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Website Experience and Search Engine Visibility in Student Decision-Making: Evidence from South African Private Business Schools

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Abstract:

The increasing reliance on digital technologies has transformed how prospective students search for information and evaluate higher education institutions. This study examines the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making within private business schools in South Africa. A mixed methods approach, guided by a pragmatic paradigm and convergent parallel research design, was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 403 students through a structured questionnaire, whilst qualitative insights were obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that search engines serve as the primary gateway through which prospective students discover and evaluate institutions, with search engine visibility influencing both information acquisition and institutional perception. Furthermore, website usability, navigation, information relevance, and interaction features such as live chat were found to contribute positively to prospective student engagement and enrolment decision-making. The study highlights the strategic importance of search engine optimisation and website quality in supporting student recruitment within private higher education institutions.

Keywords:

Digital Marketing, Higher Education, Online Information Search, Search Engine Visibility, Student Decision-making, Technology Acceptance Model, Website Experience, Website Usability

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Introduction

The higher education sector has undergone significant transformation due to demographic shifts, technological advancement, economic restructuring, and increasing competition among higher education institutions (HEIs) (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2018). These developments have compelled HEIs to intensify student recruitment efforts and adopt innovative marketing approaches to remain competitive. The rapid growth of digital technologies and internet-based communication platforms has significantly altered how institutions engage with prospective students and communicate institutional value propositions (Al-Thagafi et al., 2020).

Digital marketing has consequently become a strategic component of student recruitment within higher education. The adoption of Web 2.0 technologies, search engine optimisation (SEO), websites, and social media platforms has transformed institutional branding and recruitment practices (Duffett, 2017). Over time, digital marketing strategies have evolved beyond social media engagement to include website optimisation, web analytics, and online information management systems, enabling institutions to engage prospective students through multiple digital touchpoints (Paladan, 2018).

Search engines and institutional websites now occupy a central role in prospective students' information search and decision-making processes. Website usability, navigation, information relevance, and online interaction capabilities influence how students perceive institutional credibility and quality. Within the South African context, private business schools operate within an increasingly competitive and market-driven environment characterised by heightened reliance on brand differentiation and digital engagement strategies.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) provides a theoretical lens for understanding the adoption and use of digital technologies in higher education environments (Chuttur, 2009). Against this background, this study examines the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making in private business schools in South Africa. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how online information search influences institutional perception, assess the role of website usability and navigation in prospective student engagement, evaluate the influence of website information relevance on student decision-making, and examine the role of website interaction features in influencing enrolment decisions.

Against this background, the objectives of the study are to examine the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making in private business schools in South Africa; determine how online information search influences institutional perception; assess the role of website usability and navigation in prospective student engagement; evaluate the influence of website information relevance on student decision-making; and examine the role of website interaction features in influencing enrolment decisions.

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The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1) How does search engine visibility and website experience influence student decision-making in private business schools in South Africa?

2) How does online information search influence prospective students' perceptions of private business schools?

3) What role do website usability and navigation play in prospective student engagement?

4) How does website information relevance influence student decision-making in the selection of a private business school?

5) To what extent do website interaction features influence prospective students' enrolment decisions?

Literature Review

The Evolution of Digital Marketing and Digital Consumer Behaviour

Digital marketing has evolved from a supplementary communication tool into a strategic mechanism through which organisations attract, engage, and retain consumers in increasingly digital environments. This transformation has been driven by technological advancements, the development of search technologies, and significant changes in consumer behaviour (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2016). Understanding this evolution is important in the context of higher education, where prospective students increasingly rely on digital platforms to search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make enrolment decisions.

The emergence of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s marked the beginning of digital marketing. Early online marketing efforts were largely limited to basic websites and email communication. However, the introduction of internet browsers such as Netscape and search engines including Yahoo and Google fundamentally changed how users accessed information online (Jones et al., 2011; Bîrzu, 2023). These innovations transformed websites from static information repositories into discoverable digital assets and gave rise to search engine optimisation (SEO), enabling organisations to improve their online visibility and accessibility.

As search technologies matured, organisations increasingly recognised the strategic value of appearing prominently in search engine results pages (SERPs). Google's introduction of the AdWords platform in 2000 further revolutionised online marketing by introducing targeted pay-per-click advertising and enhancing the relevance of search results for users (Jones et al., 2011; Bîrzu, 2023). Consequently, search engines became central intermediaries between consumers and organisations, influencing information discovery and decision-making processes.

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The emergence of Web 2.0 and social media platforms further transformed digital marketing by enabling user-generated content, interactivity, and online engagement (Bîrzu, 2023; Gabhane et al., 2023). Consumers increasingly shifted from passive recipients of information to active participants who search, evaluate, compare, and share information online. This shift has profound implications for educational institutions, as prospective students now conduct extensive online research before selecting higher education providers.

Contemporary digital marketing is characterised by the integration of advanced technologies such as smartphones, artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, and the Internet of Things (IoT), which facilitate personalised and interactive digital experiences (Fierro et al., 2017; Kannan & Li, 2017; Krishen et al., 2021). Within this environment, institutional websites serve as critical digital touchpoints, while search engines act as primary gateways through which prospective students access information. Website quality, usability, content relevance, and search engine visibility have therefore become important determinants of online engagement and consumer decision-making. Technological changes have transformed Higher Education Institutions into service institutions that interact and formulate stakeholder relationships (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2019). Adopting information and communication technologies such as social media, websites, and online content has transformed student and teacher roles in addition to serving as network facilitators, marketing tools, collaboration and teaching and learning tools (del Rocío Bonilla et al., 2019).

The evolution of digital marketing has consequently shifted organisational priorities from merely establishing an online presence to optimising website experiences and search visibility to influence consumer perceptions and behaviours. In the higher education sector, where information search plays a crucial role in student choice, understanding the relationship between website experience, search engine visibility, and decision-making has become increasingly important.

Search Engine Marketing

Search engines represent one of the most widely used services on the internet and play a critical role in information discovery, knowledge acquisition, and consumer decision-making (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2020). Within the higher education sector, prospective students increasingly rely on search engines as a primary source of information when exploring study options, comparing institutions, and evaluating programme offerings. Consequently, search engine marketing (SEM) has emerged as an important digital marketing strategy for educational institutions seeking to increase their online visibility and attract prospective students.

