



**NIGERIAN ONLINE JOURNAL OF  
EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES  
AND TECHNOLOGY (NOJEST)**

NIGERIAN ONLINE JOURNAL  
OF  
EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES  
AND TECHNOLOGY

<http://nojest.unilag.edu.ng>

**POSITIONING OPEN AND DISTANCE  
LEARNING THROUGH MARKETING  
COMMUNICATION: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF  
BRAND PERSONALITY**

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**To cite this article:**

Ajeyalemi, O. F. & Eretan G. O (2021). Positioning open and distance learning through marketing communication: exploring the role of brand personality. *Nigerian Online Journal of Educational Sciences and Technology (NOJEST)*, 3(2), Pages 1-7

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## Positioning Open and Distance Learning Through Marketing Communication: Exploring the Role of Brand Personality

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### Article Info

#### Article History

Received:  
15th February 2021

Accepted:  
22 April 2021

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#### Keywords

Open and Distance Learning, Marketing, Communication, BrandPersonality

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### Abstract

*Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been viewed as being second rate compared to conventional learning methods. However, it appears poised to become a significant route to accessing quality tertiary education in Nigeria considering the massive shortfall of infrastructure to carry out said conventional methods of learning. In order to bring the required turnaround, ODL must be repositioned through improved marketing communication methods. Research has shown Brand Personality to be a useful tool in driving consumption of a wide variety of products. This study thus used established brand personality methodology to investigate the factors of ODL Personality. The study developed and validated a scale for the measurement of ODL Personality with an empirical evidence of its brand personality factors. A survey-based approach was employed and a total of 252 copies of the questionnaire were found useable and acceptable, exploratory factor analysis revealed a four-factor model which was validated using confirmatory factor analysis. Findings showed that ODL had 18 personality traits as well as four factors of brand personality which were - Value-Adding, Innovative, Fulfilment and Convenience. It was recommended among others that managers and operators of destinations in Africa need to position and align their respective ODL Institutions using the four-factor framework to develop strategic marketing communication.*

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### Introduction

The Nigerian Educational Sector is tasked with how to improve access to quality tertiary education in Nigeria in the face of rising number of unsuccessful applications to study in the nation's exiting universities. According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2018), only 521,596 out of 1,627,954 applicants successfully gained admission to 540 tertiary institutions applied to in 2018. Furthermore, only about 30% of applicants who were older than 18 years of age were successful in their application. This suggests that a larger part of older candidates may be losing the opportunity to early access to tertiary education in Nigeria. However, with the use of technological advancements, the rising numbers of disenfranchisement can be reduced using Open and Distance Learning methods.

Open and Distance Learning transcends the traditional four-wall, face-to-face by using audio-visual media to facilitate access to education for learners who do not have to be physically present in a conventional classroom. However, Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) reported the skepticism and ridicule that faced distance education, even though studies have found no significant difference in the outcomes between distance learning methods and the traditional face-to-face learning methods (Ushe, 2017; Ezema, 2015; Hannay & Newvine, 2006). There is therefore, a need for a paradigm change in the perception of ODL in order to properly position it as a panacea for the growing educational shortfall through brand personality. Brand Personality has been described as a useful tool for developing marketing communication for products where there is a need to properly position such a product in a desirable light to customers as it appeals to the symbolic or 'soft' aspirations of that customer (Aaker, 1997). Brand Personality can be seen from two sides – the side of the marketer and the side of the consumer (Sung & Kim, 2010). Marketers use it to target a subset of the general population (Lannon, 1993) while consumers use it to identify brands that they believe have similar personalities to them (Aaker, 1997) by inspiring an attachment to the brand, especially in the case as in ODL, where there are brands with minimal physical differences. Research has shown that the more connected the consumer feels to a brand, the more likely that person is to get involved with that brand (O'Cass, 2000).

This study addressed the suggested paradigm change in the three ways. First, the study developed a scale to measure the brand personality of ODL institutions (ODL Personality) using Aaker's methodology which was described by Avis (2012) as being the most stable method of developing such scales. Second the study extracted the factors of ODL Personality which can be manipulated by ODL institutions in planning their marketing

strategy. Third, the study revealed the traits that can be used in marketing communication by ODL institutions to endear ODL institution brands to their prospective customers.

### **Research Questions**

This study answered the following questions research questions:

*RQ1: What is the scale to measure brand personality of ODL institutions in Nigeria?*

*RQ2: What are the traits that can be used to describe ODL institutions in Nigeria?*

*RQ3: What are the factors of brand personality of ODL institutions in Nigeria?*

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### ***Self-Congruity Theory***

Sirgy's (1982, 1985) self-congruity theory which is based on the concept of self-image, product or brand image and psychological comparison forms the underpinning framework for this study. The theory posits the likelihood of a consumer to be attracted to and remain loyal to a product or brand if there is an accord or consonance between an evaluation of self and the product/brand. This suggests that consumers carry out a psychological test of products to determine if such products are congruent with their values, self-image or personality (Lu & Xu, 2015).

