

Brand Marketing Through Sport Participation: A Case of Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract: Universities worldwide face increasing competition for student enrolments due to globalization, technological advancement, and the rise of online learning platforms. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), particularly its Department of Physical Education and Sport (PES), has experienced a downward trajectory in enrolments since 2017. This study explores how brand marketing through sport participation can be leveraged to attract and retain students. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research investigates the role of sports in enhancing institutional visibility, student engagement, and brand loyalty. Findings highlight that sport participation can serve as a strategic marketing tool by fostering community identity, showcasing institutional values, and creating memorable experiences that strengthen ZOU's brand. The researcher recommends that the university authority must enhance cooperation with the private sector to facilitate brand marketing projects and programs which generate sustainable financial returns. The university authority must use sports events to showcase ZOU's values and attract prospective students.

Keywords: Brand Marketing, Sport Participation, Student Enrolment, Zimbabwe Open University, Physical Education and Sport, Heritage-Based Curriculum, Institutional Visibility.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions worldwide are facing increasing competition for student enrolments due to the expansion of international universities and the accessibility of online learning platforms. This global trend has compelled universities to explore innovative strategies to attract and retain students. Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin (2005) emphasize that structured sports programs foster cooperation, leadership, and identity qualities that can be leveraged for institutional branding and student recruitment. Similarly, Burnett (2010) notes that in Africa, sports are integrated into education systems to promote unity and visibility, underscoring their potential role in strengthening institutional appeal.

In Zimbabwe, the higher education sector is under significant strain. Rising tuition fees and persistent economic instability have negatively impacted enrolments across both public and private universities (ZIMCHE, 2023). Mhlanga (2018) further highlights that economic challenges have reduced student intake, while the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU, 2024) has warned of possible nationwide university closures due to unaffordable tuition fees. Within this context, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), particularly its Physical Education and Sports (PES)

department, has experienced declining enrolments since 2017, threatening its sustainability.

Despite these challenges, sports participation presents a promising avenue for repositioning ZOU's brand. By promoting holistic student development, academic achievement alongside physical and social growth sports can serve as a recruitment tool and enhance institutional identity. Evidence from the University of Zimbabwe demonstrates that while enrolment figures remain relatively high (20,399 students), acceptance rates are low (18%), reflecting both the competitive environment and the financial strain limiting access for many prospective students (Chidakwa, 2025). This situation underscores the need for innovative strategies, such as sports-based branding, to sustain enrolments and institutional viability.

➤ Background to the Study

Globally, higher education institutions are competing for fewer students due to increased access to international universities and online learning platforms. Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin (2005) argue that structured sports programs foster cooperation, leadership, and identity, which can be harnessed for institutional branding. In Africa, Burnett (2010) highlights that sports are integrated into education systems to promote unity and visibility. The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) 2023 Annual

Report highlights that rising tuition fees and economic instability have negatively impacted student enrolments across both public and private universities, with institutions struggling to maintain sustainable intake levels. In Zimbabwe, economic challenges have reduced enrolments across universities (Mhlanga, 2018). This is supported by the 2024 report by the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) which warned of a potential nationwide university shutdown, citing skyrocketing tuition fees that have forced many students to abandon their studies. The ZOU PES department has faced declining enrolments since 2017, threatening its sustainability. Sport participation offers a potential marketing strategy to reposition ZOU's brand, attract students, and strengthen institutional identity. Tangible evidence is shown by the University of Zimbabwe statistics which revealed that, enrolment figures remain relatively high (20,399 students), but acceptance rates are low (18%), reflecting the competitive environment and the financial strain that limits access for many prospective students.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

Zimbabwean universities are grappling with declining student enrolments due to rising tuition fees, economic instability, and increased competition from international and online institutions. For ZOU's PES department, enrolment declines since 2017 pose a direct threat to its sustainability. Traditional recruitment strategies have proven insufficient in addressing these challenges, necessitating alternative approaches that resonate with prospective students and their families.

