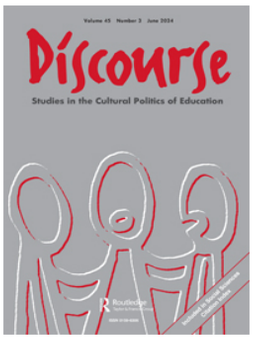

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Selling world-class education: British private schools, whiteness and the soft-sell technique

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ABSTRACT

Education-UK and British private schools more specifically are often framed as a global brand of 'world-class' quality. However, the increased competition within the international education market has meant British private schools cannot rest on their laurels but instead must continue to project their 'world-classness' in a way that does not diminish their brand image. Drawing on interviews of parents and key gatekeepers, this paper examines how British private schools in Nigeria (BPS-NIG) and British private boarding schools in the UK (BPBS-UK) evoked and projected their supposed world-classness through the strategic use of white symbolism and the expensive admission process. The paper contends that the latter are types of soft-sell marketing techniques utilised by BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK to sell British schools without imperilling their brand image. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the racial implication of framing whiteness and white British specifically as synonymous with high-quality, 'world-class' education.

KEYWORDS

World-class education; the soft-sell technique; British private schools; Nigerian elite parents; British whiteness; white symbolism

Introduction

> I'll say that we have the best private education system in the world. (British education agent 1)

According to Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2003), the private education sector in the UK has 'a brand name in both British and international markets based on high status, academic excellence and preparation of young people to play significant roles in the economy and society' (p. 188). The high currency of the English language as 'the dominant world lingua franca' (Salomone, 2022, p. 9) also plays a major role in helping to position 'Education UK' as a global brand. While studies have shown that 'Education UK' is a highly desirable and sought-after global brand (Bunnell, 2019; Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes, & Skeldon, 2012; Hazelkorn, 2014; Sin, 2013; Waters & Brooks, 2010), the increase in the number of schools and countries now competing in the international education[1] marketplace (Adams & Agbenyega, 2019; Bunnell, Courtois, & Donnelly, 2020; Drew, 2013; Tarc, Tarc, & Wu, 2019;) has intensified the search for world-class status amongst so-called international schools. To help maintain and communicate their supposed

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world-classness BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK mobilised their whiteness in the form of white British teachers (Ayling, 2016, 2019).

The field of international education can be characterised as 'an area … , a field of objective relations among … institutions competing for the same stakes' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 133). Crucially, Bourdieu (1984) contends that all fields such as racial (Fanon, 1967/2008) class (Keller, 1963), and the field of international schools (Bunnell, 2019), are hierarchical. He goes on to contend that there is '[c]onstant, permanent relationships of inequality operat[ing] inside' the field (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40). So, whilst British private schools enjoy a global brand image as a result of being part of, and associated with 'Education UK', the increased competition within the field of international education has meant that British private schools both in the UK and Nigeria for example cannot rest on their laurels. Instead, they must continuously work to maintain and project their 'world-classness' in a way that does not diminish their global brand image. I theorised therefore that the use of a soft-sell approach allowed prospective clienteles to buy *without* selling to them (Bursk, 2006). The latter is critical as a more direct, hard-sale marketing technique would result in the devaluation of the brands (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999).

In a previous scholarship, I explored how private schools in Nigeria constructed themselves as elite education institutions (Ayling, 2016). This paper expands on that work by examining how British private schools in Nigeria (BPS-NIG) and British private boarding schools in the UK (BPBS-UK) utilised the soft-sell marketing approach, which in this case study, took the forms of white symbolism and expensive and highly selective admission process, to effectively project and maintain their world-class status. Crucially, I argued that the soft-sell marketing approach allowed BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK to market themselves to their wealthy clientele without devaluing their brand image as world-class education establishments for the global elites.

As in my larger study, Whiteness is theorised in this paper as a social construct and thus without any ontological basis (Fanon, 1967/2008). In other words, the supposed superiority of Whiteness and the West more generally is an ideological construct that was conceived by White Europeans and maintained through western hegemonic discourses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Fanon, 1967/2008). Post-colonial literature on race and colonisation has shown how Blacks and more broadly Africa have historically been constructed as backward (Ekeh, 1975) and Whites and the West in general as the symbol par excellence (Fanon, 1967/2008). Such dichotomous constructions of Blacks and Whites have meant that the white skin has become a highly valuable symbolic capital that affords white individuals unearned advantages and privileges (Nayak, 2007).

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section operationalises the concept of 'world-class' and the soft-sell approach. This is followed by a review of the literature on the marketing strategies of elite private schools. The valorisation of Whiteness and 'Westernness' in general both in the West and post-colonial societies is also discussed in this section. The second section discusses the research design and methodology, while the third section presents an in-depth analysis of my qualitative data. Theorising the use of white symbolism and a highly selective and expensive admission process as soft-sale marketing techniques, I examined how BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK project their status as world-class education institutions while appealing to the sensibilities of elite Nigerian parents at the same time. As gatekeepers to elite education institutions, the role of the

headteachers, education agents and consultants in maintaining British private boarding schools' image as 'the best in the world' is discussed throughout the result section.

