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THE PROMOTIONAL STRATEGY OF THE UNIVERSITY TO APPEAL TO POTENTIAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the impact of the university's promotional strategy on the enrollment of potential students. The study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews with current university students in the Purbalingga area as participants. The number of participants was determined by saturation, and the collected data were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were then analyzed using ATLAS.ti to identify emerging themes. The findings revealed that the most effective promotional strategies for attracting students included printed brochures and Instagram pages, coupled with personal messaging via WhatsApp and direct messages on Instagram. The study suggests that today's university target consumers, Generation Z, appreciate both digital and traditional advertising, as long as it provides clear information, has an aesthetically pleasing design, and offers personal interaction, creating a sense of real engagement without the need to visit the campus.

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ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran strategi promosi universitas dalam menarik calon mahasiswa untuk mendaftar. Penelitian ini menggunakan wawancara semi-struktural satu lawan satu dengan mahasiswa universitas saat ini di sekitar Purbalingga sebagai partisipan. Jumlah partisipan ditentukan berdasarkan saturasi, dan data yang terkumpul diinterpretasikan secara harfiah. Wawancara yang telah ditranskripsi dianalisis menggunakan ATLAS.ti untuk menemukan tema-tema yang muncul. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi promosi yang paling menarik bagi mahasiswa untuk mendaftar adalah brosur cetak dan halaman Instagram media sosial, bersama dengan pesan pribadi melalui WhatsApp dan pesan langsung melalui Instagram. Penelitian ini bermaksud menunjukkan bahwa Generasi Z sebagai konsumen target universitas saat ini menghargai baik iklan digital maupun tradisional, selama itu memberikan informasi yang jelas, memiliki desain yang estetis, dan memberikan interaksi personal yang memberi mereka perasaan keterlibatan nyata tanpa harus mengunjungi kampus.

INTRODUCTION

Promotion involves the use of incentives by producers to encourage salespeople to actively sell a brand and prompt consumers to make a purchase. It can be defined as a one-way flow of information or persuasion aimed at directing individuals or organizations towards actions that facilitate exchanges in marketing (Swasta & Irawan, 1989). In today's global business market, various promotional strategies are employed by both for-profit organizations, such as banking and industrial companies, and non-profit organizations, including universities, to ensure survival (Karunanithy & Sivesan, 2013). The term "Promotion Mix" or "Marketing Communication Mix" refers to a set of tools used by businesses to effectively communicate the benefits of their products or services

to customers. The challenge lies in selecting the right mix of promotional activities tailored to the specific needs of the business and organization, particularly in the context of universities (Karunanithy & Sivesan, 2013).

While the role of marketing in education is still debated, it is undeniable that marketing in education contributes to financial benefits, improves service quality, increases brand awareness, and builds a positive image in society (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002; Geiger, 2004; Eckel, 2007; Al-Fattal, 2010).

This research focuses on the role of promotional strategies implemented by universities in the Purbalingga region, specifically during the lead-up to the new school year, aiming to achieve increased student enrollment. The study emphasizes that promotion involves not only communication-based activities but also requires a deliberate, well-implemented combination of all promotional dimensions to satisfy organizational objectives, particularly in terms of student enrollment.

Purbalingga is home to five universities, including Kampus II Universitas Jendral Soedirman (UNSOED), Universitas Perwira Purbalingga (UNPERBA), Institut Teknologi dan Bisnis Muhammadiyah Purbalingga (ITBMP), Universitas Terbuka Pokjar Purbalingga (UT Purbalingga), and Kampus II Universitas Islam Negeri Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri (UIN Saizu) (Google, 2022). These universities employ various promotional strategies to attract prospective students. However, UNPERBA and ITBMP have experienced a decline in new student enrollment in recent years, possibly due to their relatively new status and weaker brand value compared to the more established UNSOED, UT Purbalingga, and UIN Saizu. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of university promotional strategies in attracting prospective students, providing valuable insights to help struggling universities prioritize their promotional strategies to attract a larger number of prospective students in the coming years.