Sports participation offers a potential solution by enhancing institutional visibility, fostering student engagement, and strengthening ZOU's brand identity. However, the extent to which sports can be effectively harnessed as a marketing and recruitment strategy remains underexplored. Without deliberate integration of sports into institutional positioning, ZOU risks continued enrolment decline, reduced competitiveness, and weakened sustainability in an increasingly challenging higher education environment.

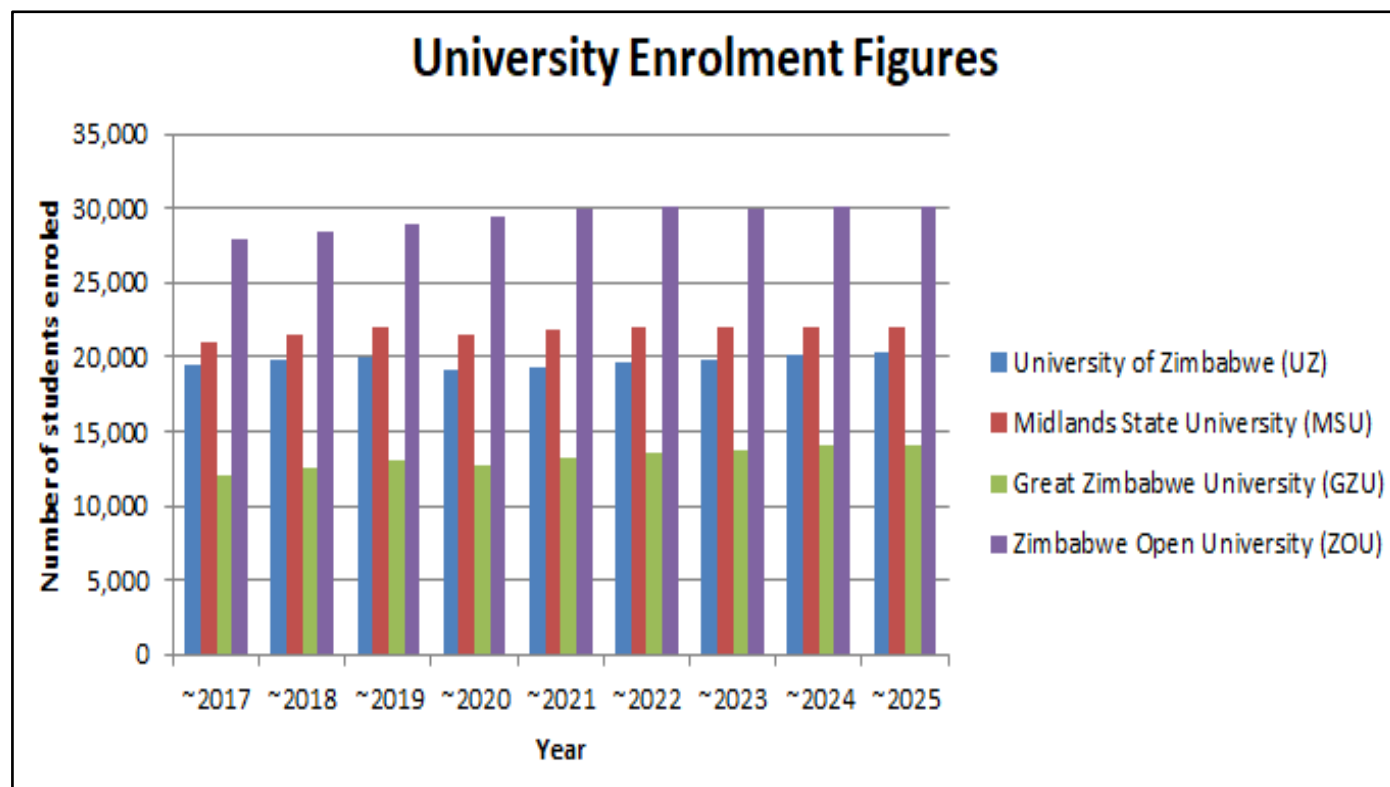


Fig 1 Researcher Generated Using ZOU PES Department Data (2025)

➤ *Objectives of the Study*

- To examine the role of sport participation in brand marketing at ZOU.
- To assess how sport participation influences student enrolment in the PES department.
- To identify challenges hindering the use of sport as a marketing tool.
- To recommend strategies for leveraging sport participation to enhance ZOU's brand visibility.