Conceptualising key concepts: 'world-class' education and the soft-sell technique

'World-class' education

The concept 'world-class' is highly problematic, not least because its meaning is 'fluid [and] dependent on context' (Deem, Mok, & Lucas, 2008, p. 85). Some scholars have also argued that the arbitrary use of the concept by so many educational institutions has led to its loss of credibility (Altbach, 2004; Siltaoja, Juusola, & Kivijärvi, 2019). Furthermore, Alvesson (2013) explains how grandiosity has permeated contemporary society to the extent that terms such as 'world-class' and 'excellence' are increasingly used for status-enhancing 'without much backup in terms of demonstrated qualities or accomplishment' (p. 10). Perhaps due to the lack of consensus on what constitutes a 'world-class' education institution the former vice-chancellor of the University of Brighton (UK), in an interview, commented that world-class is one of those things 'you know it when you see it' (Watson, 2006, p. 13). This is an interesting remark as it not only highlights the subjective nature of the concept but implies that only certain types of people; that is, those with the right cultural capital (and arguably a large volume of economic capital) are able to recognise and appreciate world-class education. That being said, Alexander (2010) contends that 'world-class' is defined within the field of education almost exclusively in 'terms of tests of student attainment in a narrow spectrum of learning' (p. 801).

Despite the lack of a global consensus on the definition of world-class education (Hazelkorn, 2013) and the general emptiness of the term (Lang, 2005), studies on schools (Siltaoja et al., 2019) and the HE sectors (Findlay et al., 2012) have reported on how education institutions mobilise the discourse of world-class to signal their position within the international education sector. According to Findlay et al. (2012) to occupy a position 'within an *imagined* or rank-list world hierarchy' helps to secure an institution's place in the field of HE education (p. 120, emphasis added). Echoing a similar point, Hazelkorn (2013) in his analysis of global rankings of HE institutions notes how HE students 'are especially conscious of and influenced by rankings' (p. 5).

The 'soft-sell' technique

> Low-pressure [soft-sell] selling … is not driving the prospect into a buying decision, but letting him reach the decision himself; *not to selling him, but letting him buy*. (Bursk, 2006, p. 2, my emphasis)

The literature reviewed thus far has highlighted three key points. First, world-classness is a subjective but highly sought-after label. Second, ranking – imagined or real – is part and parcel of the field of international education market. Third, to be ranked highly on the global education[2] league table is sufficient to attract prospective clientele. In other words, to be *perceived* as world-class education institution is and of itself a type of marketing technique. The subjective and fluid nature of the concept, however, means that

educational institutions that have acquired 'world-class' image must continuously work to maintain their brand image or risk losing it. The need to constantly project their world-class status is further compounded by the fact that the international education market is highly competitive; with an increasing number of newcomers now competing for a position on the global league table (Siltaoja et al., 2019).

To retain their world-class status, global brands are marketed using a soft-sale approach (Alden et al., 1999), which creates a desire for 'the product through image and emotional appeals without bombarding the consumers with the obligatory facts and proof' (Okazaki, Mueller, & Taylor, 2010, p. 23). This contrasts with a hard-sell marketing approach which 'is based on direct and explicit content that emphasises product advantages and performance' (Okazaki et al., 2010, p. 20). Since the soft-sale approach relies more on symbolism, abstractions, and images – what some might describe as 'hidden persuasion' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 169) – in communicating the value of a product to prospective buyers, it reduces the risk of diminishing the value of the product (Alden et al., 1999). In other words, using subtle and subliminal messaging is what makes the soft-sell technique an effective marketing approach for selling global brands and particularly positional goods such as elite private schools (Halliday, 2016).

Marketing strategies of elite/world-class education institutions

> [Elite schools] 'played on the ambitions of the social climber by perpetuating an attractive gentry style and manners and by associating such style with moral status' (Musgrave, 1970, p. 136)

Making an apt observation, Symes (1998) states that 'the school which pays due attention to its image in all areas of its endeavour will stand out from its rivals and will be perceived as a worthy and well-managed school with a sound educational performance' (p. 137). Though this remains an area of very limited research, the few studies exploring marketing strategies of elite private boarding schools and international schools in general have shown that imageries, aesthetic and ideological symbolism such as whiteness as well as abstractions are sales tactics that allow elite schools to play on the ambition and emotions of their wealthy clients (Caputo, 2007; Liu, 2020; Musgrave, 1970; Siltaoja et al., 2019) and signal their elite status at the same time (Drew, 2013). Chatterjee (2007) contends that symbols and abstractions operate at the subconscious level hence their effectiveness as marketing strategies.

In his study on an elite private boarding school in the US, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) found that the geographical landscapes of elite schools are often presented in prospectus or websites to symbolise 'unlimited abundance of a particular kind of pastoral landscape associated with elite status and wealth' (p. 38). Concurring Cucchiara (2008) posits that private schools' advertisement 'involved implicit and explicit appeals to status – essentially, attempts to show that 'the right sort of people' send their children there' (p. 171).

