

The Impact of Digital Marketing on Brand Awareness and Student Recruitment: A Study of Private Business Schools in South Africa

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the impact of digital marketing on brand awareness and student recruitment at private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa. Using a convergent parallel research design, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore this relationship. The findings highlight the critical role of digital marketing in enhancing brand awareness and driving student recruitment, with social media, Search Engine Optimisation, and email campaigns being key drivers of lead generation. Senior executives recognise the importance of both outbound and inbound channels for engagement and recruitment, particularly in a sector facing increasing competition and resource constraints. However, the study is limited to selected private business schools due to practical, budgetary, and time considerations. The findings offer valuable practical insights into the role, impact, and influence of digital marketing in the private higher education sector. This research contributes to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive examination of how digital marketing shapes the marketing strategies of South Africa's private business schools.

Keywords:

Digital Marketing, Brand Awareness, Brand Image, Brand Loyalty, Student Recruitment, Private Higher Education Institutions, South Africa, Lead Generation, Higher Education Marketing, Social Media Marketing, WEB 2.0, WEB 3.0.

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Introduction

Digital marketing has proliferated across all sectors including the private higher education sector (PHEI). Digital marketing has reshaped audience engagement, brand visibility and organisational growth with data-driven strategies. Digital marketing has developed unique channels, strategies and tools that are unparalleled (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2016).

South Africa's PHEI sector relies on digital marketing to navigate competition and attract students (Bird & Mugobo, 2021; Swart & Schutte, 2024). Marketing serves a critical role in PHEI activities as it facilitates acceptance by prospective students, parents, sponsors and industry (Bird & Mugobo, 2021).

PHEIs' marketing strategies focus on building brand presence, enhancing reputation among stakeholders, and boosting student recruitment (Swart & Schutte, 2024). Branding communicates a PHEI's programme offerings to the public, highlighting their quality and value (Fomunyam, 2020). Digital marketing strengthens branding by enabling adaptability to market changes and fostering individual customer relationships, essential for a PHEIs survival in a complex environment (Velelo & Matenda, 2023).

Digital marketing is vital for PHEIs as digital technologies like smartphones, Internet of Things (IoT), search engine optimisation (SEO), and social media reshape consumer behaviour, fostering digital relationships, user-generated content, and influencer marketing (Fierro, Cardona Arbelaez and Gavilanez, 2017; Gabhane, Varalaxmi, Rathod, Hamida and Anand, 2023). South African PHEIs use websites and social media to connect with prospective students, boosting market reputation, programme quality, and profitability (Bird & Mugobo, 2021; Fomunyam, 2020; Velelo & Matenda, 2023). Studies on digital marketing in South African PHEIs are scarce, with a focus on short-term recruitment rather than long-term goals such as growth, brand positioning, and data-driven value (Sams, Rickard and Evans, 2023).

With reference to the above narrative, the research objectives are to i) determine the influence of digital marketing on brand awareness among prospective students; ii) ascertain which strategies yield positive brand visibility for student recruitment and lastly to compare digital marketing with traditional marketing methods. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does digital marketing influence brand awareness among prospective students?
2. Which strategies are most effective in sustaining brand visibility for student recruitment?
3. How does digital marketing compare to traditional methods in contributing to student recruitment?

Literature Review

Digital Marketing Evolution

The rapid evolution of marketing has been driven by technological advancements and the rise of digital platforms. Internet users surged from 16 million in 1995 to 5.52 billion by 2024, with consumers spending over six hours online daily. Innovations such as Web 3.0, IoT, blockchain, AI, and big data have transformed consumer behaviour and marketing strategies. Since the advent of Facebook in 2004, social media has revolutionised communication and engagement, enabling new marketing approaches (Faruk, Rahman and Hasan, 2021; Petrosyan, 2024). The shift from traditional to digital media has compelled marketers to adopt dynamic strategies, leveraging AI, AR, and VR to enhance consumer interactions and drive continuous innovation (Kannan & Li, 2017; Kim, Jang and Shin, 2021).