A consumer with a self-image personality of excitement (excitable or daring) and ruggedness (outdoorsy) faced with alternative brand or product choices, for instance, will psychologically assess each brand or product choice and cognitively choose the brand whose value closely matches with his own self-image. Such a consumer is likely to prefer brands and activities that are sporty, high octane and remote.

Previous research has positively linked self-congruity to consumer attitude and behaviour, as well as purchase and re-purchase intention and ultimately loyalty. (Kang, Tang, & Lee, 2015; Lu & Xu, 2015; Roy & Rabbanee, 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). In the context of this study, self-congruity theory is very relevant and serve as the theoretical underpinning because just like brands or products and human beings as well, ODL institutions must also have their own unique personalities and characteristics. In selecting an ODL institution therefore, learners are likely to choose one whose personality and value is congruent with their own self-image. Applying self-congruity theory within the ODL context, provides a greater match between a learner's self-image and the ODL institution's personality and will probably lead to a more favourable behaviour towards the institution by the learner (Sirgy & Su, 2000).

#### **Method**

##### ***Research Design***

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey to as a research design. This is in line with Ivens & Valta (2012) and Usakli & Baloglu (2011) use of such a design in the measurement of Brand Personality.

##### ***Population***

This study was carried out using the University of Lagos Distance Learning Institute (UNILAG DLI) as the study setting. UNILAG DLI, is one of the foremost ODL institutions in Nigeria and it also carries the unique UNILAG brand, justifying the researcher's consideration of the Institute as an appropriate reflection of ODL institutions in Nigeria. Due to the large variance in population sizes for each programme running in the 2018/19 session, the researcher chose to focus on Business Administration which was the programme with the largest population of 3,474 students (Distance Learning Institute, 2019)

##### ***Sample and Sampling Technique***

The study was conducted in two distinct stages. First, a non-probabilistic volunteer sampling procedure was employed to sample 100 stakeholders (students, academic and non-academic staff) in the study setting, this sampling procedure is supported by Muniz and Marchetti (2012). Using an open-ended questionnaire, respondents were asked to give five descriptions of ODL using one word (Aaker, 1997). This yielded a total of 367 usable responses. Repetitions were removed and item purification was carried out by removing synonyms leaving 54 traits. A senior marketing practitioner provided face validity of the remaining traits.

Second, in line with Bryman and Bell (2011), a non-probabilistic quota sampling procedure was employed to select samples from the five levels of the programme to ensure adequate representation of the entire Business Administration programme.

### **Research Instrument**

Aaker (1997) introduced the quantitative method of extracting factors of Brand Personality using Exploratory Factor Analysis. Items in her scale were also validated using Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010) suggestion of factor loadings above 0.5. Researchers (Ivens & Valta, 2012; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011) have employed Aaker's methodology successfully in varying product types and classes and agree that it remains a veritable framework for scale development in the brand personality domain. Consequently, this study employed Aaker's (1997) quantitative methodology to develop a 54-item questionnaire which was administered to the abovementioned sample.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected with the assistance of two well-trained research assistants, who administered a total of 500 hard copies (an average of 100 per level) of the questionnaire, comprising of two sections to the students (ODL consumers) of the Business Administration Programme. Section A of the questionnaire collected general demographic data of the respondents while Section B comprised of the 54 remaining traits from the purification process. Only 252 responses were found useable for analysis after discarding those that had missing responses or were poorly filled.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data was analysed using SPSS 24 for the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and LISREL 8.9 for the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Data integrity and reliability was checked as thus:

- a. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy > 0.50, showed that the data could be subjected to EFA (Usakli & Baloglu, 2011)
- b. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity p value < 0.05 (IBM Knowledge Center, 2019)
- c. Internal Reliability of Factors > 0.70 < 0.90 (DeVellis, 2003)
- d. Total Variance Explained > 50% (Aaker, 1997; Muniz and Marchetti, 2012)

### **Results**

#### **Scale Purification by Item Reduction**

This study employed empirical methodologies of previous authors in its definition and measurement of brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Chen & Phou, 2018; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). 54 personality items connoting an ODL institution were included in the scale and validation of these items as well as extraction of the factors was carried out using exploratory factor analysis with principal component analysis. In validation, only factor loadings above .50 were considered ideal (Hair *et al.*, 2010). All factors that had high cross-loadings on more than one factors, such as "interactive", were excluded from the study. The 'tiring' factor appeared to correlate significantly with many of the other items and was subsequently dropped. Findings showed a four-factor model of 20 brand personality items that explained 62.15% of the total variance. All parameter for data integrity and reliability were met and all four factors had eigen values greater than one. See Table 1. Three of the factors showed reliability within the recommended range, However, one factor appeared to be lower (0.613) than the bottom threshold. It was however accepted in line with DeVellis's (2003) allowance for constructs with low number of items. A Cronbach alpha of 0.882 was obtained for the four-factor ODL brand personality construct. The four factors were named as thus: *Value-Adding*, because it consisted of traits like 'Worthwhile', 'Insightful' and 'Informative'; *Innovative* which consisted of traits like 'Creative', 'Exciting' and 'Dynamic'; *Fulfilment* because of 'Engaging' and 'Enhancing' and finally *Convenience* which had traits like 'Stress free' and 'Organized'.