In a more recent study, Drew, Gottschall, Wardman, and Saltmarsh (2016) found that montage and images of smiling and cheerful children engaging in different elite sport activities are means by which prospective 'parents and students are invited to participate in forms of education associated with achievement, success, winning and social status' (p. 98). A similar finding is reported by Siltaoja et al. (2019) who observed how international branch Campuses (IBC[3]) in the United Arab Emirates emphasise their world-

class status through the inclusion of 'images of iconic landmarks (e.g. Big Ben or the Statue of Liberty)' in their promotional material. Liu's (2020) research on elite education in China also revealed how an elite private school communicates its 'eliteness' by placing a large painting of '*The 100 Most Influential People in the World* [on] an entire wall in the reading area' of their library (p. 42, original emphasis). What is noteworthy thus far is how the increased numbers of schools now competing within the international school and transnational higher education market has seemingly intensified the use of symbolism, architecture as well as aesthetics and imagery amongst elite private schools to communicate their world-classness. In other words, schools and HE institutions operating within the international marketplace are invoking their world-class status through various creative means (Liu, 2020).

Westernness and whiteness as symbols of high-quality

Several studies have found that the notions of 'Westernness' and Whiteness are used as a measurement and insignia for quality in the West (Reay et al., 2007), and former British (Keating, 1995; Shonekan, 2013) and French colonies (Fanon, 1963; 1967/2008). In a similar vein, post-colonial literature has also shown that in non-western countries, Indigenes with western education, dispositions and accent are ascribed positive qualities such as trustworthy, respectability and refinement by the rest of the society (De Mejía, 2002; Phillips & Potter, 2006). The embodiment of western dispositions by non-westerners is also one of the means by which individuals gain access to prestigious jobs that are often only accessible to white individuals in former British colonies such as South Africa (Hunter & Hachimi, 2012) and Barbados (Phillips & Potter, 2006). Findings from my own research echoed these findings and revealed how Whiteness was a salient factor in the construction of elite private schools in Nigeria (Ayling, 2016). Taken together, these findings have shown that Whiteness is a highly valuable symbolic capital, or as Underiner (2000) puts it, a 'pigmentocratic' capital (p. 1296) that puts white people in privileged positions.

The review of the literature on international schools has revealed a paucity of studies exploring the marketing strategies of international private boarding schools. Whilst few studies have examined the marketing strategies of international private schools, fewer still have examined how international private schools in western and non-western countries, such as Nigeria, project and maintain their world-class status using white symbolism. Drawing on an empirical data set, my analysis of how British private schools in Nigeria and the UK – via their gatekeepers – used the soft-sale marketing technique to project and maintain their supposed 'world-classness' while appealing to the sensibilities and class status of non-western elite will usefully contribute to current understanding of marketing strategies of private schools operating within the international education market. Similarly, theorising Whiteness and the admission process of BPBS-UK as soft-sale techniques that allowed them to market their product without imperilling their global brand is a novel endeavour thus a contribution to the fields of elite education and marketing more broadly.

Research design

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study that investigated affluent Nigerian parents' school choices. The research was carried out in Lagos (South), Abuja

(North) and Port-Harcourt (East) in Nigeria, as well as in London, England, between 2013 and 2014. Research participants were recruited through a snow-balling sampling framework while data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires were used to collect demographic information such as parental age, ethnicity, religion, educational qualifications, job title, number of children, etc., while the semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data (see Ayling, 2015, for a more detailed discussion on the methodology).

A total of 39 participants were recruited for the study. The participants consisted of 26 parents – 11 fathers, four of whom had sent their children to Canada, and 15 mothers, one of whom had sent her daughter to Ghana, and 13 gatekeepers. Of the 13 gatekeepers, 5 were head teachers, 1 head of department, 6 education agents and 1 consular official. The head teachers were all white British males, three based in Nigeria and two in England. The head of the department was a white British female. The agents consisted of 3 Nigerians; 2 males based in Lagos, and 1 female based in England. The other 3 agents consisted of 2 white British females and one white British male education agent/consultant, all of whom were based in England. The consular official was a white female who was head of the visa section at the British Deputy High Commission in Lagos.

At the time of fieldwork, the fathers who had sent their children to the UK were either directors or CEOs of major organisations or owned their own companies. Of the 14 mothers who had sent their children to private boarding schools in the UK, two held political appointments at federal and state government levels while the rest either ran their own medium size businesses and/or were married to top business executives. The four fathers that had sent their children to Canada held middle-management positions, while the mother whose daughter was schooling in Ghana was a junior civil servant at the time of my fieldwork.

The term elite was used to describe parents who had children in private boarding schools in England. Besides this being how some of the parents, particularly mothers, described themselves, the term elite was used to describe this set of parents because they exhibited most, if not all, of the nine characteristics of elites in a modern democratic society (Boyd, 1973). According to Boyd (1973), these defining features of elites include holding high occupational positions, a distinctive lifestyle, group consciousness, a sense of exclusiveness, being seen to hold a functional capability, and positioning of moral responsibility within society. Some of Boyd's characteristics of elites have been supported by other writings which emphasised minority status and the exclusivity of holding such a positioning (Ellersgaard, Larsen, & Munk, 2012; Keller, 1963).

