketing management plays a crucial role in the strategic operations of higher education institutions. Its primary function is to establish and enhance the institution's brand image, thereby increasing its appeal to prospective students (Fadhli et al., 2023). By adopting well-designed marketing strategies, institutions can improve the overall quality and effectiveness of their higher education systems. As noted by Hasbi et al., (2016), the implementation of a synergistic and integrated marketing approach enables the delivery of services that align with the expectations of the target market while simultaneously offering superior value. This alignment not only strengthens institutional reputation but also contributes to sustainable enrollment growth. Additionally, effective marketing management enables institutions to reach their intended audience more efficiently and attract a larger number of prospective students (Kuklin & Sanovich, 2023). Consequently, marketing management plays a vital role in supporting the sustainable development of higher education institutions, particularly in their efforts to remain competitive in an increasingly dynamic educational market.

Mind-Share Marketing Strategy

Mind-share, often referred to as Competitive strategy, is a marketing concept that denotes the extent of consumer awareness and recall of a company's products, services, or brand-related ideas. Essentially, mind share reflects the degree to which a company occupies a prominent position in the consumer's consciousness (Shinta, 2011). Within this the framework, three fundamental strategic components are commonly identified: segmentation, targeting, and positioning. These elements collectively guide how organizations define their market, identify potential customers, and establish a distinctive brand presence.

Segmentation, refers to a strategic approach used to analyse and understand the target market by examining specific variables. These variables may include environmental

factors (such as culture and demographics), psychological dimensions (including perception, attitudes, and learning processes), and individual characteristics (such as motivation, needs, lifestyle, and knowledge) (Shinta, 2011). This strategy also encompasses identifying market opportunities, formulating objectives, developing communication strategies, and conceptualizing the products or services being offered. In essence, market segmentation involves the systematic identification of distinct consumer groups, acknowledging that each group exhibits unique characteristics and preferences that influence their product or service choices.

Beside, **targeting** is the strategic process of identifying and selecting a specific market segment by aligning market responses with fundamental needs, purchasing power, and possible constraints. Once a segment is selected, organizations focus on effectively reaching and serving that market. According to Shinta (2011), there are four critical criteria that must be considered when selecting a target market to ensure optimal outcomes in the context of higher education institutions: (1) Responsiveness - the target market must exhibit a positive and measurable response to the marketing efforts and the products or services offered; (2) Potential - the market should not only be evaluated based on its size, but also on its purchasing power and the desire to obtain the institution's offerings; (3) Adequate growth - the selected segment should demonstrate promising development and expansion potential over time; and (4) Media reach - institutions must assess their ability to effectively communicate and disseminate information to the target market, particularly through appropriate advertising and promotional channels.

Finally, **positioning** refers to the strategic effort to establish a distinctive and memorable perception of a product or service in the minds of the target market. It involves crafting a unique identity for the offering such that potential consumers form specific evaluations and can associate themselves with the product (Kontler & Keller, 2012). According to Shinta (2011), higher education institutions can implement product-based positioning by clearly communicating how their academic offerings differ from those of competing institutions. This differentiation strategy facilitates consumer recognition and helps prospective students distinguish one institution's services from another.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to examine the marketing strategies implemented by a newly established private higher education institution, Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama (UNU) Yogyakarta. Ethnography involves an in-depth exploration of naturally occurring behaviors within a specific cultural or social group. This approach aims to understand the dynamic relationship between culture and behavior, where culture is defined as the shared beliefs, values, strategies, practices, and attitudes of the group under investigation (Ary, Donald; Jacobs, Lucy Cheser; Sorensen, Chris; Razavieh, 2010; Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021).

To collect the data, this study will involve multiple qualitative methods, including direct observation and in-depth interviews with key university stakeholders - such as the deputy of Rectors, academic administration, and other relevant participants. In addition, the

study will incorporate document analysis to support triangulation and enrich contextual understanding. All data will be analyzed following the interactive model of qualitative analysis proposed by Miles et al., (2014) which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

RESULTS

The findings of the study indicate that UNU Yogyakarta's marketing strategy began with the implementation of the STP (Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning) framework as a foundational approach.