This study contributes to the knowledge and literature in marketing education, particularly in the university context, and offers practical insights for education marketing to consider the right promotional mix to attract more prospective students, especially in the Generation Z era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Promotional Strategies

The theoretical framework on promotional strategies, known as the promotion mix, is derived from Kotler and Armstrong (2018). It comprises a combination of communication tools employed by a firm to execute the promotional process, engaging directly with consumers persuasively to communicate customer value and build customer relationships. The promotion mix includes five elements: Advertising, Sales Promotion, Personal Selling, Public Relations, and Direct and Digital Marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). In today's media-saturated society, the effective promotion encompasses various media and channels, emphasizing the integration of traditional, digital, and internet-based approaches (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The integration of these dimensions in the promotion mix can result in message clarity, consistency, and persuasiveness with a high impact and minimum cost (Percy, 2018). Combining these dimensions has been found to enhance marketing performance, leading to increased market share, sales, and corporate profits (Tleuberdinova & Sabdenbekova, 2018).

Advertisement is a form of paid and non-personal communication about ideas, organizations, products, and services by identified sponsors (Jobber, 2007). While traditional advertising media includes print media like newspapers and brochures, electronic advertising media comprises television, radio, and the internet or social media (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). However, recent marketing practices emphasize maximizing brand association, image, and quality perception to convince consumers of the product or service quality (Theodora, 2021). Commercial advertising, specifically aimed at gaining students' attention, increasing university brand recognition, and persuading students to enroll, plays a crucial role in creating brand awareness and influencing purchase intentions (Baker et al., 2005; Zhafira et al., 2018; Ri et al., 2020).

Sales Promotion is a direct persuasion strategy utilizing various incentives, such as coupons, contests, discounts, and premiums, to encourage product or service purchases (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Personal Selling involves direct interactions with potential buyers through presentations, answering questions, and taking orders, proving to be effective in building buyer preferences, beliefs, and actions (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Public Relations focus on establishing communication between the organization and external parties through activities like press conferences, customer service, or public events, contributing to positive image building and brand association (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Direct and Digital Marketing involves direct communication with targeted individuals, utilizing methods like direct mail, telemarketing, email marketing, and social media to create customer engagement and build one-to-one customer relationships (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018).

Previous research emphasizes the significant role of promotion in consumer purchase decisions,

particularly in the context of student enrollment (Neha & Manoj, 2013). Promotion mix positively affects brand equity (Karunanithy & Sivesan, 2013), and incorporating media advertisement, quality school programs, infrastructural development, and a school's online presence in marketing strategies has been recommended to boost student enrollment (Uchendu et al., 2015).

This study focuses explicitly on Generation Z as the targeted prospective students, aligning with the current societal phenomenon of Society 5.0.

Students' Enrollment

Kotler and Keller (2016) define purchase decision as the decision processes and actions of individuals involved in purchasing products or using services. In the context of this study, consumer purchase decisions refer to students' enrollment in the university. Prospective students decide to enroll based on information gathered and the influence of the university's promotional strategies.

Previous research indicates that promotional strategies, using the promotion mix, influence the psychology of targeted consumers, impacting positive behaviors in purchasing products or using services, especially in the case of student enrollment (Neha & Manoj, 2013; Damarjati et al., 2016). It has been suggested that universities need to predict the targeted prospective students to focus on specific promotional strategies (Briggs, 2006).

Promotional strategies serve as a means for universities to provide relevant information, attracting prospective students to enroll. The students, acting as buyers, undergo a decision-making process with stages such as problem recognition, information seeking, evaluating alternatives, making a purchase, and providing post-purchase feedback (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). In the context of student enrollment, promotional strategies are assigned to the information-seeking stage, where prospective students gather information about a university before deciding to enroll (Afifah, 2022).

During information seeking, students engage in internal searches based on personal knowledge and experiences from family, friends, and relatives. If internal searches prove insufficient, students initiate external searches by gathering information from various sources such as mass media, prospectuses, social media, websites, and contacting admissions administrators (Al-Fattal, 2010; Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Thus, promotional strategies play a crucial role in creating brand awareness, broadening brand knowledge, and generating interest among prospective students (Geiger, 2004).