I also utilised the term 'middle-class' to describe the four fathers that had sent their children to Canada mainly because three of the fathers consistently used it when describing themselves and their lifestyle. Moreover, all the fathers had at least a degree qualification and held middle management positions in international corporations at the time of the fieldwork (Maxwell & Yemini, 2019), suggesting they spent considerable time in their professional lives among upper-class Nigerians and westerners. More importantly, three of the fathers – Mr Akin, Mr Dele and Mr Giwa – the same fathers that had consistently used the term 'middle-class' had lived overseas (e.g. UK, Netherlands) on secondment which indicates they could be considered Global Middle-Class (Maxwell, Yemini, Koh, & Agbaria, 2019). Due to her low economic status, and job position at the time of fieldwork, the mother whose daughter was schooling in Ghana at the time of my

fieldwork was classified as working-class (Hurst & Nenga, 2016). To protect my participants' identities, pseudonyms rather than their real names are used throughout the paper.

The soft selling of world-class education

> If you look at the world … look everywhere else where education is being run properly, I'm yet to find a system that beats the UK. (Mrs Ayo)
> I think probably the third reason [why Nigerian parents choice UK-based boarding schools] is the reputation of the UK boarding education which has a very high reputation throughout the world. (British head-teacher 1- NIG)
> OK, I think probably the British education is taken seriously in the whole world and it is probably the best education in the world. (British agent 2)

The above remarks were typical of my participants' view of British private boarding as the 'best in the world', with phrases such as 'high reputation' and 'world-class education' constantly mobilised to describe British private schools in general. Interestingly, both my parent participants and gatekeepers believed this to be a 'fact'. Contrary to my participants' views, and based on PISA's standard, Britain is however, not one of the countries with 'the best-performing school systems' in the world (McKinsey, 2007, p. 6). PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment); a global ranking system, is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) programme that assesses knowledge and skills in literacy, mathematics and science of 15-year-olds in all OECD countries as well as countries outside the OECD (OECD, 2023). Past PISA reports (2010, 2013, 2016) and the latest PISA report (Schleicher, 2023[4]) have shown that the UK not only ranked below comparable economies such as Finland but also Asia countries such as China. The incessant description of British private schools as 'the best in the world' by the gatekeepers despite not having any concrete proof is indicative of two important points. First, it is reflective of the highly competitive global context within which international private schools such as BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK are operating. Second, it reveals that the gatekeepers of BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK are aware of the competition within the international education market and are making a conscious effort to maintain Education UK's world-class status.

The PISA reports discussed above provide further support to the supposition of world-class being a 'fantasy' that is often invoked by elite education institutions without any concrete fact to underpin their claim (Siltaoja et al., 2019). That being said, this does not make the discourse of 'world-class' any less powerful particularly for those institutions or countries such as the UK that are already perceived as historically providing high-quality education. For example, Walford (2009) notably, observed how an increasingly competitive international education market has resulted in a situation whereby the majority of elite private boarding schools in the UK are finding 'it difficult to attract enough [foreign] pupils of sufficiently high academic ability to fill their boarding places' (p. 721). Further, it is not a huge leap to infer that the recent global recessions, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic would have compounded this situation further. It is against this backdrop that I now discuss the two marketing strategies utilised by BPS-NIG and BPBS-UK to project and maintain their world-class while appealing to the wealth and status of non-western elite parents.

Projecting BPS-UK's world-class image: white British teachers and the white-rota

> Our mission is to deliver world–class primary education based essentially on the British National Curriculum. (St-Saviours school, Lagos, Nigeria)

Whiteness is a major theme that runs through my entire qualitative data set. It permeated my participants' narratives of elite schooling and high-quality education in general. In seeking to understand what BPS-NIG typically looks for when considering a person for the headteacher position, I interviewed a British education consultant whose services were used by some of the top private schools in Lagos and Abuja. The consultant who was white and based in England at the time, explained that the schools he worked for always 'demand *only* white British individuals' for the head teacher position. He went on to explain that while this 'was not something [he] would mention in the job description' (no doubt, because his company would be in breach of the UK employment and equality legislation), this criterion was the 'most important requirement' for the post of a head teacher in BPS-NIG. The interview transcripts of the headteachers working in BPS-NIG also revealed how they too were keen to stress that their respective schools had 'enough [White British teachers] to go round' (British headteacher 3—Nigeria).

Further analysis of the data showed that BPS-UK deployed British whiteness in two strategic ways. First, the data revealed that white British teachers were strategically positioned across the school as heads of departments. The quote below is typical of the managerial structure of the BPS-NIG that participated in my study.

> I'm the head and the school is divided into three departments – Early Years which is the first three years of a child's life at school, lower primary which is Year 1, 2 and 3, upper primary which is Year 4, 5 and 6. Each of those three departments is in the charge of an expatriate head of department; usually a British person. At the moment all [white] British. (British head-teacher 1 - Nigeria)

Second, the data also indicated that all the BPS-UK that took part in my research adopted what I have coined the 'white-rota' system. I defined the white-rota as a rotational system whereby White British teachers are spread out across the year group, thus ensuring that each student will be taught by a *white* British teacher 'every other year' (British head teacher 2 – Nigeria). The extract below provided an insight into how and why BPS-UK used the white-rota.