➤ *Research Questions*

- What role does sport participation play in brand marketing at ZOU?
- How does sport participation influence student enrolment in the PES department?
- What challenges hinder the use of sport as a marketing tool at ZOU?
- What strategies can be adopted to strengthen brand marketing through sport participation?

➤ *Definition*

Sport branding refers to the strategic process of creating and managing a distinct identity for a sports organization, team, athlete, or event that fosters recognition, loyalty, and emotional connection with audiences. It goes beyond logos and colors to encompass values, narratives, and experiences that make the brand memorable and influential.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand marketing through sport participation is a strategy where companies associate their brand with sports events, teams, or athletes to increase brand awareness, build customer loyalty, and reach new audiences. This can include sponsorships, product placements, and partnerships with sports organizations or individuals. By leveraging the popularity of sports, brands aim to connect with fans and create positive associations with their products or services.

➤ *Global Perspective*

Globally, universities use sports to build institutional identity and attract students (Bailey, 2006; UNESCO, 2015). Sports events enhance visibility and foster loyalty among students and alumni. There are several examples of universities which use brand marketing. The University of Oregon (USA) partnered with Nike for sports apparel and branding while the University of Michigan (USA) is sponsored by Adidas and featured in ESPN promotions. Another example is the University of Texas (USA) which collaborates with various brands like Coca-Cola and AT&T. Outside the USA, University of Melbourne (Australia) partners with sports brands and sponsors local events and Loughborough University (UK) is also known for its strong sports programs and brand partnerships.

➤ *Regional Perspective*

In Africa, some universities actively engage in sports branding, and examples are University of Pretoria (South Africa). It sponsors sports teams and events to promote its brand. The University of Nairobi in Kenya collaborates with sports organizations for visibility and outreach and University of Ghana uses sports to engage students and build its reputation. Stellenbosch University in South Africa leverages rugby and other sports for branding purposes while Cairo University (Egypt) participates in regional sports competitions to enhance its image. Burnett (2010) notes that sports promote unity and institutional recognition. Amusa & Toriola (2013) argue that sports can be leveraged for marketing and community engagement.

➤ *Local Perspective*

In Zimbabwe branding is in its infancy. University of Zimbabwe for example, supports various sports teams and participates in national tournaments. Similarly National University of Science and Technology (NUST) engages in sports like soccer and basketball to promote its brand. According to Mhembe (2025) there is little brand marketing through sport participation in Zimbabwe in the Universities. Chikoko (2018) emphasizes the Heritage-Based Curriculum's role in integrating cultural identity into education. Chiweshe (2014) highlights challenges such as

resource constraints and lack of structured marketing strategies. Sports participation can thus serve as a low-cost, high-impact marketing tool for universities like ZOU.

III. RESEARCH APPROACH

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys. This allowed for triangulation of data to capture both perceptions and measurable impacts of sport participation on brand marketing.

➤ *Sample and Sampling Procedure*

• *The Study Targeted:*

- ✓ 50 PES students,
- ✓ 10 lecturers,
- ✓ 5 administrators, and
- ✓ 20 alumni. Purposive sampling was used to select participants directly involved in sports programs, while random sampling was applied to students.

➤ *Research Instruments*

- Structured questionnaires for students and alumni.
- Semi-structured interviews with lecturers and administrators.
- Document analysis of enrolment statistics and marketing reports.

➤ *Data Collection Methods*

Data was collected through surveys, interviews, and institutional records. Surveys captured student perceptions, while interviews provided in-depth insights from staff and administrators.