WEB 2.0, introduced in 2004, enabled user-generated content, reshaping digital marketing through viral and influencer marketing (Gabhane et al., 2023). WEB 3.0, the latest evolution, integrates AI and blockchain to enhance user experiences, enabling sophisticated behavioural targeting and personalisation. By processing complex data and fostering user collaboration, WEB 3.0 refines digital marketing strategies, making them more intuitive and engaging (Ghelani & Kian Hua, 2022). Digital marketing now plays a critical role in fostering interactive relationships between organisations and consumers across digital platforms (Fierro et al., 2017; Kannan & Li, 2017).

Digital marketing facilitates customer acquisition, brand positioning, retention, and sales through digital technologies (Kannan & Li, 2017). It delivers value via digital channels, emphasising interactivity and co-creation between consumers and organisations (Gabhane et al., 2023). The evolving consumer landscape, shaped by search engines, social media, and user-generated content, requires adaptive marketing strategies (Fierro et al., 2017). By creating immersive consumer experiences that extend beyond traditional advertising, digital marketing continues to redefine engagement in an increasingly digital world (Krishen, Dwivedi, Bindu & Kumar, 2021).

South African Higher Education Landscape

In 2016, South Africa had 26 public and 123 private higher education institutions (HEIs) serving 1.1 million students, falling short of the 2030 target of 1.6 million (DHET, 2018; Nukunah, Bezuidenhout & Furtak, 2019; Singh & Tustin, 2022). Private HEIs (PHEIs) accounted for only 167,408 students, with a participation rate of 14.6%. The higher education system faces pressure to expand while maintaining quality, particularly as the national unemployment rate stood at 32.9% in Q1 2024, disproportionately affecting those with lower qualifications (Stats SA, 2024). Public HEIs struggle with overcrowding, outdated curricula, and funding shortages, exacerbating accessibility challenges (Froneman, 2002; Nukunah et al., 2019).

Many prospective students are further hindered by their rural and township locations, limiting access to education (Froneman, 2002). PHEIs help alleviate pressure on public institutions by expanding access, particularly through distance learning, which benefits disadvantaged students (Froneman, 2002). Both public and private HEIs operate under the regulatory framework of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995 and the Higher Education Act of 1997, ensuring quality control (DHET, 2018). Despite a volatile higher education landscape, PHEIs present opportunities for growth and increased participation in the sector (Froneman, 2002).

Enrolments in private HEIs have risen by 59.9% since 2010, reflecting the sector's growing role in addressing demand (Nukunah et al., 2019). The expansion of private institutions, alongside institutional diversification and innovations in teaching, can help mitigate the challenges faced by public HEIs. By offering flexible learning pathways and bridging gaps in accessibility, private providers contribute meaningfully to South Africa's higher education sector.

Use of Digital Marketing Strategies in Higher Education SA

HEIs in South Africa all utilise websites to communicate with students, alumni, visitors, faculty, and other stakeholders (Fomunyan, 2020). HEIs use websites to engage potential students, with visitor interactions influencing organisational performance (Velelo and Matenda, 2023). HEI websites provide information on programme offerings, admissions, scholarship information, ceremonies, and social events, as well as links to registration sites (Fomunyan, 2020). HEI websites also link the institution's social media sites. These social media sites are updated with multimedia content of events, lectures, orientations, inaugurations, and engagement with the public and current students of the institution (Fomunyan, 2020). Innovations like blended learning and technology-driven education are key to modern higher education branding, enhancing the student experience and enabling personalised attention. In South Africa, PHEIs rely on corporate image and website branding to drive success and profitability, focusing on market reputation and meeting quality standards demanded by students and industry (Bird and Mugobo, 2021). Research on digital marketing in South African higher education is limited and fragmented, often focusing on branding or social media. While PHEIs use digital tools, their integration into broader strategies is unclear, with efforts largely centred on student recruitment and income generation rather than long-term goals (Sams *et al.*, 2023).