Search engine marketing refers to the use of search engines such as Google, Bing, and Yahoo to generate website traffic and connect users with relevant information through search engine results pages (SERPs) (Zhang et al., 2023). Search engines act as intermediaries between information seekers

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and organisations by indexing, ranking, and presenting web content in response to user queries. The effectiveness of a search engine is influenced by factors such as aesthetics, including how search results are displayed, and usability, which determines the ease with which users can locate relevant information (AL Mukhtar et al., 2021). These characteristics significantly influence user preferences and search behaviour.

The importance of SEM stems from the central role that online search plays in contemporary consumer decision-making. Search activities often represent the initial stage of the information search process, influencing awareness, consideration, evaluation, and ultimately purchase or selection decisions (Zhang et al., 2023). In the context of higher education, prospective students frequently utilise search engines to identify institutions, compare qualifications, assess reputation, and obtain information regarding admission requirements, fees, and career opportunities. Institutions that achieve prominent placement on SERPs are therefore more likely to attract website visits and enter the student's consideration set.

The primary objective of SEM is to improve visibility on SERPs by securing favourable rankings through either paid or organic methods (Nagpal & Petersen, 2021). Higher search rankings increase the likelihood of users clicking on a website and engaging with its content. Research consistently demonstrates that users tend to focus on results appearing on the first page of search results, making visibility a critical determinant of website traffic and online engagement. The strategic importance of search engine marketing is particularly evident within the higher education sector. The private higher education market is characterised by intense competition, both nationally and internationally, compelling institutions to adopt sophisticated digital marketing strategies to attract and retain students (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). As prospective students increasingly rely on online information searches to evaluate educational opportunities, visibility on search engines has become a critical factor influencing institutional awareness and consideration. Consequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) are encouraged to prioritise search engine marketing initiatives, including keyword analysis, website optimisation, and the development of user-friendly digital experiences that align with prospective students' information needs (Taylor & Bicak, 2020).

The dominance of Google further reinforces the importance of search engine visibility. Google remains the world's most widely used search engine, accounting for the majority of global search activity (Bianchi, 2023). In addition to organic search strategies, organisations may utilise paid search advertising platforms such as Google Ads, which enable websites to obtain prominent positions on search engine results pages based on selected keywords and bidding strategies (Patel, 2022). Together, organic and paid search approaches form the foundation of search engine marketing and play a significant role in directing users to institutional websites, thereby influencing information search behaviour and decision-making.

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Two principal strategies are utilised to achieve search visibility. The first is search engine optimisation (SEO), which focuses on improving a website's organic ranking through content, technical, and structural enhancements. The second is sponsored search advertising, which involves paid placements within search engine results. While both approaches seek to increase website traffic and visibility, SEO is particularly relevant in the higher education context as it supports the long-term discoverability of institutional websites and influences how prospective students access and evaluate information during their decision-making process. The following section discusses search engine optimisation in greater detail.

Paid Search Marketing

In addition to organic search strategies, organisations frequently utilise paid search marketing to increase their visibility on search engine results pages (SERPs). Paid search marketing, commonly referred to as pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, involves organisations paying search engines to display advertisements in prominent positions on search results pages in response to specific user search queries (Bayer et al., 2020). These advertisements typically appear above or alongside organic search results and are designed to direct users to a designated landing page or website.

The effectiveness of paid search marketing is based on the alignment between user search intent and advertiser-selected keywords. Search engines match advertisements to user-entered phrases and keywords, ensuring that sponsored content remains relevant to the information being sought by users (Olson et al., 2021). Consequently, paid search enables organisations to reach potential consumers at the precise moment they are actively searching for information, products, or services. Paid advertisements also contribute to brand awareness by increasing organisational visibility and generating website traffic through third-party search platforms (Kim et al., 2021).

A significant advantage of paid search marketing is the degree of control it provides organisations over their search engine visibility. Unlike organic search rankings, which require ongoing optimisation efforts and may take time to produce results, paid search campaigns can generate immediate visibility on SERPs (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Organisations can target specific audiences, monitor campaign performance, and measure outcomes such as impressions, click-through rates, conversions, and website visits (Kim et al., 2021). This measurability enables organisations to refine campaigns and optimise marketing expenditure.

The success of paid search campaigns is influenced by several factors. Although advertiser bids determine the amount organisations are willing to pay for visibility, search engines also consider advert relevance, keyword relevance, landing page quality, website speed, and click-through rates when determining advert placement (Li et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2021). These factors ensure that users are

presented with relevant and high-quality search results while rewarding organisations that provide valuable online experiences.

Within the higher education sector, paid search marketing has become an increasingly important strategy for enhancing institutional visibility and attracting prospective students. As students frequently utilise search engines during their information search and evaluation processes, paid search advertisements provide institutions with an opportunity to increase exposure for programmes, qualifications, and institutional websites. Consequently, paid search marketing complements organic search strategies by ensuring that institutions remain visible in highly competitive search environments. The extent to which institutions invest in paid search relative to organic search optimisation ultimately depends on their strategic marketing objectives, available resources, and recruitment priorities (Charlesworth, 2018).

Online Information Search Behaviour and Search Engine Visibility

Online information search has become a fundamental component of consumer decision-making within digital environments. Internet marketing enables organisations to promote products and services through digital channels such as websites, social media platforms, search engines, and online advertising (Terrance et al., 2018). As consumers increasingly rely on digital technologies to obtain information, search engines have emerged as important gateways through which users access, evaluate, and compare information before making decisions. Consequently, organisations seek to establish a strong online presence to ensure visibility during the information search process.

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) is a digital marketing strategy that seeks to improve the visibility and positioning of an organisation's website within search engine results (Terrance et al., 2018). Search engines play a critical role in directing users to relevant information and websites, making search visibility an important determinant of online engagement. In the South African context, Google dominates the search engine market, with 94.51% of internet users indicating Google as their primary search engine (Kemp, 2022). The dominance of Google has resulted in organisations increasingly focusing on search engine optimisation and search-based marketing strategies to improve discoverability and online visibility.