> And then we have three or four expatriate teachers in the school who don't have management responsibilities as such but who bring to us *extra degree of Britishness* if I can put it that way and enable us to have expatriate teachers in most year groups and that means that the children would, every three years will have a year with an expatriate teacher and I think for all sorts of reasons, the parents quite like that. (British head-teacher 1 - Nigeria).

McIntosh's (1988) description of whiteness being an 'invisible weightless knapsack' that accrues unearned privileges for the wearer is quite apt and findings from my research supported this assertation (p. 2). Although rather than being invisible, it is the visibility of whiteness that makes it an effective soft-sell marketing technique precisely because white skin is the most concrete visual representation of Britishness and 'Westernness' in general (Fanon, 1967/2008). Consequently, having a white British headteacher becomes one of the most effective ways for BPS-UK to project their international and

'world-class' status. To put it differently, having a white British headteacher allowed British private schools in Nigeria to signal their connection 'to the supposed birthplace … of world-class education' (Ayling, 2016, p. 158).

Operating within a highly competitive and increasingly crowded marketplace has further heightened the need for distinction among international schools (Assiri, 2017). More importantly, studies have shown that exclusivity and distinction are both highly valuable commodities that generate the most power in the field of elite education (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Cairns, & Desai, 2013; Zweigenhaft, 2012). Even though up-to-date data is scarce, available literature suggests that over 60% of the schools in Nigeria are private schools (Theobald, Umar, Ochekpe, & Sanni, 2007) and the majority of them tended to describe themselves as 'international schools' (Ayling, 2015; 2016). However, evidence from my fieldwork indicated that very few private schools in Nigeria have the financial capacity to recruit western expatriate teachers. Given this context, having white teachers becomes an effective way for BPS-UK could distinguish itself from other private international schools that are also competing for top positions on the international league table. Importantly, having a white head teacher also allowed only a few schools to portray themselves as exclusive education institutions for the Nigerian elite class. It is indeed the perceived social distinction and exclusivity that BPS-NIG provides that encouraged parents to pay what even they have described as 'exorbitant [fees] prices' (Mrs Ayo).

While all the headteachers acknowledged that BPS-NIG do have 'some cracking good Nigerian teachers' (British head teacher 1—Nigeria), there was copious evidence within the qualitative data indicating that the headteachers were also aware of parents' preference for white British teachers, which is a point I shall return to later in the paper. In explaining the significance of the white-rota system, one of the headteachers I spoke with commented that it is what 'parents expect and demand' (Head teacher 3—Nigeria). This headteacher went on to explain how using the white-rota system enabled him to avoid a situation whereby 'parents don't feel they are getting what they pay for' and acknowledged that British whiteness was their 'main selling point'. Making a similar point, another headteacher explained that the white-rota system was how BPS-UK 'protect the integrity of the British brand' (British head-teacher 2). In other words, the white-rota system was a type of quality control mechanism deployed by the headteachers to reassure and remind parents of the high-quality education that BPS-NIG provides.

In exploring how British private schools maintain their 'world-class' status, there are two further important observations that are worth noting. The first observation is how the use of white symbolism is a *conscious* and *calculated* decision on the part of BPS-UK. That is to say, both the strategic positioning of white British individuals in managerial positions within BPS-UK and the white-rota system was used with the *intention* to project and maintain BPS-UK's brand image as 'the best in the world' as well as communicate 'the class identity of the school to the wider community' (Light & Kirk, 2000, cited in Lynch & Moran, 2006, p. 227). The latter is very significant as it indicates how, despite being aware of the racist undertones of the white-rota system; with one headteacher describing it 'racist' (British head teacher 3–Nigeria), these British head-teachers were still mobilising British whiteness to communicate their world-classness.

Second, the reason why white symbolism was effective as a soft-sale technique in contemporary Nigeria was due to her colonial past. Colonisation (and now coloniality – Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) not only resulted in the construction of whiteness as the

symbol *par excellence*, but crucially led to what Fanon (1967/2008, p.119) described as the 'colonial condition'[5] within the colonised. As a result of the colonial condition 'the African unconscious cultural logic accepts that we are yet to be there where Europe and America are now' (Molande, 2008, p. 179). In a nutshell, given Nigeria's colonial past, coupled with the fact that we live in a 'Whiteworld' (Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2011, p. 1085), white symbolism as a soft-sell operating at the subconscious level is *the* most powerful and effective marketing approach for portraying and selling BPS-NIG as world-class education institutions. To put it yet another way, utilising white symbolism meant that BPS-NIG did not need to sell their product to Nigerian elite parents as much as just letting them buy (Bursk, 2006).