Impact of Digital Marketing on Branding

According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is a distinguishing name, term, symbol, or feature of a seller's products or services ('Definitions of Marketing', 2019). Branding is defined as an asset that influences strategy and performance, with high-value brands positively shaping consumer perceptions and correlating with increased purchase intentions (Aaker, 2015; Bernarto, Berlianto, Meilani, Masman and Suryawan, 2020). This section explores traditional branding concepts, followed

by digital marketing's impact on branding. Branding comprises brand image (BI), brand awareness (BA), brand loyalty, and brand equity (Zia, Younus and Mirza, 2021).

BI is the consumer's perception of a brand's ability to fulfil their needs, shaped by consumer insights, memories, and brand associations, influencing customer loyalty (Bernarto *et al.*, 2020; Zia *et al.*, 2021). BI consists of three components: attributes (brand features), benefits (functional, symbolic, or experiential), and attitude (consumer evaluations influencing future purchases) (Bernarto *et al.*, 2020).

BA measures how well consumers identify with a brand and directly impacts brand equity. It is shaped through marketing communications and influences purchasing decisions (Bernarto *et al.*, 2020; Zia *et al.*, 2021). Brand loyalty, a result of positive perception, strengthens commitment and reduces brand switching while brand equity reflects consumer evaluations, impacting organisational performance (Aaker, 2015; Zia *et al.*, 2021).

Digital technologies, including social media and review platforms, have shifted brand building by enhancing consumer engagement and co-creation of brand value (Mingione & Abratt, 2020). Brand managers now focus on multi-stakeholder engagement using customer journey blueprints (Heinonen, Campbell and Lord Ferguson, 2019). Digital channels aid brand positioning through branding and communication, leveraging social media and word-of-mouth to build long-term relationships (Oh, Keller, Neslin, Reibstein and Lehmann, 2020). Social media enables two-way communication, allowing consumers to engage with brands or share experiences on platforms like TripAdvisor (Rowles, 2022). However, discrepancies between brand perceptions and promises pose risks (Mingione & Abratt, 2020).

eWOM plays a key role in social media marketing by fostering dialogue and reducing risks (Alghizzawi, 2019). Digital disruption has created new markets, prompting organisations to focus on stakeholder engagement and brand communities (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). Digital marketing necessitates balancing company-generated and consumer-created content, aligning both with a unified brand narrative (Mingione & Abratt, 2020). It also supports direct-to-consumer (D2C) channels (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). The shift from broadcasting to fostering dialogue through digital platforms has transformed branding, with two-way conversations enhancing consumer understanding and trust. Traditional metrics like awareness, affinity, and loyalty remain relevant but must integrate into broader digital strategies (Rowles, 2022). Organisations now recognise the value of digital engagement and integrating consumer voices into branding strategies, leading to co-creation of products and services and narrowing the gap between business objectives and consumer needs (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019; Rowles, 2022).

Methods and Data

This study employed a mixed methods design to examine the impact of digital marketing on brand awareness and student recruitment at two South African private higher education institutions (PHEIs).

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Pragmatism, unlike positivist or post-constructivist methods, allowed for an abductive approach, linking theory and data through intersubjective, transferable insights (Morgan, 2014).

Research Design

A descriptive research design was used to outline digital marketing strategies employed by the 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.

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 to yield a sample size of 400 was deemed sufficient to ensure generalisability (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 quantitative sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's formula, yielding 386 participants. A total of 391 responses were collected through self-administered surveys, in alignment with recommendations for survey sample sizes (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.

Questionnaire: To collect quantitative data, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was developed based on research objectives. The questionnaire, administered manually to improve response rates, targeted demographic information, internet usage, digital marketing effectiveness, and perceptions of PHEI websites and social media platforms. 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 traditional vs. digital marketing, digital strategies' influence on recruitment, and digital marketing effectiveness. 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).