Search engine optimisation (SEO) forms a central component of SEM and involves adapting website content and structure to improve rankings within search engine results pages (Terrance et al., 2018). SEO strategies are based on the premise that consumers frequently search for information using keywords rather than specific organisational names, making favourable search engine rankings essential for attracting website traffic (Matta et al., 2020; Vynogradova et al., 2020). Research suggests that organisations occupying higher positions within search engine rankings are more likely to generate

website visits and engagement, thereby increasing opportunities to influence consumer perceptions and behavioural intentions (Matta et al., 2020).

Within the higher education sector, increasing competition has intensified the need for institutions to utilise digital marketing strategies that enhance online visibility and student engagement (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Search engine optimisation has consequently become a fundamental strategy used by higher education institutions to attract prospective students and direct traffic to institutional websites (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). As SEO adoption has become widespread, competition for favourable search engine rankings has increased, compelling organisations to continually optimise website content and improve online visibility (Taylor & Bicak, 2020). Furthermore, SEO has been recognised as a cost-effective digital marketing strategy that can generate sustainable traffic and engagement when compared to paid search alternatives (Taylor & Bicak, 2020).

The influence of search engines extends beyond website traffic generation and plays an important role in shaping consumer perceptions. While much of the literature focuses on the short-term effectiveness of search advertising, search visibility may also have longer-term branding implications (Yoo, 2014; Bird & Mugobo, 2021). Search engine results often contain brand-related information, value propositions, and institutional content that assist users in evaluating organisations. Consequently, Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) serve as important sources of information during the consumer decision-making process (Yoo, 2014; Zhang et al., 2023).

Research indicates that consumers spend relatively little time evaluating search engine results and are more likely to focus on highly ranked listings (Yoo, 2014). Exposure to top-ranked search results has been associated with increased levels of brand awareness and familiarity, with consumers being significantly more likely to recognise brands appearing prominently within search results than those appearing lower on the page (Yoo, 2014; Zhang et al., 2023). Behavioural studies further suggest that consumers often perceive organisations appearing at the top of search results as market leaders or more credible providers within their respective industries (Yoo, 2014; Bird & Mugobo, 2021). Consequently, search engine visibility influences not only information acquisition but also institutional perception and decision-making behaviour.

Search Engine Results Pages (SERP) and Institutional Perception

Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) represent one of the most influential interfaces between internet users and organisations within digital environments. SERPs are the pages generated by search engines in response to a user's search query and contain both organic and sponsored search results that direct users to relevant websites and information sources (Zhang et al., 2023). As consumers increasingly utilise search engines as their primary source of information, SERPs have become critical touchpoints in shaping awareness, perceptions, and decision-making behaviour.

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The prominence of search engines in contemporary information-seeking behaviour has elevated the strategic importance of SERP visibility. Search engines serve as intermediaries that organise and present information according to relevance and ranking algorithms, enabling users to access large volumes of information efficiently (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2020). However, consumer behaviour research indicates that users rarely examine all available search results and instead focus primarily on results appearing at the top of the SERP (Yoo, 2014). Consequently, organisations appearing in prominent positions are more likely to attract user attention, website visits, and engagement than those positioned lower within search results.

The relationship between SERP rankings and consumer perceptions extends beyond visibility and traffic generation. Research suggests that consumers often associate higher search rankings with greater credibility, quality, and authority (Yoo, 2014; Bird & Mugobo, 2021). Search engines are frequently perceived as objective and trustworthy information intermediaries, resulting in users attributing legitimacy to organisations that achieve favourable rankings (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2020). As a result, rankings on search engine results pages can influence how consumers evaluate organisations before engaging directly with their websites or services.

SERPs also serve as an important mechanism for brand awareness and information acquisition. Search results typically contain brand names, website descriptions, value propositions, and links to additional information that assist users in evaluating alternatives during the information search process (Yoo, 2014). Research indicates that consumers exposed to highly ranked search results are more likely to develop brand awareness than those not exposed to prominent listings (Yoo, 2014; Zhang et al., 2023). Furthermore, behavioural studies have found that consumers frequently perceive organisations appearing at the top of search results as market leaders within their respective industries (Bird & Mugobo, 2021).

Within the higher education sector, SERPs play a particularly important role in shaping institutional awareness and perception. Prospective students increasingly utilise search engines to identify institutions, compare qualifications, evaluate reputation, and obtain information relating to admission requirements and programme offerings. Consequently, the visibility of a higher education institution within search engine results may influence whether the institution enters the prospective student's consideration set. Institutions that achieve favourable search rankings are more likely to generate website traffic, facilitate information discovery, and positively influence prospective students' perceptions during the early stages of the decision-making process.

The literature therefore suggests that SERPs represent more than a mechanism for directing users to websites. Rather, they function as influential digital environments that shape information acquisition, brand awareness, institutional credibility, and consumer perceptions. As prospective students

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increasingly rely on search engines to evaluate educational opportunities, understanding the role of SERP visibility in influencing institutional perception and decision-making becomes increasingly important.

Websites and Website Experience

Websites constitute a fundamental component of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) environment and serve as the digital face of an organisation within the broader digital ecosystem (Rerung et al., 2020). As organisations increasingly operate within digitally connected environments, websites have become strategic platforms for communicating organisational information, engaging stakeholders, and delivering products and services in a cost-effective and scalable manner (Napitupulu, 2017). In the higher education sector, institutional websites serve as important information portals through which prospective students obtain information regarding programmes, admission requirements, fees, institutional reputation, and support services.

The strategic importance of websites extends beyond information dissemination. Websites provide organisations with opportunities to establish credibility, enhance visibility, and engage users throughout the decision-making process (Foroudi et al., 2018). As digital technologies have become embedded within consumer decision-making behaviour, websites increasingly serve as the primary interface between organisations and prospective consumers. Consequently, organisations must ensure that their websites satisfy user expectations and facilitate positive online experiences.

The quality of a website is frequently assessed using the WebQual 4.0 framework, which evaluates website quality based on end-user perceptions and satisfaction (Handayani et al., 2020; Rerung et al., 2020). The framework comprises three dimensions, namely usability quality, information quality, and service interaction quality. Usability quality refers to the ease with which users can navigate a website and the extent to which the website provides a visually appealing experience. Information quality relates to the relevance, accuracy, format, and usefulness of website content, whilst service interaction quality concerns the overall experience and interaction facilitated through the website platform (Handayani et al., 2020; Rerung et al., 2020).