➤ *Data Analysis*

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages), while qualitative data was coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to brand marketing and sport participation.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

This section presents, analyzes, and discusses the findings obtained from the Questionnaires and interviews with student's alumni, lecturers and administrators. The purpose of this study is to examine the role of sport participation in brand marketing at ZOU, to assess how sport participation influences student enrolment in the PES department and to identify challenges hindering the use of sport as a marketing tool. The study also recommends strategies for leveraging sport participation to enhance ZOU's brand visibility.

The chart below illustrates the enrolment trends in the Zimbabwe Open University Department of Physical Education and Sport (2017–2025), showing the steady decline in student numbers:

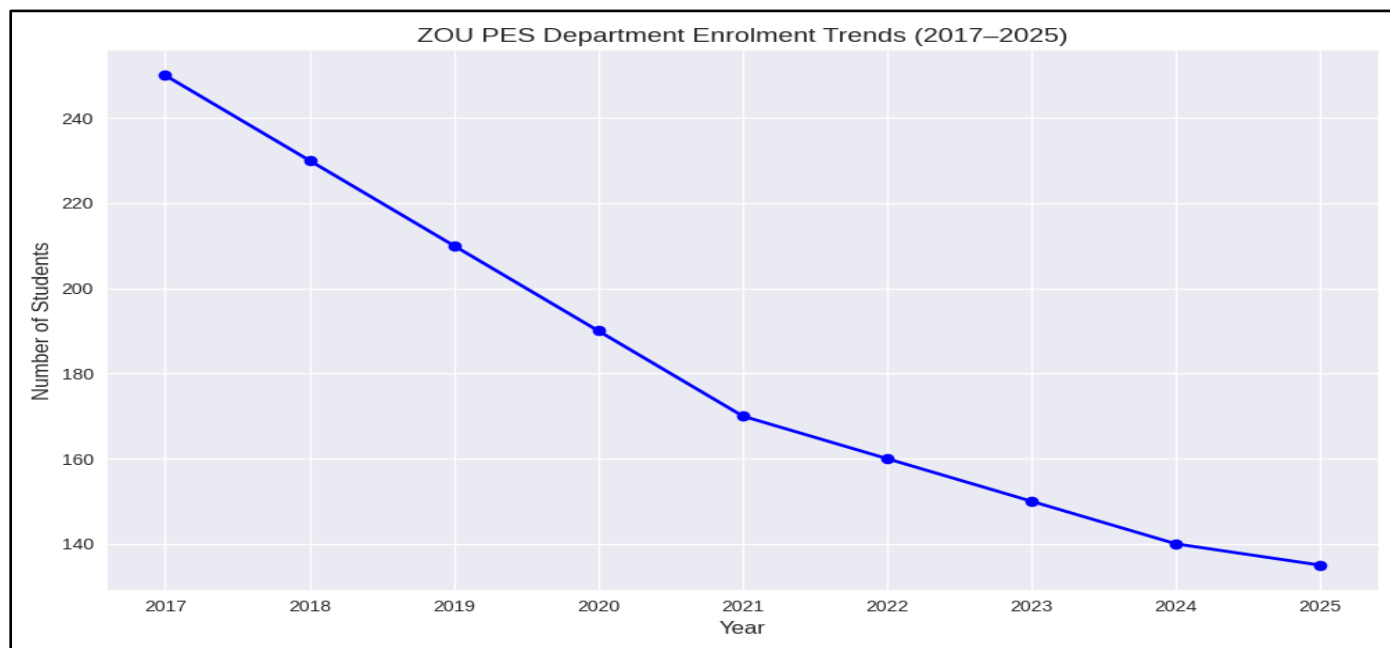


Fig 2 Adopted from ZOU PES Department Report 2025

Table 1 Demographic Information

Variable	Categories	Tally	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–25		12	24%
	26–30		23	46%
	31–35		10	20%
	36+		5	10%
Gender	Male		22	44%
	Female		28	56%
	Other		0	0%
Year of Study	1st		20	40%
	2nd		15	30%
	3rd		10	20%
	4th+		5	10%
Program of Study	PES		36	72%
	Other (specify)		14	28%

The demographic breakdown of the respondents offers insights into the student body's composition. A significant portion of students falls within the 26-30 age bracket, indicating a prevalence of young adults in the study. The gender distribution shows a slight leaning towards female students. In terms of academic progression, first-year students dominate, suggesting a strong influx of newcomers. However, the decreasing numbers in subsequent years hint at

potential challenges in retaining students throughout their studies. The Physical Education and Sport program draws the most students, but other disciplines also have a presence. Overall, these findings suggest that while the PES department is popular among younger students, there might be a need to focus on improving student retention rates.