Segmentation

Market segmentation serves as a strategic approach to understanding the market by analyzing specific variables to identify opportunities for defining objectives, designing communication strategies, and shaping the concepts of services and products offered (Lim et al., 2020). In line with this, the result found that UNU Yogyakarta formulated its initial marketing strategy by conducting a comprehensive market analysis based on geographic, emotional, and psychographic segmentation. This multi-dimensional segmentation approach enabled the institution to better identify and respond to the diverse characteristics, motivations, and preferences of its prospective student population.

- **Geographically:** Nahdlatul Ulama University of Yogyakarta (UNU Yogyakarta) is located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, a region widely recognized as one of Indonesia's major academic hubs. This designation as a "student city" contributes to a heightened interest among prospective students seeking higher education in the area, thereby enhancing UNU Yogyakarta's potential to attract new enrollments. In terms of physical infrastructure, the university occupies a strategically developed urban campus with a total building area of 16,769.19 m², constructed on a 7,478 m² site. The main building rises 52 meters high over nine floors and is designed with a modern architectural concept under the supervision of Indonesia's Ministry of Public Works (PUPR). Its proximity to the city center and ease of access to various student-supporting facilities further strengthen its appeal, particularly for students residing in or relocating to Yogyakarta.
- **Emotionally:** UNU Yogyakarta strategically targets prospective students from senior high schools affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama educational network, as well as from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). This emotionally driven market focus plays a central role in shaping the university's promotional strategies. Hermawan et al., (2022) and Pradatha & Muksin (2021) stated that some groups of prospective students choose to enroll mainly because of shared religious beliefs and cultural values, instead of typical factors like tuition costs, school rankings, or available technology. For these students, the religious and cultural values embedded within an institution's identity serve as a decisive factor in selecting a university. Accordingly, UNU Yogyakarta leverages its *pesantren*-based values and affiliation with Nahdlatul Ulama to enhance its appeal within this segment.

- **Psychographically:** UNU Yogyakarta takes into account the career interests and aspirations of prospective students in the development and promotion of its academic programs. The findings indicate that many students base their choice of study programs on perceived alignment with labor market needs, particularly in sectors where employment opportunities are abundant or specialized roles remain unfilled. In response, UNU Yogyakarta strategically designs its programs to create direct pathways into key positions within the Nahdlatul Ulama organizational structure. This approach not only increases the practical relevance of its academic offerings but also enhances their appeal to students seeking clear professional outcomes. As Sitorus & Ginting (2021) and Hoang et al., (2019) emphasize, the perceived job prospects associated with a particular program are among the most influential factors guiding students' decisions in higher education.

Targeting

In establishing its position as a new entrant in the higher education sector, UNU Yogyakarta has set short-term objectives focused on attracting prospective students. As part of this effort, the university identifies and prioritizes target markets that demonstrate both strong interest and purchasing power - key indicators of market potential. The findings of this study indicate that the primary target market for UNU Yogyakarta consists of students from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and educational institutions affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama. These groups are considered strategically important due to their alignment with the university's cultural and religious values, as well as their demonstrated capacity and willingness to pursue higher education at UNU Yogyakarta.

Market Positioning

UNU Yogyakarta is positioned as a higher education institution rooted in the values of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah*, integrating the cultural and educational traditions of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) into its academic and campus life. This *pesantren-based* identity is reflected in various campus activities and institutional practices, reinforcing the university's religious and cultural orientation. Such positioning serves as a strategic appeal to prospective students-particularly those who are alumni of Islamic boarding schools-aligning with the university's target demographic. Furthermore, UNU Yogyakarta supports this identity through the establishment of a dedicated campus dormitory (*pesantren*), which functions as a space for maintaining and cultivating the values of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* within the student community.