Website usability has been identified as a critical determinant of website effectiveness and user engagement (Frisdiantara et al., 2020). Ease of navigation enables users to locate information efficiently, reducing frustration and enhancing the overall user experience. Similarly, visual design influences users' perceptions of a website and affects both cognitive processing and psychological responses during website interaction (Chen, 2018). Research suggests that websites characterised by excessive visual complexity may increase cognitive load and negatively affect user perceptions, whilst visually appealing and well-organised websites contribute positively to user engagement and satisfaction (Chen, 2018).

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Websites also play an important role in shaping organisational image and reputation. Foroudi et al. (2018) argue that well-designed websites contribute to positive brand perceptions by conveying organisational values, culture, and professionalism. In addition, websites facilitate interaction and co-creation between organisations and consumers by encouraging engagement, attracting visitors, and supporting ongoing communication (Foroudi et al., 2018). Within higher education, institutional websites often represent the first substantive interaction prospective students have with an institution, making website quality an important factor influencing institutional perception and credibility.

The growing importance of inbound marketing has further elevated the role of websites as primary digital marketing tools. Inbound marketing focuses on attracting and engaging users through the provision of relevant, valuable, and informative content that addresses consumer needs (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Consequently, website content has become a critical determinant of user engagement and information-seeking behaviour. Stefko et al. (2015) found that website design, clarity, relevant content, and programme information are positively associated with perceptions of organisational effectiveness and website usefulness.

Website design is particularly important in facilitating user engagement across desktop and mobile platforms (Garett et al., 2016). Poorly designed websites may frustrate users, reduce engagement levels, and contribute to website abandonment, whilst effective website design promotes positive user experiences and sustained interaction (Garett et al., 2016). Key elements associated with successful website design include navigation, visual appeal, organisation, content usefulness, purpose, and simplicity (Garett et al., 2016). These elements collectively influence how users interact with websites and assess the quality and credibility of the information presented.

The literature therefore suggests that website quality extends beyond technical functionality and encompasses a combination of usability, information relevance, visual appeal, and interaction quality. As websites increasingly serve as primary information sources within digital environments, understanding how prospective students engage with and evaluate institutional websites is essential for understanding student decision-making behaviour within higher education.

Website Interaction Features: Live Chat

The evolution of digital technologies has transformed websites from static information repositories into interactive engagement platforms. One website feature that has gained prominence in facilitating real-time communication between organisations and consumers is live chat. Early internet formats lacked the ability for direct interaction between service personnel and consumers, creating a disconnect between organisations and their target audiences (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019). Advancements in internet technology have addressed this limitation through the introduction of live chat systems that

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enable one-to-one communication via human agents or artificial intelligence-driven systems (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019).

Live chat has become a common feature across major digital platforms, facilitating dialogue between organisations and prospective consumers while contributing towards customer engagement and relationship development (Kang et al., 2015). Within service-oriented industries, live chat assists organisations in maintaining service quality, reducing customer uncertainty, and enhancing the overall customer experience through the provision of immediate responses and personalised support (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019). Consequently, live chat has emerged as an important website interaction feature that enhances user engagement and information accessibility.

Within the private higher education sector, live chat systems provide prospective students with opportunities to obtain information in real time and engage directly with institutional representatives. According to Hugo (2012), live chat assists in meeting the information needs of prospective students while simultaneously allowing institutions to assess student interest and engagement levels. The technology further democratises the recruitment process by enabling students to control the flow of information and engage with institutions at their convenience (Hugo, 2012). As prospective students increasingly utilise digital platforms to evaluate educational opportunities, real-time communication tools may assist institutions in improving information delivery and enhancing the student experience.

Live chat may also be utilised as an engagement mechanism that delivers targeted messages and encourages user action. Talarico (2018) argues that live chat can create calls to action and generate a sense of urgency by providing reminders relating to application deadlines, registration periods, and programme information. For live chat systems to be effective, institutional representatives must possess comprehensive knowledge regarding programme offerings, admission requirements, and support services to ensure that accurate information is provided to prospective students (Kingsnorth, 2016).

Research further suggests that live chat contributes positively to trust, motivation, and consumer engagement. Using the Motivation, Opportunity and Ability (MOA) framework, Kang et al. (2015) found that website interactivity facilitated through live chat positively influences consumer behaviour and engagement outcomes. By increasing opportunities for interaction and information exchange, live chat enhances website functionality and supports relationship development between organisations and consumers. Despite its widespread adoption, research examining the impact of live chat on consumer behaviour remains limited (Kang et al., 2015). Within higher education, understanding the role of live chat as a website interaction feature may provide valuable insights into how institutions can improve prospective student engagement and support enrolment decision-making.

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Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1986), is one of the most widely utilised theoretical frameworks for explaining user acceptance and adoption of technology. The model emerged from the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and proposes that an individual's intention to use a technology is primarily influenced by two key determinants: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Chuttur, 2009; Granic & Marangunic, 2019). Perceived usefulness refers to the extent to which an individual believes that using a particular system will enhance performance, whilst perceived ease of use relates to the degree to which the system is perceived as being free from effort (Davis, 1989; Granic & Marangunic, 2019).

TAM proposes that users develop attitudes towards technology based on their perceptions of its usefulness and ease of use, which subsequently influence behavioural intentions and actual system usage (Chuttur, 2009). The model further suggests that these perceptions are shaped by the design characteristics and capabilities of the technology being utilised. Consequently, technologies that are perceived as useful, accessible, and easy to navigate are more likely to be accepted and adopted by users (Matikiti et al., 2018).

The model has been extensively applied across various technological contexts to explain why individuals accept or reject digital technologies (Lai, 2017; Granic & Marangunic, 2019). Within digital environments, TAM provides a useful framework for understanding how users interact with websites, search engines, and other online platforms during information acquisition and decision-making processes. Previous studies have demonstrated that perceived usefulness remains one of the strongest predictors of technology adoption, whilst perceived ease of use influences user satisfaction, engagement, and behavioural intentions (Al-Tarawneh, 2019).

In the context of this study, TAM provides a theoretical lens for examining how prospective students interact with search engines and institutional websites during the higher education decision-making process. Perceived ease of use relates to students' ability to locate, navigate, and access information through search engines and institutional websites. Elements such as website navigation, website layout, search functionality, and interaction features may influence students' perceptions regarding the ease with which information can be obtained. Perceived usefulness relates to the value students derive from the information available through search engines and institutional websites, including programme information, admission requirements, institutional reputation, and other information relevant to enrolment decisions.