Data Analysis

SPSS V24 was used to process the questionnaire data, with responses coded numerically and cleansed for accuracy. Descriptive statistics, including mode, median, and mean, were calculated to identify trends within the student responses, reflecting their views on digital marketing's effectiveness.

A deductive approach guided the analysis of semi-structured and focus group interviews, transcribed and verified for accuracy. NVivo V12 Pro was used for thematic analysis, identifying, coding, and categorizing data into primary themes. This process enabled an in-depth understanding of participant perspectives and provided complementary qualitative insights to the quantitative findings.

Results

This section presents the study's findings on the impact of digital marketing on brand awareness and student recruitment at two private higher education institutions in South Africa. Results are divided into two sections: quantitative survey data and qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups, each addressing key themes on digital marketing's influence on brand awareness and recruitment.

Quantitative Survey Results

Social media application use. Figure 1 below highlights varying levels of engagement across social media platforms among South African students in private higher education institutions (PHEIs). WhatsApp emerged as the most popular platform, with 65.58% of respondents using it for three or more hours daily, underscoring its role as a dominant communication tool. The platform's usage data demonstrated positive skewness and leptokurtic distribution, indicating high engagement levels, which aligns with national trends showing WhatsApp as widely adopted in South Africa (Digital 2022).

Conversely, Snapchat had the highest proportion of non-users, with 71.61% of respondents reporting no use, reflecting limited appeal. Its data distribution showed slight positive skewness and platykurtosis, indicating moderate user engagement. The platform's low popularity is also reflected in national data, showing only 6.25 million South African Snapchat users (Digital 2022).

Facebook and Instagram demonstrated moderate usage, with significant numbers of students using these platforms daily, although a considerable proportion did not engage at all. Facebook's usage distribution was largely symmetrical, and Instagram's data indicated a moderate positive skewness with platykurtic tendencies. Both platforms' engagement patterns highlight selective use, while Facebook maintains broad reach, albeit facing growth saturation (Digital 2022).

Among marketing-related platforms, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) was notably used, with 28.20% of respondents frequently engaging with it, indicating its importance in digital marketing. In contrast, Smartphone Marketing, Landing Page Marketing, and Online Advertising were less frequently used,

with substantial proportions of students indicating non-use. These platforms showed nearly symmetric distributions, reflecting their limited but selective use for marketing purposes.

Email Marketing displayed a balanced usage pattern, with moderate proportions of respondents using it frequently and similarly high non-usage rates. Content Marketing and LinkedIn also showed moderate levels of engagement, with respondents using these tools selectively.

The skewness and kurtosis analyses across platforms highlighted differences in engagement patterns, where platforms like WhatsApp and SEO had positively skewed distributions reflecting high engagement, while others like Snapchat and Landing Page Marketing were platykurtic, indicating lower usage extremes.