Furthermore, UNU Yogyakarta strategically positions itself as a higher education institution that prioritizes the quality of its educational offerings. This commitment to quality is reflected in the provision of comprehensive teaching and learning facilities, including state-of-the-art campus infrastructure designed to enhance student knowledge and current demand of technological proficiency. The university also offers well-equipped library resources, research laboratories both on campus and in collaboration with multiple key industries, as well as a qualified faculty and professional education staff to support effective academic delivery and institutional management. Collectively, these resources contribute to

fostering a conducive learning environment aligned with the university's commitment to academic excellence.

In addition to emphasizing the quality of education, UNU Yogyakarta strategically positions itself through a strong focus on customer service. This is demonstrated by the provision of hybrid information services designed to assist prospective students in accessing comprehensive information about the university's academic offerings. Furthermore, UNU Yogyakarta fosters transparency and responsiveness by maintaining dedicated consultation services, providing students and their parents with accessible channels to raise inquiries or express concerns related to academic activities. This commitment to customer-oriented service enhances stakeholder engagement and supports the institution's broader marketing objectives.

DISCUSSION

To strengthen its position in higher education market, UNU Yogyakarta views prospective students as long-term institutional assets, recognizing that enrolled students can serve as informal ambassadors who influence future enrollment through word-of-mouth and peer networks. This approach allows the university to reduce its marketing expenditures over time while continuing to generate interest and increase outreach organically. As defined by Durmaz et al., (2020), lifetime value represents a critical dimension in evaluating the long-term significance of a consumer to an organization. Once the institution has established the lifetime value of its student base, the second goal is to enhance this value incrementally across different consumer segments. This involves strengthening student engagement and satisfaction to ensure sustained loyalty and ongoing referrals. The third stage focuses on reinvesting the returns from the first two objectives to acquire new students at a relatively low cost. By balancing current and incoming student groups, UNU Yogyakarta aims to achieve consistent and sustainable growth. As Afifi & Amini (2018) emphasize, such a strategy supports long-term profitability and resilience, even during periods of crisis, by maintaining stable or increasing levels of student retention and acquisition.

Moreover, in its marketing efforts, Nahdlatul Ulama University (UNU) Yogyakarta employs a promotional strategy centered on earned media. Earned media refers to the organic promotion of an institution through third-party endorsements and word-of-mouth channels, rather than paid advertising (Lovett & Staelin, 2016; Spotts et al., 2022; Yoon et al., 2024). In the case of UNU Yogyakarta, this strategy involves leveraging its extensive network of affiliations and institutional relationships. These include ties with the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU) at both regional and national levels, various Indonesian government ministries such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Investment, and the Ministry of Public Works, as well as academic partnerships with prominent universities in Yogyakarta, including Gadjah Mada University (UGM), etc. This strategy aligns with the findings of Kieu (2021); (Le, 2020); Sinaga & Rahayu (2024), who revealed that the effectiveness of communication and engagement efforts by the university, the influence of

significant others (such as parents, teachers, alumni, industry, or community leaders) affect students' decision-making when choosing a university.

Additionally, the university capitalizes on its connections with affiliated schools, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), alumni, organizational member, and internal academic staff, who play a key role in disseminating information about the institution. These third parties act as informal ambassadors, promoting UNU Yogyakarta to their families, peers, and professional networks. This strategy showed that UNU Yogyakarta's marketing strategy intentionally departs from conventional promotional methods by prioritizing strategic partnerships and interpersonal communication. This approach enhances credibility and fosters trust, especially crucial for a newly established institution seeking to establish its presence in a competitive higher education landscape.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer significant implications for the future marketing strategies of higher education institutions. Specifically, the results provide valuable insights for newly established or lesser-known private universities, serving as a strategic framework to cultivate a positive institutional climate that effectively attracts and increases student enrollment. This framework is grounded in the marketing approach successfully implemented by Nahdlatul Ulama University (UNU) Yogyakarta.

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