Admission into BPBS-UK

> Schools can and do deflect undesirable class 'choices' and encourage desirable ones as their *own institutional survival* as a particular type of school demands it. (Lynch & Moran, 2006, p. 228, my emphasis)

Studies have shown that the admission processes in elite schools are deliberately designed to be complex as a way of creating the impression of a prestigious education establishment (Cookson & Persell, 1985). Data from the parents' and the gatekeepers' interview transcripts revealed that typically it took parents between one and two years to complete the admission process for BPBS-UK. Also, when my parent participants spoke about BPBS-UK admission process they typically included the initial application to the schools (a formal expression of interest); parents' selection of schools, pre-admission visits to selected schools, entrance exam, deciding on school and finally the visa application. The comments below are illustrative of this:

> Oh yes! Oh yes! It took me the best part of a year and a half to finish that experience you know. I will go, book an appointment, go and visit this school. I then started narrowing it down to various other criteria, you know, so with that you know, we were able to decide that well, let him go here. (Mrs Tosin)

> I put her name down like two years ago, so even when I called to say I'm bringing her application forward it wasn't too strange because I had been in touch with them. They tell you if you want to apply to a school make sure you do it a year or two in advance. We kept up with the registrar and I'm used to doing that anyway. (Mrs Adu)

Conversely, the data from the four fathers that sent their children to Canada showed that admission into private boarding schools in Canada involved a much shorter time frame. For example, one of the middle-class fathers explained that it took him as little as 'three months from start to finish' (Mr Akin). Further analysis of the data also revealed that while BPBS-UK expected parents to formally register their interest by completing a registration form and paying the registration fee at least a year before their child was due to start, the private boarding schools in Canada that these fathers had sought admission for their children did not make such demand. Additionally, while none of these fathers had been to Canada (for holiday or pre-admission trips) prior to sending their children to Canada for their secondary education, evidence from parents' interview transcripts showed that admission into a UK-based private boarding school often involved two or more trips to the UK during which parents and their children visited their different school choices.

> We also had to visit the school. I visited the school, she visited the school. She had two choices, so she had to pick the one she prefers and checking through their hotels, checking through their classes, and the comfort … . I went to the place twice … first before she chose the school, then after when she decided on the school, I went again to make sure that it was OK. (Mrs Ola)

> My husband took him, he spent a night at the school to experience boarding school, showed him around the school as they do. He just had a day at school, classes, boarding et cetera. That also helped prepare him. (Mrs Amechi)

To continue to maintain their position on the global ranking while protecting the exclusiveness of elites at the same time, elite schools must pay close attention to who they admit (Bourdieu, 1996). The data set shows that education agents and consultants as well as the British embassy as gatekeepers to international elite schools, play a significant role in maintaining BPBS-UK's global brand by ensuring only the right types of families are admitted into these schools. Interestingly, the data also revealed that pre-admission trips were one of the methods used by the agents to weed out those they perceived as 'risky parents' or 'time wasters'.

One of the education agents explained that these pre-admission visits allowed him to determine whether parents were 'serious and not just going to waste the school's time' (Nigeria agent 2). Another explained how parents' pre-admission visits enabled him to determine if prospective parents can meet 'the huge financial commitment' (Nigerian agent 3) involved in sending their children to BPBS-UK. Parents' financial capability was also something both the schools and the British embassy were concerned about and were able to ascertain through the visa application process. For example, in addition to having evidence that the school fees have been paid in full, the British embassy also expected parents to have the equivalent of a year's school fees in parents' bank account for at least three months prior to applying for the appropriate visas on behalf of their children. This was in direct contrast to Canadian private boarding schools where schools allowed parents to pay fees in instalments; 'the owner will issue you the admission letter as long as you pay the first batch' (Mr Kome).

Besides the financial implications for the education agents and consultants who are paid 'commissions' or 'percentage of the annual school fees each year the child is in the school' (Nigerian agent 3) by the schools, there is also reputational damage both for the agents and the schools where the wrong families were admitted. Expressing his concern about working with 'the wrong parents' one of the education agents remarked: 'if I don't do my job thoroughly and recommend parents that are struggling to put the fees together, it will finally damage my reputation with the schools' (Nigerian agent 1). On the other hand, as noted in the extracts below, a good reputation would yield high dividends for education agents and consultants.

> We are 99% confident that all the families she [a well-known Nigerian agent] works with are genuine and meet all our criteria so we usually grant her the visas. (Head of the visa section, British embassy, Lagos)

> Sometimes there can be a situation where a parent rings a school, the school may not have a space but if we ring them, they might just find one. Because we do build up very close relationship [with the schools] so we get on with the admission team very well. (British education agent 2)

What the extracts above show is that a good reputation is a valuable currency that can be used by education agents and consultants to acquire the trust and respect of the embassy and schools. In the same vein, by admitting only those from the right social background and appropriate dispositions, BPBS-UK is able to maintain its brand image as an elite institution capable of producing distinction and exclusivity (Cookson & Persell, 2010; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2010).