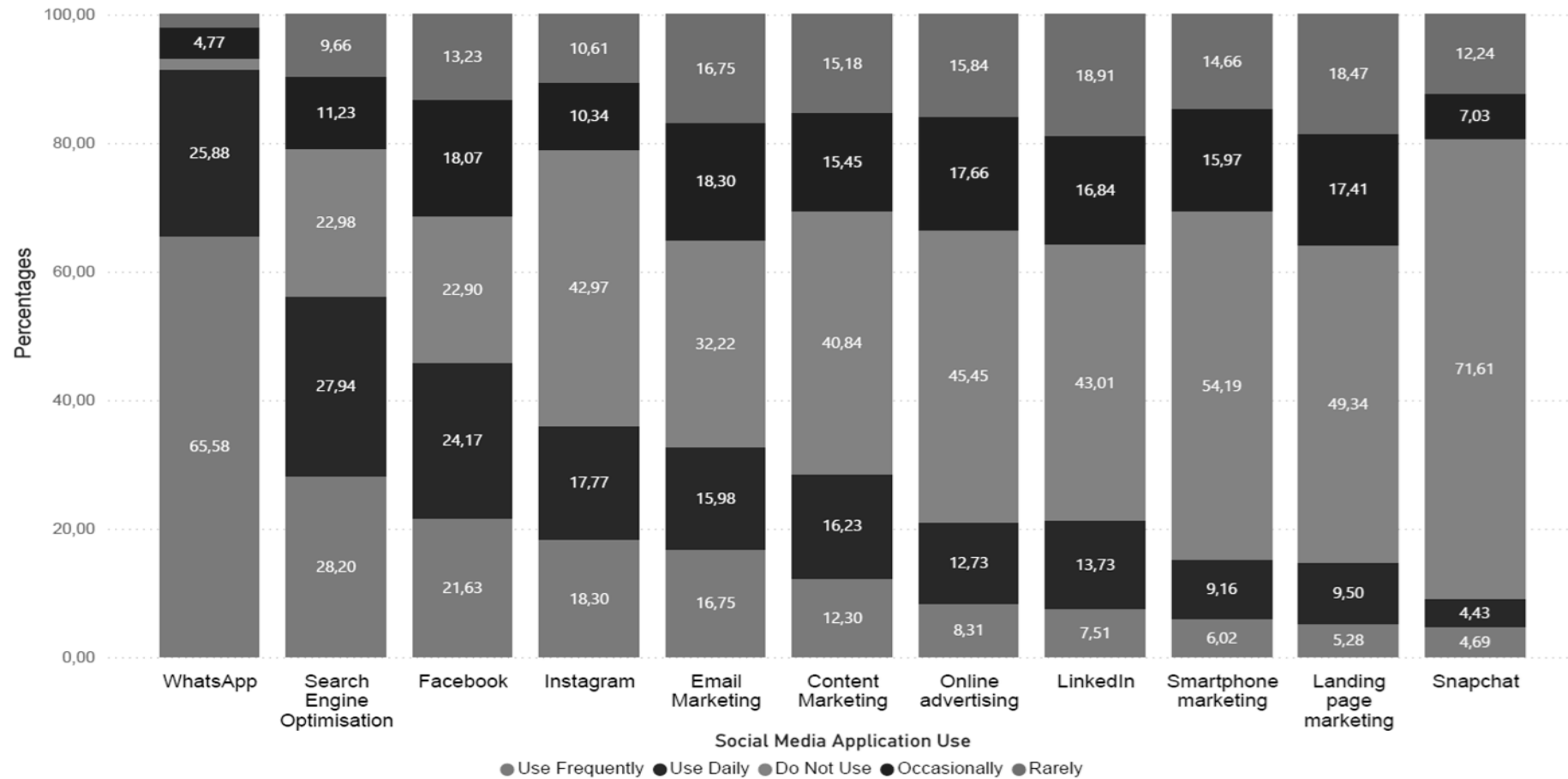


Figure 1: Social media application use

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The study found that online information search significantly influences respondents' perceptions of PHEI brands. Figure 2 shows most participants agreed (32.05% strongly agreed, 37.95% agreed), while 22.82% were neutral, and only a small percentage disagreed (5.64%) or strongly disagreed (1.54%). The data, with a positive skew (0.687) and mesokurtic distribution (kurtosis 0.064), highlights a general tendency toward agreement. These findings align with previous research on search engine results influencing brand perception. Search Engine Results Pages (SERP) provide a convenient platform for consumers to access brand information, which is often embedded with brand names, unique propositions, and detailed information (Yoo, 2014; Bird & Mugobo, 2021). Studies reveal that consumers are 27% more likely to develop brand awareness for top-ranked ads on SERPs, often perceiving these brands as industry leaders (Yoo, 2014; Bird and Mugobo, 2021; Zhang, Yang and Li, 2023).