The application of TAM to this study is particularly relevant as prospective students increasingly rely on digital platforms to evaluate educational opportunities before engaging directly with institutions. Search engine visibility, website usability, information relevance, and website interaction features may influence

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students' perceptions of usefulness and ease of use, ultimately affecting institutional perceptions and enrolment decision-making. Consequently, TAM provides an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding how digital information environments influence student decision-making within private business schools in South Africa.

Methods and Data

This study employed a mixed methods design to examine the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making at two South African private higher education institutions (PHEIs).

Research Design

A descriptive research design was used to examine how search engine visibility, website experience, and website interaction features influence prospective student decision-making within selected PHEIs. The convergent parallel design facilitated the collection of quantitative and qualitative data in a single phase, allowing for a comprehensive analysis by merging findings from both data sets. This approach enhanced depth, contrasting with mono-method designs, by combining quantitative survey results with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and a student focus group (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data collection employed a 5-point Likert scale survey distributed to registered students for quantitative insights. For qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing staff, supplemented by a focus group interview with selected students, to capture detailed perspectives on digital marketing effectiveness for branding and recruitment efforts.

Data Analysis

In line with the convergent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed separately, then merged for interpretation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016).

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS V24, with descriptive statistics and frequency analysis to interpret survey responses. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and a focus group were thematically analysed and coded using NVivo V12 Pro. In the final stage, quantitative and qualitative findings were compared to assess areas of convergence or divergence, providing a comprehensive view of the research outcomes.

Sampling Strategy

This study utilised both systematic random sampling for quantitative data and purposive sampling for qualitative data due to the dual sample populations.

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For the quantitative aspect, a systematic random sampling method was applied to a target population of 11,000 students from the two PHEIs, selecting students at regular intervals. Based on Yamane's formula, a minimum sample size of 386 respondents was required. A target sample of approximately 400 respondents was therefore established to accommodate generalisability, potential non-response and incomplete questionnaires (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Only students registered in 2019, comprising both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, were included to maintain data validity and relevance (Saunders et al., 2016).

Purposive sampling was used for the qualitative aspect, targeting participants directly involved in student recruitment. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing staff engaged in digital marketing, and two focus group interviews, each with six students from the 2019 cohort, provided insights into student perspectives. This approach enabled a selection of participants most relevant to the study's objectives (Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014; Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

Sample Size

The minimum required sample size was calculated using Taro Yamane's formula and yielded a minimum sample size requirement of 386 respondents. To account for incomplete questionnaires and improve statistical representation, a target sample size of approximately 400 respondents was established. A total of 403 valid questionnaires were ultimately obtained and included in the final analysis (Ngulube & Ngulube, 2015; Mukaka & Moulton, 2016). For qualitative data, eight interviews and two focus groups met recommended sizes for in-depth data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Collection

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods aligned with the convergent parallel research design. This design provided independent data strands that were later combined for comprehensive analysis.

Face-to-Face Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were used to gain in-depth insights into the digital marketing strategies of the private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This approach facilitated flexible, open-ended questioning based on key themes, allowing the researcher to capture diverse perspectives across different organizational levels (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview schedule comprised four themes: participant roles, traditional vs. digital marketing, digital marketing's influence on recruitment, and its impact on the broader marketing strategy. Eight interviews with marketing staff in student recruitment were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo V12 Pro to code and categorize themes, adhering to Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) guidance on sample adequacy for qualitative studies.

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Questionnaire: To collect quantitative data, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was developed based on research objectives. The questionnaire, administered manually to improve response ratestargeted demographic information, internet usage patterns, online information search behaviour, perceptions of search engine visibility, website experience, website interaction features, and their influence on institutional perception and student decision-making. Data from 2019-registered students attending weekend workshops was captured in Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS V24, applying descriptive statistics to reveal trends.

Focus Group Interviews: Six students from each PHEI participated in focus group discussions, structured around themes like online information search behaviour, search engine visibility, website experience, website interaction features, and the influence of digital touchpoints on student decision-making. The groups facilitated dynamic discussions on digital marketing's role in recruitment, with findings transcribed and analyzed in NVivo V12 Pro to identify recurring themes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Results

This section presents the findings relating to the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making within private higher education institutions. Consistent with the study objectives, the findings are organised around four themes: respondent profile, online information search behaviour, website experience, and website interaction features. Quantitative findings derived from the student survey are presented alongside supporting qualitative insights obtained from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The integrated presentation of findings is consistent with the convergent parallel mixed methods design adopted for the study and enables a comprehensive understanding of how prospective students utilise search engines and institutional websites during the higher education decision-making process.

Respondent Profile

A total of 403 valid responses were obtained, exceeding the minimum sample size requirement of 386 respondents determined through Taro Yamane’s formula. The sample consisted predominantly of female respondents (58.3%), whilst male respondents accounted for 40.9% of the sample. The majority of respondents belonged to the Generation Y cohort (62.3%), followed by Generation X (28.0%) and Generation Z (8.4%). Most respondents were employed full-time (75.8%), reflecting the profile of working adult students commonly enrolled at private higher education institutions. Undergraduate students represented 55% of the sample, whilst postgraduate students accounted for 45%.

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Online Information Search Behaviour

The findings indicate that online information search forms a critical component of prospective students' decision-making processes. As shown in Figure 1, most respondents (90.9%) indicated that they utilised an online search engine before registering with the institution. Furthermore, 84.4% agreed that information relating to the institution was easily searchable online, whilst 80.7% reported that the information obtained through search engines was relevant to their information needs.