Selecting value-able pupils

The data showed that BPBS-UK followed a different set of rules when it came to how and where entrance exams are taken by prospective students. For instance, the interview transcripts revealed that whilst some UK-based British private boarding schools were satisfied with prospective students sitting their entrance exams in Nigeria (under the supervision of the current school), others were willing to base admission on the child's latest exam transcripts, provided that the child was attending a British private school at the time. There were also those schools for whom the entrance exams were not only mandatory but who demanded that children sit for them in the UK. Interestingly, the data showed that the more demanding and expensive the admission process, the more value the elite parents attached to these schools.

> They don't care what your O-level result is about, they base you on the test result, because they think their own test is fool-proof. If you pass it, they give you an unconditional offer. They don't go with your transcripts. So, … they can't risk sending the papers to Nigeria where the teachers can give one hour instead of 45 min just so that the child passes. So, you have to come here [UK] and do the exam. (Mrs Adu)

> We had to take him to UK to sit for the test because [Bailey college] don't send the test over to Nigeria like other schools … . I like their way because it means that people cannot cheat their way into their school and I think that's why they are one of the top boarding schools in the UK. (Mr Odili)

> [Finley College] do not conduct their test outside the UK so our pupils have had to go to the UK to sit for their aptitude tests. Now this is their policy, but I don't necessarily agree with it because we can supervise the test here if it is arranged at a time when my staff are less busy. As you can imagine going to England to write a test that lasts no more than 2–3 h is quite an expensive exercise but surprisingly they are most of our parents' first choice. (British headteacher 3—Nigeria)

That some of these parents seemed concerned about the possibility of their children being given an unfair advantage in an exam is laudable. However, the fact that all the elite parents including the middle-class parents in the research seemed oblivious to the unfair advantage that they were giving their children through buying highly selective private schools suggests that these parents have a very simplistic understanding of meritocracy. This important observation aside, given the increased competition for distinction amongst international private schools having a highly demanding and expensive admission process is actually profitable for both UK-based private boarding schools and their wealthy clientele. In the case of Mrs Adu and Mr Odili, choosing a school with a demanding and expensive admission process allowed them to claim both economic and social superiority over other factions, particularly the newcomers, within the elite class (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, this type of school choice is a mechanism for creating

firmer intraclass boundaries as well as instigating social closure. For BPBS-UK, on the other hand, a stringent and costly admission process (one that even the head teachers considered unreasonable) is another way of invoking their 'world-class' status (Kenway et al., 2017).

The fact that it is their 'Englishness' that was the main attraction for overseas parents coupled with their desire to maintain their brand image as world-class schools further complicated BPBS-UK's admission process.

> It is the Englishness, the British culture that is one of the attractions to foreign parents so they [British private boarding schools] are quite careful about it … it is very important that they remain English because parents are buying [the] Englishness. (British education agent 2)

> All schools have a cut-off point. You know, they will only have a certain amount of Japanese, Chinese, Russians or Nigerians because they want to keep the British culture alive. Because if you have too many foreign students, you lose that [British] tradition so they have a cap. (British education agent/consultant 1)

Significantly, there was ample evidence in my data set supporting the education consultant's claim that 'it is the Englishness, the British culture that is one of the attractions to foreign parents'.

> I found out he will be one of the few Nigerians in that school and one of the very few Nigerians that have been to St Benedict and that is why I chose St Benedict because I like to think my son is one of the very few Nigerians to have been to that school. (Mr Okon)

> Like my first daughter we took her to where she is because the school is an international school, very international, with very few Nigerians there. (Mrs Bridge)

> Mary is one of the few Nigerian children in the school and that is another good thing about Whitehouse. They have Nigerians but not too much. (Mrs Philips)

A thorough analysis of the data set indicated that for the elite parents in my research 'Englishness' took the forms of a refined British accent and upper/middle-class lifestyle and dispositions (Ayling, 2019).

The need to maintain their Englishness has meant that BPBS-UK are, for the most part, selecting overseas pupils (and family) based on the value they can add to the school. Consequently, other qualities such as the 'interests and talents the child has' (British education agent 3) are given more weight in the selection of overseas students.

> A lot of the Japanese children that we place in British schools have incredible musical talent and therefore one of the things the schools love about that is that they can play the piano beautifully or the flute, violin, or whatever they may play and that is enhancing the school community. It's not necessarily to do with nationality it can be to do with skills. (British education agent 2)

The idea that BPBS-UK needs to limit the number of those they admit may seem illogical in a purely economic sense particularly if one takes the view that the aim of every producer is to 'draw the maximum possible profit from his capacity to steal a march on his competitors' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 110). However, it is my contention that by portraying themselves as 'world-class' education institutions BPBS-UK must appear disinterested in the economic aspect of this transaction otherwise, they risk losing their 'world-class' status. Moreover, as argued earlier, the ability to instigate social closure is an integral

and important part of the struggle for reputable and symbolic as well as cultural capital in the field of international elite education. As well as helping to communicate their 'world-classness', the ability to instigate social closure allows BPBS-UK to only select the type of children (and family) that will further enhance their brand image as elite institution. It is important to stress again that the admission and selection criteria discussed thus far are implicitly rather than explicitly stated. In other words, these discriminatory and exclusionary measures are not necessarily found in the schools' prospectuses and websites precisely because subtlety and concealment are what make the soft-sale technique effective.