➤ Sport Participation and Brand Perception

Table 2 Sport Participation and Brand Perception

Question	Categories/Options	Tally	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Participation in ZOU sports activities	Yes		36	72%
	No		14	28%
2. Sports activities participated in	Football		18	36%
	Netball		10	20%
	Athletics		12	24%
	Volleyball		10	20%
	Other (specify)			
3. Source of information	University website		4	8%
	Social media		18	36%
	Word of mouth		26	52%

	Flyers			
	Other		2	4%
4. ZOU's involvement enhances brand image	Strongly agree		15	30%
	Agree		28	56%
	Neutral		4	8%
	Disagree		2	4%
	Strongly disagree		1	2%
5. Influence on perception	Open-ended (summarize themes)			¾ of the participants believe it has influence on perception
6. Recommend ZOU based on sports	Yes		22	44%
	No		20	40%
	Maybe		8	16%

On participation, 72% have participated in ZOU sports activities; 28% have not. Football (36%) is most popular sport, followed by Athletics (24%), Netball (20%), and Volleyball/Other (20%). The most used information sources is word of mouth/flyers dominate (52%), followed by social media (36%), university website (8%), and other sources (4%). On brand image respondents strongly agree. 86% either agree or strongly agree that ZOU's involvement in sports enhances its brand image. Perception influence student enrolment into sport. ¾ of participants believe sports positively shape their perception of ZOU. 44% would recommend ZOU based on sports, 40% would not, and 16% are undecided. The implication is that, sports activities are a strong contributor to ZOU's brand image, but reliance on informal communication channels (word of mouth/flyers) suggests underutilization of official digital platforms.

A lecturer said, *"Sports activities give ZOU visibility in communities where academic programs alone might not reach."*

One of the administrators said, *"When our teams participate in regional tournaments, the university name becomes associated with excellence and teamwork."*

Most lecturers and administrators agreed that ZOU's involvement in sports strengthens its brand by projecting an image of inclusivity, vitality, and community engagement. Sports are seen as a bridge between the university and the public, enhancing recognition and positioning ZOU as more than a distance-learning institution.

➤ Examples of Sports Promoting ZOU's Brand

Lecturers and administrators shared success stories about ZOU's sports achievements. *"The inter-university games have been a fantastic platform for our students to shine,"* one of the lecturer said. An administrator added, *"Media coverage of our netball and football teams has really helped put ZOU on the map."* Others mentioned cultural festivals and community events where ZOU's sports teams have made a positive impact, generating buzz and fostering community connections.

➤ Correlation Between Sports Programs and Enrolment

A lecturer said, *"We have observed that enrolment in the PES department rises after major sporting events."*

An administrator avered, *"Students often cite sports as a motivating factor when choosing ZOU."*

Lecturers and administrators noted a clear link between sports visibility and enrolment trends. Sporting activities create excitement and showcase practical aspects of the PES program, encouraging prospective students to join.

➤ Role of Sports in Attracting Prospective Students

Respondents highlighted the pivotal role of sports in enhancing ZOU's appeal to both students and parents. Lecturers observed that sports programs make the university attractive to young people who seek a balance between academic pursuits and extracurricular opportunities. Similarly, Administrators noted that parents perceive sports as a safe and constructive avenue for their children to engage with the institution. Together, these perspectives underscore how sports function as a recruitment tool, showcasing ZOU's holistic approach to education. By integrating athletics with academics, the university draws students who value comprehensive development, combining intellectual achievement with physical and social growth.