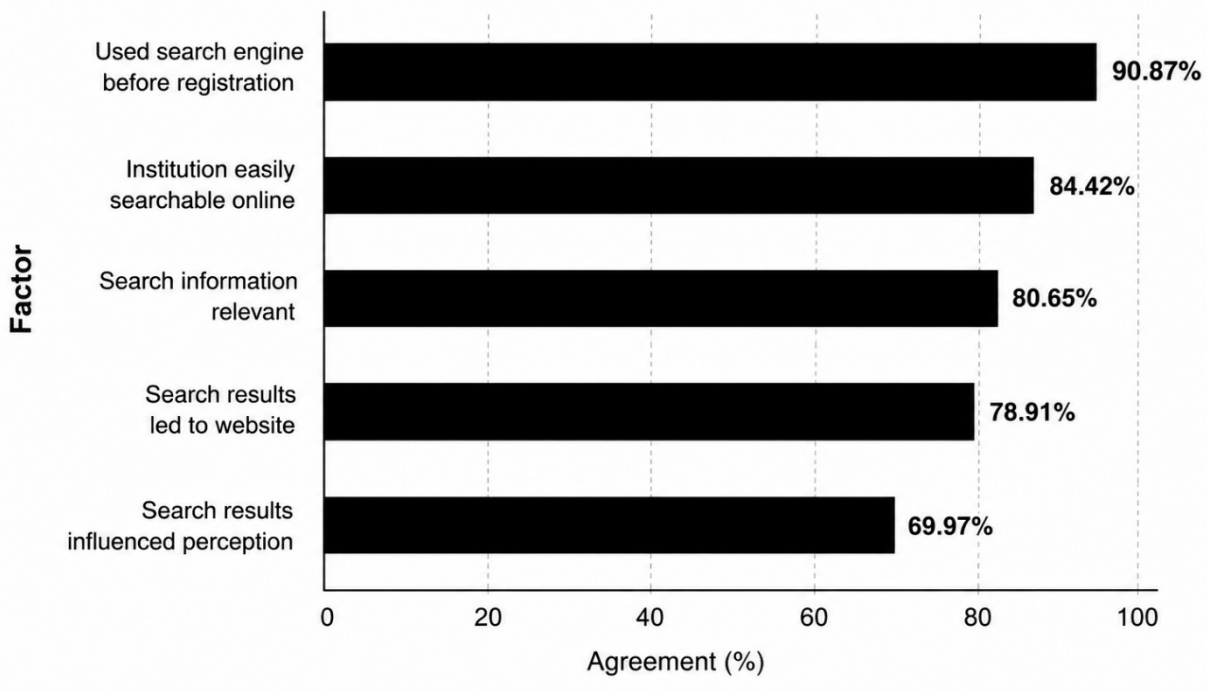

Figure 1: Online Information Search Behaviour Factors Influencing Student Decision-Making
Source: Author's own

Figure 1 demonstrates the importance of search engines during the student decision-making process. Search engine utilisation prior to registration recorded the highest level of agreement (90.87%), followed by ease of locating institutional information online (84.42%) and information relevance (80.65%). The findings indicate that search engines represent an important gateway through which prospective students discover, evaluate, and form perceptions of private higher education institutions.

The findings demonstrate the central role of search engines in facilitating information acquisition during the student recruitment process. These results support previous studies which found that search engines have become primary gateways through which consumers locate and evaluate information before making decisions (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). The high percentage of respondents indicating that search engine results directed them to institutional websites (78.9%) further highlights the importance of search engine visibility in higher education marketing.

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Notably, approximately 70% of respondents indicated that search engine results influenced their perception of the institution before registration. This finding aligns with Yoo (2014) and Bird and Mugobo (2021), who argue that consumers frequently associate highly ranked search results with organisational credibility and market leadership. Consequently, search engine visibility appears to influence not only information discovery but also institutional perception and evaluation.

The quantitative findings were supported by qualitative interviews with marketing personnel. Participants indicated that search engine optimisation strategies were developed around prospective student search behaviour, particularly through identifying commonly used qualification and programme-related keywords. One participant explained that search terms and keyword strategies were informed by understanding how prospective students searched for qualifications and institutions online. These findings suggest that institutions actively seek to improve search visibility to align with prospective student information-seeking behaviour.

Website Experience

Institutional websites emerged as a critical source of information and evaluation during the student decision-making process. As reflected in Figure 2, 79.5% of respondents indicated that they visited the institution's website prior to registration.

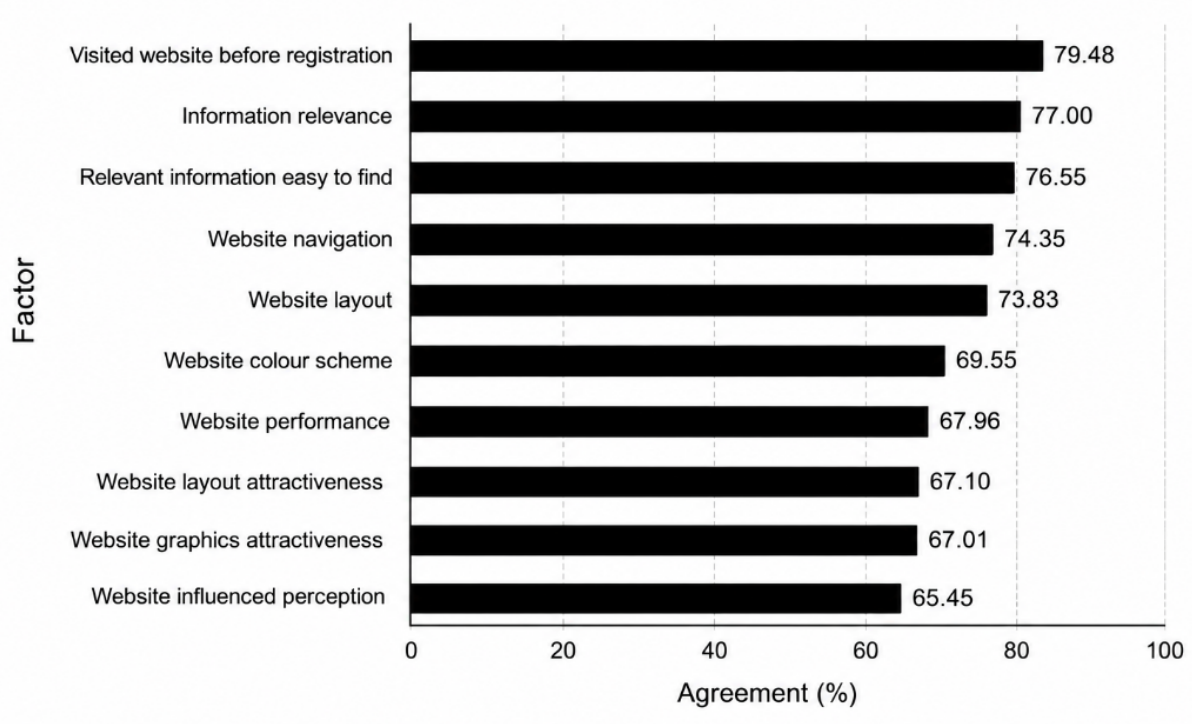

Figure 2: Website Experience Factors Influencing Student Decision-Making
Source: Author's own

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Figure 2 illustrates the website-related factors that influenced prospective students during their evaluation of private higher education institutions. Information relevance (77.00%), ease of locating information (76.55%), website navigation (74.35%), and website layout (73.83%) emerged as the most influential website attributes. The findings suggest that website usability and information quality play a more prominent role in student decision-making than aesthetic website features.