Table 1: Exploratory factor analysis of ODL personality items<sup>a</sup>

Factors	Factor Loading	Eigenvalue	Explained Variance (%)	Reliability (Cronbach alpha)
Value-Adding		8.489	40.425	.856
informative	.652			
insightful	.643			
inspiring	.750			
reliable	.783			
progressive	.672			
quality	.604			
transforming	.622			
unique	.783			
worthwhile	.728			
Innovative		1.711	8.150	.777
cool	.721			
creative	.710			
dynamic	.509			
exciting	.627			
Fulfilment		1.615	7.689	.779
efficient	.629			
engaging	.850			
enhancing	.763			
Convenience		1.238	5.895	.613
organized	.630			
stress-free	.864			
Total variance explained			62.159	

<sup>a</sup> Extraction method: principal component analysis, rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy: .921. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity p-value .000 (chi-square: 7934.020, df: 190).

### Scale Validation

Scale Validation was carried out using Structural Equation Modelling for Confirmatory Factor Analysis on LIREL 8.9. Tables 2 and 3 present the Goodness of Fit statistics.

Findings suggest a good fit. Hu and Bentler's (1998, 1999) suggestion for RMSEA score was  $< 0.6$  was met. NNFI (TLI) also met Hu & Bentler (1998, 1999) and Muniz and Marchetti (2012) suggestion of  $> 0.95$ . CFI was also considered to satisfy Marsh, Hau, and Wen (2004)'s suggestion of  $> 0.95$ . The Chi Square Statistic was low and  $\chi^2/df$  ratio was less than 5, which support goodness of fit according to Sung and Tinkham (2005) and Hair *et al* (2010). Thus, it can be concluded that there is discriminant validity.

Table 2 Baseline Comparisons

Model	NFI Delta1	RFI rho1	IFI Delta2	TLI rho2	CFI
Default model	.94	.93	.96	.96	.96

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Table 3 Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)

Model	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90	PCLOSE
Default model	.057	.054	.061	.000

Source: Field Survey, 2019

## Discussion

### *Managerial Implications of Findings*

#### *Managers and operators of ODL Institutions*

The findings reveal ODL institutions' brand personality as four distinct factors long with the personality traits that loaded under each factor. This personality traits can be used in marketing communication by ODL institutions who measure highly in such traits as research has suggested that brand personality is a significant predictor of customer loyalty (Ekinci, *et al.*, 2013). This presents an invaluable resource to managers of ODL institutions who must develop such marketing strategies.

Also, managers need to consciously and continuously communicate the value-adding, innovative, fulfilling and convenient personalities of their institutions to prospective students, with the intention of creating and confirming cognitive matches with students' self-congruity.

#### *Marketing professionals*

The traits of destination personality factors could also be used by marketing professionals to develop marketing communication that can attract prospective students to ODL institutions. This study intensifies the argument for a paradigm shift from formulating marketing communication targeted at functionality of the product to softer, sublime messages targeting innermost or subconscious desires of the consumer. Depending on the needs of a particular ODL institution, marketing professionals can manipulate the ODL Personality factors thus improving on them and allowing for more informed decision making in attracting more students.

## Conclusion

In line with arguments that ODL institutions can have their unique personalities; this study examined and empirically established a four factor model for ODL Personality. The findings contribute to literature in several ways. One, in agreement with previous research (eg. Glinska & Kilon 2014; Chi, Pan & Del Chiappa, 2018), this study provides further validation Aaker's (1997) quantitative methodology for the investigation of Brand Personality. Two, this study identified the factors of ODL personality as *Value-Adding*, *Innovative*, *Fulfilment* and *Convenience*. These factors can be manipulated by marketing professionals to develop the offerings of ODL institutions. Three, this study revealed 18 personality traits of ODL (see Table 1) which could be used to develop communication strategy for ODL institutions.

Regardless of findings by this study, there are a few limitations which may present an avenue for further research. One, the study focused on a single ODL institution. Even though this may permit specific findings unique to that institution, however, findings may not be easily generalised for other ODL institutions, which may have their own peculiar ODL personalities. This paves the way for future studies to consider other ODL Institutions. Two, since it has been argued that brand personality positively affects customer satisfaction, loyalty and word-of-mouth behaviour in other product categories, it presents an exciting challenge to explore the relationship between ODL personality and these outcome variables.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in light of the findings of this study:

1. Managers of ODL institutions are advised to market their institutions to prospective markets by brand personality dimensions of ODL which are likely to resonate with consumer self-congruity.
2. Marketing professionals developing marketing communication for ODL institutions can make use of the traits uncovered by this study as there is empirical evidence that they are significant to ODL since they loaded very highly in Factor Analysis.

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