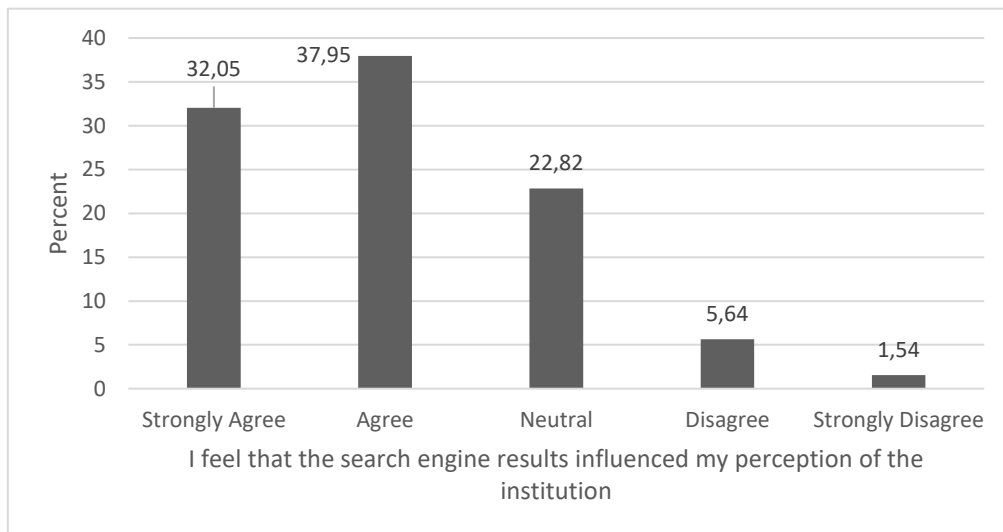


Figure 2: Online information search and perception of the institution

The results displayed in figure 3 indicate that most respondents visited the PHEI website before registering, with 44.10% strongly agreeing and 35.38% agreeing. A smaller proportion were neutral (9.23%), disagreed (8.72%), or strongly disagreed (2.56%). The data, with positive skewness (1.182) and a mesokurtic distribution (kurtosis 0.700), shows a clear tendency towards agreement. These findings align with studies highlighting the internet's role in expanding consumer choices and reducing search costs (Kulviwat, Guo & Engchanil, 2017; Douneva, Thielsch & Jaron, 2016).

University websites act as virtual storefronts, providing prospective students with essential information (Foroudi, Yu, Gupta & Foroudi, 2018).

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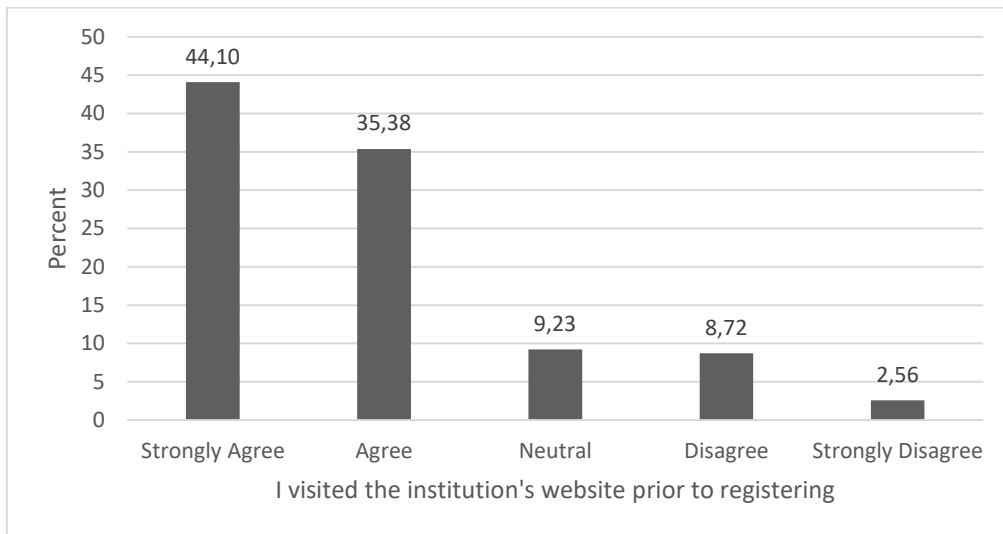


Figure 3: Accessing the PHEI website before registering

The results in figure 4 show that most respondents found the PHEI website's information relevant, with 28.61% strongly agreeing and 47.94% agreeing. Fewer were neutral (18.04%), disagreed (3.61%), or strongly disagreed (1.80%). The data, with a positive skewness (0.920) and leptokurtic distribution (kurtosis 1.136), indicates general agreement. These findings align with inbound marketing principles, where tailored content engages customers through SEO (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). The relevance of website content is crucial for shaping student perceptions, as highlighted by a 2015 study linking website design and course information with positive evaluations (Stefko, Fedorko & Bacik, 2015).