Equally, one might argue that current perceptions about 'Education UK' being a global brand are indeed one of the reasons why BPBS-UK (and the British embassy) are able to make high demands on prospective parents in the first place. On the other hand, as well as making less stringent financial demands on parents, Canadian private boarding schools appear to actively highlight the benefits of schooling in Canada; the most cited by agents and parents being the acquisition of Canadian citizenship (Findlay et al., 2012). In the context of global brand marketing however, attracting potential students with the perspective of acquiring citizenship could be described as a hard-sell approach, which as I have already argued is not an ideal technique for selling a supposedly global brand like BPBS-UK (Alden et al., 1999; Okazaki et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The paper has critically analysed how British private schools in Nigeria and British private boarding schools in England (UK) that took part in my research utilised the soft-sell marketing approach to project and maintain their brand image as world-class education establishments for the elites. More importantly, the paper argued that the soft-sell approach took the forms of White symbolism and an expensive and highly selective admission process. The role of the headteachers and education agents and consultants as gatekeepers of elite education institutions (defining and shaping the 'rule of the game' as it plays out in the international education marketplace) was discussed throughout the paper. In the same way that they were employed to signal BPS-NIG's link to the supposed birthplace of high quality, the paper argued that the strategic positioning of white British teachers as heads of departments allowed the headteachers of these schools to communicate their international credentials and world-class status to their wealthy clientele. Coupled with the white-rota, having enough white British teachers that can be spread across the various departments within the school ensured that BPS-UK pupils were sufficiently imbued with white 'Britishness'. Consequently, the white-rota system was utilised by BPS-NIG as a mechanism for quality control and quality assurance. Throughout, the paper argues that such distinction through White symbolism is particularly critical in the current global climate which has seen a steep rise not only in the number of private schools describing themselves as world-class and/or international schools (Bunnell, 2019; Siltaoja et al., 2019) but also those, including HE institutions and/or countries, jostling for the dominant positions within global rankings (Hazelkorn, 2013).

Like White symbolism, the highly selective and expensive admission process was also framed as a type of soft-sell marketing technique that enabled BPBS-UK to maintain its world-class status. As a mechanism for keeping out the 'undesirables', that is, families

without sufficient economic capital and/or children without the right familial legacy, dispositions, and lifestyle (Khan, 2011), a highly selective admission process, it was argued, would allow BPBS-UK to admit foreign students that can help to further enhance their global brand. It is worth pointing out that in the context of international education and the increased struggle for world-class status specifically, BPBS-UK's ability to limit the number of non-western foreign students they admit is very important. This is because, as the data revealed, 'Englishness', or White upper/middle Britishness to be more precise, was the main attraction of BPBS-UK for foreign parents (Ayling, 2019). In other words, admitting too many foreign students will imperil BPBS-UK's 'world-class' image.

To summarise: framing British Whiteness as a soft-sale marketing tool allowed me to explain how the gatekeepers, specifically, the white British headteachers and the white British education consultant were heavily invested in the racial game, which invariably puts Whites on the apex of the racial order. Although some of the head teachers commented that the 'white-rota' was, in effect, a racist system precisely because of what it implies. That is, the superiority of white British teachers over Nigerian teachers. Their willingness 'to engage in struggles over racial capitals, symbols [and] fantasies' (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2015, p. 142), albeit for marketing purposes, implicated them in this racist game. Concomitantly, these parents' unfaltering belief in the high value of British Whiteness inadvertently also plays a fundamental role in maintaining this racial myth (Fanon, 1967/2008). All that said, it is the collective belief of the gatekeepers of these elitist schools and non-Western elite parents in the supposed 'superiority' of British middle-class whiteness, which helps to sustain the perceived world-classness of 'Education UK' (Bourdieu, 1984).

Notes

1. The international education market is a particular field of education within which private international schools with international affiliations and/or reputations operate. As a global marketplace, the international education market allows the buying and selling of international schools while facilitating the flow of Western 'knowledge' from the West to non-Western nation-states at the same time. Integral to its origin and sustainability the international education market has a close relationship to elite international schools within non-Western societies as well as private boarding schools in Western countries such as the UK (Ayling, 2017, pp. 2–3).
2. Global education market and international education market are used interchangeably in this paper.
3. IBC also known as off-campus universities are universities in non-western countries such as United Arab Emirates that are affiliated to, and/or modelled on western-based universities (Shonekan, 2019; Sin, 2013).
4. Whilst the latest PISA report shows a slight improvement from previous years, the UK is still not one of the top ten countries; coming came in 15th place in science, 13th in Reading, and 14th place in Mathematics (Schleicher, 2023). Interestingly, Asia countries such China, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore have consistently ranked as the top five countries in PISA's ranking.
5. The 'colonial condition' is Blacks' internalisation of Western hegemonic discourses, values and ideologies, whereby Whites and Whiteness is constructed as superior to Blacks and Blackness. Though the colonial condition is a byproduct of colonialism, it is maintained in contemporary times through and by coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

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