This study, in line with prior research, highlights Generation Z as the explicit target of prospective students, aligning with the current societal phenomenon of Society 5.0.

RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative method approach, rooted in the post-positivism philosophy, serves as a research method employed to investigate the state of natural objects, where the researcher functions as the primary instrument. This approach enables the researcher to delve into the actual situation by tapping into the perspectives of participants through interviews (Sugiyono, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In this study, a one-on-one semi-structured interview method was utilized. The researcher actively engaged in the study and selected a limited number of participants from university students in the vicinity of Purbalingga. Purbalingga was chosen due to its higher concentration of universities compared to surrounding districts. Recent students were chosen as participants to gain precise insights into the role of promotional strategies employed by universities in attracting prospective students as their target customers for enrollment. The number of participants was determined by saturation, indicating that data collection ceased when no further information could be gathered through interviews, resulting in a total of 33 participants.

Audio interviews were transcribed verbatim. The study employed inductive data analysis, prioritizing the extraction of meaning over generalization. In addition to primary data obtained through interviews, secondary data were collected from university admission departments, websites, books, and journals. To ensure credibility and conformability, a peer review process was conducted to scrutinize the data and coding, refining categories and developing the most descriptive labels at each level (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

DISCUSSION AND DISCUSSION

To meet the prospective students' need about university related information, university in Purbalingga offered various promotional strategies to deliver the related information regarding the universities, includes advertising in print media, electronic media, social media, and website; personal selling strategy such as visiting schools and companies, individual selling, and call center; Public Relation strategy such as press-conference, admission office, and events; direct and digital marketing strategy such as email, instant messaging, and personal messaging; and sales promotion strategy such as university scholarship, tuition waiver, and Kartu Indonesia Pintar Kuliah (KIPK). KIPK is education

fund assistance provided by the Indonesian government for high school graduates (SMA) or equivalent that has good academic grade but have economic limitations (Pusat Layanan Pembiayaan Pendidikan, 2022).

Based on the interview analysis, researcher found that university in Purbalingga have implemented the promotional strategies using various traditional, digital, and internet media and channel which has broadened its market reach. It is proven by the interview which disclosure 16 students knew the university from closed related person such as family and friends, 10 students knew the university from social media, and 7 other students knew the university from other form of promotion such as brochure, flyer, billboard, former school, and radio news. This result disclosure and supports the prior studies and theory which promotional strategies can broaden the brand knowledge, create brand awareness and brand equity which lead to brand loyalty (Krussell & Paramita, 2016; Damarjati et al., 2016; Theodora, 2021).

The interview discovered that the university in Purbalingga were not only posted the advertisement in print media such as newspaper, magazine, flyer, brochure, banner, and billboard, but also in digital and social media such as TV, radio, website, YouTube, Instagram, and Tiktok, as their *Advertising Strategy*. The students explained that the most attractive form of digital and traditional advertisement delivered by the university respectively is Instagram and brochure. The students claim that they can find the complete related information and attractive design in both advertising form as the P2, P28 stated,

> "Brochure, since it provides clear information about new student registration, so I became convinced to join as a university student. It also says that the fees are very affordable, that's why I decided to enroll in that university", said P2.
>
> "Instagram, because there is a lot of information regarding the activities carried out, we can follow positive activities from uploaded photos and videos, and much more. Anyway, there are many interesting things from activity posts on Instagram, that's why I'm interested in enrolling at a university", said P28

The 26 students claim that their school or workplace is never been visited by the university. Meanwhile, 7 other students claim that their school or workplace have been visited by the university to make promotion. The universities comes to the school or workplace, and then enter each class or make a forum in auditorium, after that the university would elaborate in detail about the university such as vision, missions, school fees, facilities, university activities, student activities, and the course and study programs as the P28 and P30 explained,

> "They come to my school and then introducing the various existing departments or study programs as well as the activities and the students organizations that exist in the university", said P28.
>
> "The university told in detail about fees, facilities and so on……", said P30.