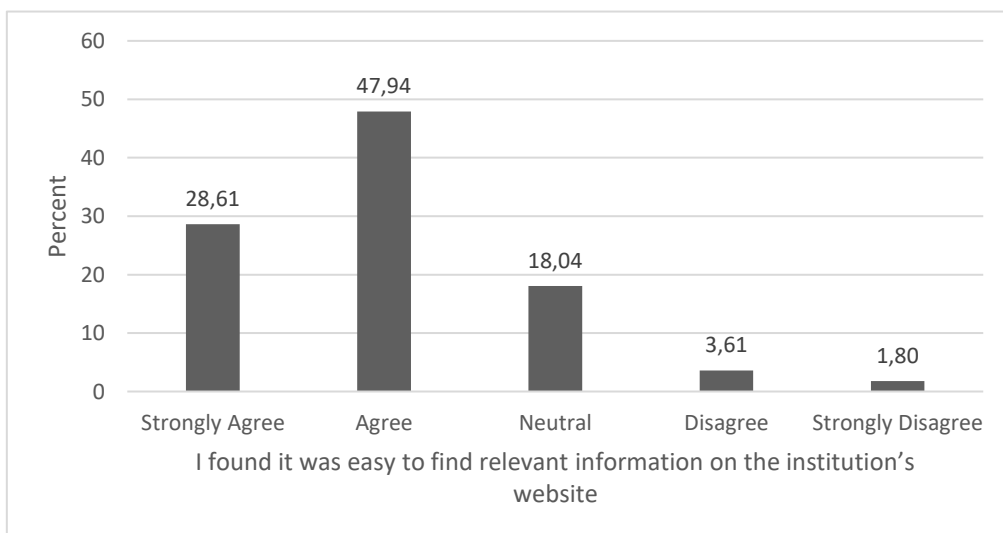


Figure 4: Relevant information on the PHEI website

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Figure 5 results show that 27.58% of participants strongly agreed and 39.43% agreed that the PHEI website's design was visually appealing. Additionally, 27.84% were neutral, while 3.61% disagreed and 1.55% strongly disagreed. With a positive skewness (0.549) and platykurtic distribution (kurtosis 0.138), the data reflects overall positive feedback. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of website design in user engagement (Garett, Chiu, Zhang & Young, 2016). Poor design can lead to user frustration, while effective design elements such as navigation, graphics, and content contribute to better engagement, as seen in the positive perceptions of the PHEI website's layout.