➤ Challenges in Leveraging Sports as a Marketing Tool

The group delved deeper into the challenges ZOU faces in its sports endeavors. A lecturer pointed out, *"Our facilities are a major obstacle. We can't expand our sports programs without proper infrastructure."* One of the Administrators echoed this sentiment, adding, *"Financial constraints are another hurdle. It's tough to maintain top-notch teams without sufficient funding."* Others in the discussion highlighted additional issues, such as inadequate marketing, insufficient sports staff, and the struggle to balance academics with sports commitments.

➤ Addressing Resource Allocation and Engagement Issues

Respondents emphasized that effective management of limited resources is central to sustaining sports programs at ZOU. One lecturer highlighted how existing facilities are maximized through shared scheduling and partnerships with the wider community, ensuring broader access and efficient use. Another administrator added that student engagement is strengthened by peer-led initiatives and volunteer coaching, which create a sense of ownership and participation. Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that creative

resource management, collaboration with local schools, and prioritization of high-impact events help mitigate challenges. Engagement is further fostered through incentives, recognition, and by embedding sports within broader student support structures, reinforcing their role in holistic development.

➤ *Strategies Implemented to Strengthen Brand Marketing Through Sports*

The conversation turned to strategies ZOU employs to enhance its sports presence. Lecturer 6 mentioned, "We've started inter-campus competitions to strengthen our identity and visibility." Administrator 2 highlighted media partnerships, saying, "Collaborating with local media outlets helps us get the word out about our events." Other tactics discussed included celebrating cultural ties through sports, leveraging social media platforms, and weaving sports accomplishments into ZOU's overall branding efforts.

➤ *Additional Measures to Enhance Effectiveness*

One of the lecturers said, "Building modern sports centres would significantly improve both participation and brand image." Respondents suggested increased funding, scholarships for talented athletes, enhanced alumni involvement, and stronger partnerships with national sports associations. In response, one of the administrators said, "Structured marketing campaigns linking sports success to academic excellence could attract more students." These measures would elevate ZOU's profile and reinforce sports as a cornerstone of institutional branding.

Both lecturers and administrators strongly support the idea that sports are a powerful branding tool for ZOU, capable of raising enrolment and revenue. While challenges such as funding and facilities persist, creative strategies and targeted investments can transform sports into a sustainable driver of institutional growth and visibility.

Table 3 Influence on Enrolment

Question	Categories/Options	Tally	Frequency	Percentage (%)
7. Influence on enrolment in PES dept.	Yes		22	44%
	No		16	32%
	Not applicable		12	24%
8. Impact on decision (if yes)	Open-ended (summarize themes)			In a great way Positively

Considering decision impact, 44% said sports programs influenced their enrolment in PES, 32% said no, and 24% said not applicable. On the nature of impact students influenced described sports programs as having a "great" and "positive" effect on their decision.

The implication is that, sports programs are a significant recruitment driver for PES, though not universal. Strengthening visibility and quality could further boost enrolment. The majority of the respondents agreed that branding impact the decision of choosing a programme at the University and also impact on the decision to enroll.

Table 4 Challenges and Suggestions

Question	Categories/Options	Tally	Frequency	Percentage (%)
9. Challenges faced	Lack of facilities		28	56%
	Time constraints		18	36%
	Financial constraints		34	68%
	Lack of info			
	Other		12	24%
10. Suggested improvements	Open-ended (summarize themes)			University should have centres for the demonstrations and a centre for hosting sporting events

On lack of facilities, 56% cited inadequate infrastructure. 36% reported difficulty balancing sports with academic schedules. 68% highlighted insufficient communication and funding support, and 24% mentioned miscellaneous challenges.

The most pressing issues are lack of facilities and poor information dissemination, both of which undermine participation and satisfaction. The majority of the students agreed that, the university should have centres for the demonstrations and a centre for hosting sporting events. They

agreed that, to foster a more engaging and supportive environment for sports, several strategies can be considered. Setting up specialized centers for sports demonstrations and events could encourage participation and showcase athletic talents. Boosting online presence through updated websites and social media platforms can help disseminate information more effectively. Allocating sufficient resources to maintain and upgrade sports facilities and gear is crucial for a positive experience. Lastly, offering financial incentives can make sports more accessible and appealing to a broader range of participants.