Respondents generally reported favourable perceptions regarding website usability and information quality. Approximately 76.6% agreed that relevant information could easily be located on the website, whilst 74.4% reported that the website was easy to navigate. Similarly, 73.8% agreed that the website was well organised and appropriately structured.

These findings support the Website Quality (WebQual 4.0) dimensions of usability and information quality proposed by Handayani et al. (2020) and Rerung et al. (2020). The findings further reinforce previous studies suggesting that website usability, navigation, and information relevance are important determinants of user engagement and satisfaction (Frisdiantara et al., 2020).

Information quality emerged as one of the strongest website attributes, with 77% of respondents indicating that the information provided on the website was relevant to their needs. This finding supports the argument of Holliman and Rowley (2014) that content remains a critical component of digital engagement and inbound marketing strategies. Prospective students appear to rely heavily on institutional websites to obtain programme information, admission requirements, and other information relevant to their enrolment decisions.

Respondents also reported positive perceptions regarding website aesthetics. Approximately 69.6% indicated positive perceptions of the website's colour scheme, whilst 67.1% and 67.0% respectively reported favourable perceptions regarding website layout and graphics. These findings support Chen (2018), who argues that visual complexity and design influence users' cognitive processing and perceptions of websites. Similarly, Foroudi et al. (2018) contend that website design contributes positively to organisational image, reputation, and stakeholder perceptions.

Importantly, 65.5% of respondents agreed that the overall presentation of the website influenced their perception of the institution. This suggests that websites serve not only as information repositories but also as mechanisms through which prospective students evaluate institutional credibility and quality. The findings support Stefko et al. (2015), who found that website design, content relevance, and usability contribute significantly to organisational perceptions.

Website Interaction Features: Live Chat

The study further examined the effectiveness of live chat as a website interaction feature. Although utilisation levels were lower than other website features, 47.0% of respondents indicated that they had

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used the institution's live chat functionality. Furthermore, 43.5% agreed that they were assisted effectively through the live chat platform, whilst 40.0% indicated that live chat influenced their study choice.

These findings suggest that live chat serves as a valuable support mechanism for prospective students seeking additional information during the decision-making process. The findings are consistent with McLean and Osei-Frimpong (2019), who argue that live chat enhances customer experience through immediate communication and personalised support. Similarly, Kang et al. (2015) found that live chat increases website interactivity, trust, and consumer engagement.

The qualitative findings further revealed that live chat was viewed as a mechanism for responding to prospective student enquiries in real time and facilitating information exchange. Participants indicated that live chat enabled institutions to engage directly with prospective students and provide immediate responses to programme-related enquiries. This finding supports Hugo (2012), who contends that live chat assists prospective students in obtaining information whilst enabling institutions to engage directly with potential applicants.

Correlation Analysis

To further examine the relationships between search engine visibility, website experience, and student decision-making variables, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. Correlation analysis was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between the key constructs investigated in this study. Table 1 presents selected statistically significant correlations relevant to the research objectives.

Variables	Pearson r	Significance
Institution easily searchable online ↔ Search information relevance	0.788	p < .001
Search information relevance ↔ Search results led to website	0.726	p < .001
Search results led to website ↔ Institutional perception	0.677	p < .001
Search results led to website ↔ Website visitation	0.477	p < .001
Search engine results influenced perception ↔ Website influenced perception	0.497	p < .001
Live chat effectiveness ↔ Influence on study choice	0.757	p < .001

Table 1: Selected Correlations Between Search Visibility and Website Experience Variables

The findings reveal several statistically significant positive relationships between search engine visibility, website engagement, and student decision-making variables. Institution searchability demonstrated a

strong positive relationship with the perceived relevance of search engine information ($r = 0.788$, $p < .001$), suggesting that institutions that are more visible within search engines are also perceived as providing more relevant information to prospective students. Similarly, search information relevance was strongly associated with search results directing prospective students to institutional websites ($r = 0.726$, $p < .001$).

The results further indicate that search engine visibility contributes to institutional perception. Search results directing respondents to institutional websites were positively associated with institutional perception ($r = 0.677$, $p < .001$). A moderate positive relationship was also observed between search engine results influencing perception and website influence on perception ($r = 0.497$, $p < .001$), suggesting that search engines and websites operate as complementary digital touchpoints within the student decision-making process.

With regard to website interaction features, live chat effectiveness demonstrated a strong positive relationship with its influence on study choice ($r = 0.757$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that prospective students who perceive live chat as effective are more likely to indicate that the feature influenced their enrolment decisions. Collectively, the findings support the view that search engine visibility, website experience, and website interaction features are interconnected factors that influence prospective student engagement and institutional evaluation.

Integrated Findings

The findings reveal a sequential digital decision-making process among prospective students. Search engines function as the primary gateway through which students discover and evaluate institutions. Search engine visibility facilitates information acquisition and directs prospective students to institutional websites. Once on the website, usability, information quality, visual appeal, and website performance collectively influence institutional perceptions. Interactive features such as live chat further enhance engagement by enabling real-time communication and information exchange.

Collectively, the findings suggest that prospective students evaluate private higher education institutions through a combination of search engine visibility, website experience, and website interaction features. These digital touchpoints contribute to institutional perception and support student decision-making throughout the enrolment process.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making within private business schools in South Africa. The findings demonstrate that search engines and institutional websites play a significant role in shaping prospective students' information acquisition processes, institutional perceptions, and enrolment decisions.