P30 also claim that one of explanation that interests him is that the recent students in the university are gathered from not only within the city, but also from other cities around Indonesia.

> "……They also told that students at the university were not only from within the city of Purbalingga, but also from various cities as well", said P30.

The university admission and promotional department claims that visiting the school or workplace is one of the ways of *Personal Selling Strategy* for the university to promote and attracts prospective students to enroll. The prospective students nowadays are come from Generation Z (Gen Z). Those participants' answer is in line with the prior research from Stanford scholars stated that Gen Z value diversity than other older generation. Gen Z is strive for a diverse community and is highly collaborative and social (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, & Woodhead, 2021).

University also provide call center or admission service center under the university admission and promotional department as part of *Personal Selling Strategy* to serve the prospective students who seeks more detail information personally such as scholarship and tuition waiver information, tuition fee payment, registration method, registration documents, and university accreditation, as P7 and P25 explained,

> "I asked a lot about how to register, the requirements for registration documents, and about the scholarships available at the university", said P7.
>
> "I asked about university accreditation and the tuition fees", said P25.

Other *Personal Selling Strategy* implemented by the university is creating an agent where the agent approach personally to the prospective students and persuade them to enroll in the university by explaining the admission details as P6 and P11, explained,

> "They go to every house which has children who will graduate from high school including my house, and then they describe in detail about their activities, course that I can takeand which classes. Thus my parents and I are very interested in it and decided to enroll", said P6.

> "They motivate me so that I am sure and want to continue my education at the university", said P11.

Most of students claim that the most attractive of the university's *Personal Selling Strategy* is the call center or admission service center combine with the personal messaging using WhatsApp (WA), since the students can personally contact the admission admin without visiting the premise and still get the expected detailed answers, as P28 explained,

> "I prefer contact them personally because when I contacted the call center via WhatsApp the response was very good like when I asked about the KIPK scholarship the admin responded very well. Even the admin explained about the KIPK scholarship itself to me. It makes me happy and satisfied", said P28.

University in Purbalingga also offered some benefits to the prospective students such as university scholarship (fully funded and partial funded), tuition waiver, and KIPK as *Sales Promotion Strategy*. Total 26 students claim that tuition waiver was the most attractive sales promotional strategy of university they enrolled for, since it can give the students opportunity to save the remaining money to make college preparation such as boarding house, transportation, college attributes, textbooks, and stationery, as the P29 explained. In addition, tuition waiver has no strict requirement compare to the scholarship.

> "Tuition waiver and discount. Yes because with tuition waiver and discount I can save my remaining money to buy stuffs to prepare for college, hahaha", said P29.

This is in line with the prior study that consumers are passionate about discount (Zhafira, Andreti, Akmal, & Kumar, 2018), and it has been studied long before that by Gupta and Cooper (1992) who found that offering discounts on a brand name has bigger impact on customer's purchase intention (Gupta & Cooper, 1992).

University in Purbalingga also actively participating in various public events such as education expo, campus fair, and other exhibition, which organized by the local government or other third parties. Some of the students prefer visiting the education exhibition since they can visit the university's booth and having direct conversation with the admin while having snacks and strolling around with friends.

The institutions were not only participating in events but also held their own events such as digital press-conference includes YouTube podcast and live Instagram as the part of their *Public Relation Strategy* in order to provide a place for prospective students who want to know more about the campus without visiting the premise. Public relations of university is a management function which aimed to managing and maintaining the relationships and communication between the university and various public groups such as government, industry, and prospective students in order to establish common goodwill and maintain the good reputation of the university (Arens, Weild, & Arens, 2011).

Besides press-conference, university also held their own event as part of *Public Relation Strategy* in order to attract more prospective students. Total 22 students explained that rather than university booth in the public event, those students were more attracted and interested by the university events such as academic contest, music contest, sport and e-sport competition, theater, stages, since the public can participated in the contest and competition which made the prospective students more interested to enroll, as P11 explained,

> "I love the events held by the university since I can participate in many interesting contest and competition for young millenials such as futsal, e-sport competition, and so on. Very entertaining and amazing", said P11.