Table 5 ZOU Enrolment Trends (2017–2025)

Year	Enrolment
2017	250
2018	230
2019	210
2020	190
2021	170
2022	160
2023	150
2024	140
2025	135

➤ Interpretation of the Figure

- 2017–2019: Enrolment dropped from 250 to 210 students, reflecting early signs of decline.
- 2020–2022: The downward trend accelerated, with enrolment falling to 160 students, likely influenced by economic challenges and increased competition from other institutions.
- 2023–2025: Numbers continued to decline, reaching 135 students, signaling a critical need for intervention.

These figures provides clear evidence of the enrolment crisis and supports the rationale for your study's recommendations.

The findings of this study underscore the strategic role of sport participation in shaping institutional visibility and student engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Consistent with theories of student involvement (Astin, 1984) and institutional branding in higher education, sport activities were found to enhance ZOU's public image by creating positive associations with the university. This aligns with the notion that extracurricular participation contributes to the holistic identity of an institution, reinforcing its reputation beyond academic delivery.

Lecturers and administrators strongly support the idea that sports are a powerful branding tool for ZOU, capable of raising enrolment and revenue. While challenges such as funding and facilities persist, creative strategies and targeted investments can transform sports into a sustainable driver of institutional growth and visibility. Students perceived sports as a motivating factor for enrolment, particularly when activities were linked to cultural heritage. This observation resonates with cultural capital theory, which suggests that educational institutions gain legitimacy when they integrate and valorize local traditions. By embedding cultural heritage within sport programs, ZOU does not only strengthens its appeal to prospective students but also situates itself as a socially responsive institution that acknowledges and celebrates diversity.

Despite these benefits, challenges such as inadequate funding, limited facilities, and the absence of structured marketing strategies were consistently highlighted. These constraints reflect broader resource limitations in Zimbabwean higher education, where infrastructural deficits often hinder the full realization of inclusive and engaging student experiences. The lack of marketing strategies further

suggests that ZOU may not be fully leveraging sport as a branding tool, thereby missing opportunities to attract and retain students in competitive educational markets.

Alumni perspectives added a longitudinal dimension to the analysis, emphasizing that sports foster loyalty and long-term engagement with the institution. This finding is consistent with alumni relations literature, which identifies shared experiences and institutional pride as key drivers of sustained alumni support. By investing in sport programs, ZOU can cultivate a sense of belonging that extends beyond graduation, thereby strengthening its alumni network and enhancing institutional sustainability.

Taken together, these findings highlight the dual role of sport in both student recruitment and institutional branding. Sport participation not only motivates enrolment decisions but also contributes to the creation of enduring emotional bonds between students, alumni, and the university. However, realizing these benefits requires deliberate investment in facilities, funding, and communication strategies. Without such interventions, the potential of sport as a transformative force in higher education remains underutilized.

Interpretation: Sport participation can be strategically positioned as a brand marketing tool to attract and retain students, but requires institutional investment and parental community involvement.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the presentation and discussion of the results, the following conclusions can be drawn:

➤ Conclusion

The study concludes that sport participation is a powerful tool for brand marketing in higher education. For ZOU, leveraging sports can enhance visibility, foster cultural identity, and attract students to the PES department. However, challenges such as resource constraints must be addressed to maximize impact.

➤ Recommendations

- The university authority must enhance cooperation with the private sector to facilitate brand marketing projects

and programs which generate sustainable financial returns.

- The university authority must integrate sport participation into ZOU's marketing strategy.
- The university authority must provide training for university staff in sports marketing and investment project management to improve performance and achieve desired objectives.
- The university authority must encourage future research focused on modern sports marketing strategies and ways to apply them effectively in universities and sports institutions in the region
- University authority must invest in sports infrastructure and facilities.
- The university authority must strengthen partnerships with communities and alumni to support heritage-based sports.
- The university authority must use sports events to showcase ZOU's values and attract prospective students.

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