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The first objective sought to examine the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making. The findings revealed that most respondents utilised search engines prior to registration and regarded institutional information as easily searchable and relevant to their needs. Furthermore, search engine results directed respondents to institutional websites and influenced their perceptions of the institution. These findings support Schultheiß and Lewandowski (2020) and Zhang et al. (2023), who found that search engines serve as primary information gateways that influence consumer evaluation and decision-making processes. The findings further support Yoo (2014) and Bird and Mugobo (2021), who argue that consumers associate highly ranked search results with organisational credibility and quality. Within the context of private higher education, search engine visibility appears to facilitate institutional awareness and influence whether an institution enters a prospective student's consideration set.

The second objective sought to determine how online information search influences institutional perception. The findings indicate that search engine results contribute towards shaping prospective students' perceptions of private business schools before direct engagement with the institution occurs. Approximately seventy percent of respondents indicated that search engine results influenced their perception of the institution. These findings suggest that institutional perception begins to form during the online information search process rather than only after interaction with institutional websites or marketing representatives. The findings support previous research which suggests that search engine rankings influence consumer trust and perceptions of organisational legitimacy (Yoo, 2014; Bird & Mugobo, 2021). Consequently, search engine optimisation extends beyond website traffic generation and serves as a strategic branding mechanism within the higher education sector.

The third objective sought to assess the role of website usability and navigation in prospective student engagement. The findings indicate that respondents generally reported positive perceptions regarding website navigation, website layout, and the ability to locate relevant information. These findings support the WebQual dimensions of usability proposed by Handayani et al. (2020) and Rerung et al. (2020). Website usability is particularly important within higher education because prospective students often rely on institutional websites as their primary source of information relating to qualifications, admission requirements, fees, and support services. The findings further support Frisdiantara et al. (2020), who found that website usability and navigation positively influence user satisfaction and engagement. It can therefore be argued that website usability contributes towards reducing barriers to information acquisition and enhances the overall digital experience of prospective students.

The fourth objective sought to evaluate the influence of website information relevance on student decision-making. Information relevance emerged as one of the strongest website attributes, with respondents indicating that website information was relevant and easy to locate. This finding supports Holliman and Rowley (2014), who argue that content remains a fundamental component of digital

engagement strategies. The findings suggest that prospective students evaluate institutions based on the quality and relevance of information available through institutional websites. Within private higher education, where prospective students are required to make significant financial and educational commitments, access to relevant and accurate information appears critical to reducing uncertainty and supporting informed decision-making.

The fifth objective sought to examine the role of website interaction features in influencing enrolment decisions. Although live chat recorded lower levels of utilisation than other website features, respondents who utilised the functionality reported positive experiences and indicated that the feature influenced their study choice. These findings support McLean and Osei-Frimpong (2019), who found that live chat enhances customer experience through immediate communication and personalised support. Similarly, Kang et al. (2015) found that website interactivity positively influences trust and engagement. The findings suggest that live chat contributes towards relationship building and information exchange by providing prospective students with immediate access to institutional support and guidance.

The findings of the study further support the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The website attributes identified as important by respondents, including navigation, usability, information accessibility, and information relevance, correspond closely with the constructs of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. According to Davis (1989), users are more likely to engage with technologies that are perceived as easy to use and capable of providing value. In this study, respondents reported positive perceptions regarding both the usability of institutional websites and the usefulness of the information available through these platforms. Consequently, the findings suggest that prospective students' acceptance and use of digital platforms during the information search process are influenced by their perceptions of usefulness and ease of use. The study therefore extends the application of TAM within the context of student recruitment by demonstrating how search engine visibility and website experience influence prospective student decision-making within private business schools.

Overall, the findings reveal a sequential digital decision-making process in which search engines facilitate information discovery, institutional websites support information evaluation, and website interaction features enhance engagement. Collectively, these digital touchpoints influence institutional perception and contribute towards prospective students' enrolment decisions within private higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of search engine visibility and website experience on student decision-making within private business schools in South Africa. The study further sought to determine how online information search influences institutional perception, assess the role of website usability and navigation in prospective student engagement, evaluate the influence of website

information relevance on decision-making, and examine the role of website interaction features in influencing enrolment decisions.

The findings demonstrate that digital information search has become an integral component of the student decision-making process. Search engines emerged as the primary gateway through which prospective students discover, evaluate, and develop perceptions of private business schools. The findings revealed high levels of search engine utilisation prior to registration, indicating that prospective students rely extensively on online search platforms when gathering information relating to higher education opportunities. Furthermore, search engine visibility was found to influence institutional perception, suggesting that search engine optimisation extends beyond website traffic generation and contributes to broader branding and recruitment objectives.

Institutional websites were also found to play a significant role in student decision-making. Website usability, ease of navigation, information accessibility, and information relevance emerged as important determinants of prospective student engagement. The findings indicate that students place considerable value on the quality and accessibility of information available through institutional websites. In addition, website aesthetics and overall presentation were found to influence perceptions of institutional credibility and quality. These findings reinforce the importance of viewing institutional websites not merely as information repositories but as strategic digital recruitment platforms.

The study further found that website interaction features, particularly live chat functionality, contribute positively towards prospective student engagement and information acquisition. Although utilisation levels were lower than other website attributes, respondents who engaged with live chat reported favourable experiences and indicated that the feature supported their decision-making process. These findings suggest that real-time interaction capabilities provide institutions with additional opportunities to engage prospective students and address information needs during the recruitment process.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the application of the Technology Acceptance Model within the higher education recruitment environment. Website usability and information relevance correspond closely with the concepts of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, highlighting the importance of designing digital platforms that facilitate efficient information access and positive user experiences.

Practically, the findings suggest that private business schools should prioritise search engine optimisation, website usability, content relevance, and interactive website features as part of an integrated digital recruitment strategy. Institutions that effectively leverage these digital touchpoints are likely to improve online visibility, strengthen institutional perceptions, and enhance prospective student engagement.

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The study was limited to two private business schools operating within South Africa, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other higher education contexts. Future research could expand the study to include public universities and other private higher education institutions, while also examining the influence of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, personalised search experiences, and conversational marketing tools on prospective student decision-making.

Overall, the study demonstrates that search engine visibility and website experience are significant determinants of prospective student decision-making and institutional perception. As higher education becomes increasingly digital, institutions must recognise the strategic importance of these online touchpoints in attracting, engaging, and converting prospective students.

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