This is in line with the prior study explained that the customers are influenced the most by premium and contest (Neha & Manoj, 2013).

Directmail, telemarketing, email, text (sms), prospectus, online marketing, mobile marketing, and social media marketing also implemented by university as the *Direct and Digital Marketing strategy* in order to communicate directly with or solicit response or dialogue from certain and prospective students. Twenty nine (29) students were agreed that mobile and social media marketing such as personal messaging by Whatsapp and direct message by Instagram has managed to persuade them to enroll in the university, since the students can ask any information needed and related to the university without visiting the premise. The students also agreed that personal or direct messages have allowed them to feel the real and intense engagement with the university admission without visiting the premise.

> "Whatsapp directly, because it makes it easier for me to ask everything about the university clearly. It's also what got me into university", said P9.
>
> "Whatsapp directly and direct messages instagram because it is more efficient and indicates directly to me to be invited to enroll in the university", said P19.

This is in line with the prior researches and theory that in order to attract more prospective students, university need to apply the combination of promotional strategies which unified and integrated. So that, university have more power to produce

stronger message and help to boost impact sales (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In conjunction with other prior study explained that promotional strategy works better in combine and can help to boost more customer purchase decision (Rohaeni, 2016). Furthermore, a study found that when the price dimension combined with advertising and featured with other promotional strategies, the sales volume increased by 24% (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

The fact that today's target market of university is comes from Generation Z, thus, university need to apply promotional strategies which suit best for Gen Z. Gen Z never experience living without internet. Thus, Gen Z prefers to surf the internet for information rather than visiting the premise, and very familiar to digital communication. (Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, & Woodhead, 2021)

The results of this study is relevance and supports the prior studies which agreed that marketing for education is necessary in order to broaden brand knowledge, gain financial benefits, and enhance the positive image to the society (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002; Eckel, 2007; Al-Fattal, 2010). Moreover, when the organization implemented the right promotional strategies, it can enhance the company sales hereby students' enrollment in the university (Amalia & Purwanegara, 2013; Uchendu, et al., 2015; Damarjati, et al., 2016; Percy, 2018; Tleuberdinova & Sabdenbekova, 2018).

Furthermore, this study has shown that the today's university's targeted consumer are comes from Gen Z with the unique fact that they are valued both digital and traditional advertising as long as it give them clearly related information and have aesthetic design. Additionally, Gen Z also valued the personal interaction even though through virtual space. Therefore, university need to provide them with personal interaction which gives them real engagement feeling without visiting the premise.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it can be deduced that print media brochures and Instagram on social media have a more significant impact on students' enrollment compared to other forms of advertising media and channels. This is attributed to their ability to provide clear and relevant information about the universities, including details about departments, admission requirements, tuition fees, and student activities, coupled with aesthetically pleasing designs. Conversely, personally visiting the school or workplace of prospective students for university presentations has limited influence on enrollment, as most students prefer personal conversations or messaging via mobile platforms like WhatsApp and Direct Message (DM) on Instagram. This allows them to obtain the necessary information without physically visiting the premises.

Additionally, tuition waivers are found to be more attractive than other sales promotion strategies, such as government scholarships, as the latter often involves a more rigorous selection process. Moreover, organizing university events with entertaining performances, contests, and competitions proves to be more influential in generating students' interest to enroll compared to having booths in exhibitions.

In light of these findings, the researcher recommends universities to adopt a combination of traditional and digital promotional strategies. This involves leveraging social media platforms, especially Instagram, and utilizing aesthetically pleasing printed brochures to enhance the attractiveness of advertising and reach a broader audience. Additionally, the use of direct and personal messaging through platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram DM is recommended to increase prospective students' interest, fostering a sense of real engagement with the university without the need for physical visits. Furthermore, for future studies, it is suggested to delve deeper into the relevance of traditional advertising in the context of Society 5.0.

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