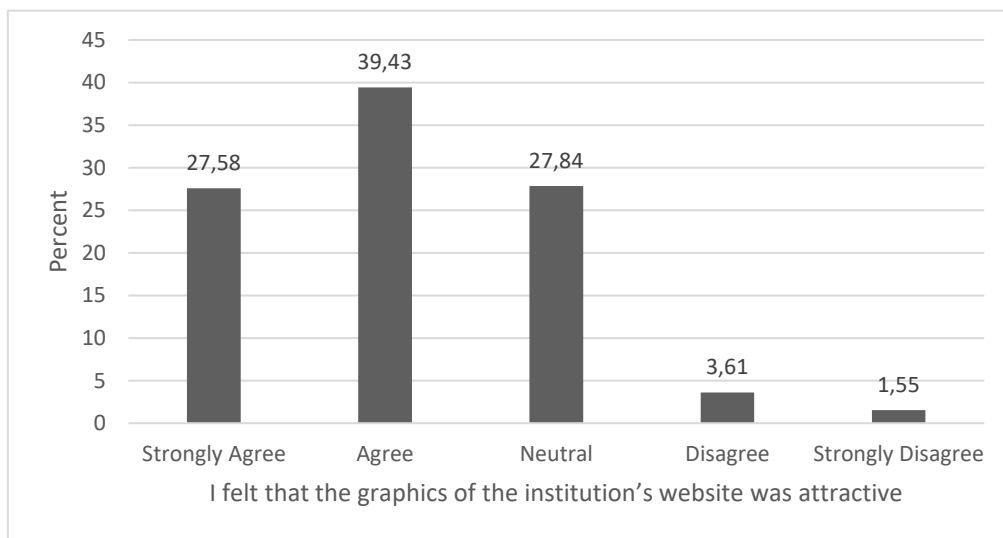


Figure 5: Attractiveness of the PHEI websites

Figure 6 results show that 27.01% of participants strongly agreed and 38.44% agreed that the PHEI website positively influenced their perception of the institution. A further 26.49% were neutral, while 6.23% disagreed and 1.82% strongly disagreed. With a skewness of 0.571 and platykurtic distribution (-0.029), the data indicates a tendency for respondents to agree or strongly agree. These findings support the role of digital experiences, such as website interaction, in shaping brand awareness and equity (Nguyen, Nguyen, Duong, Nguyen and Le, 2020). The findings confirms the websites positive impact on respondents' perceptions and ability to enhance brand equity through a positive e-brand experience.

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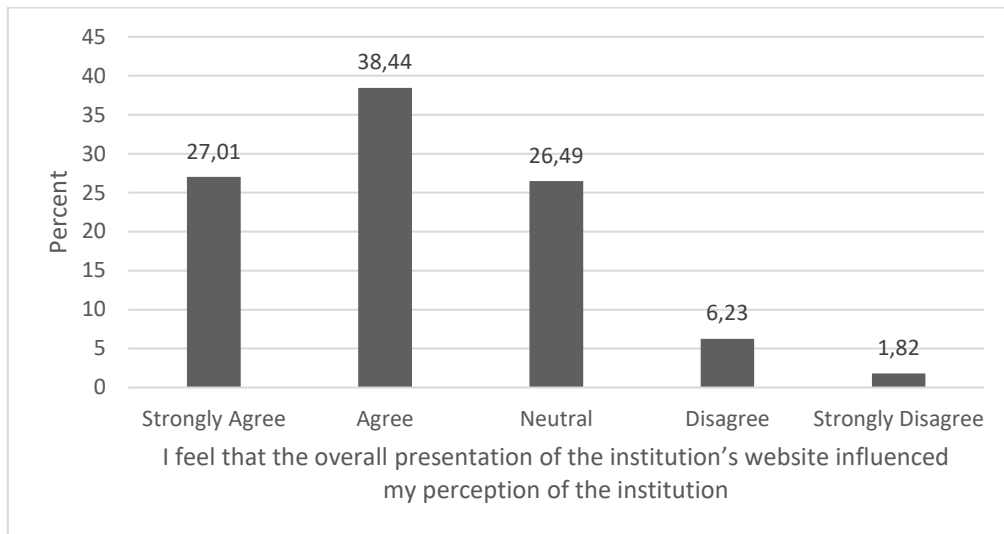


Figure 6: Website influence on respondents' perception of the PHEI

Figure 7 results show that 12.30% strongly agreed and 18.06% agreed they visited the PHEI's social media sites before registration, while 31.68% disagreed and 11.78% strongly disagreed. A median of 3, mode of 4, negative skewness (-0.262), and platykurtic distribution (-0.869) suggest that respondents were generally less likely to visit the institution's social media sites. This aligns with research highlighting the importance of content quality and interactivity in social media strategies (Rutter, Roper, and Lettice, 2016). The findings indicate a potential underutilisation of social media in engaging prospective students.

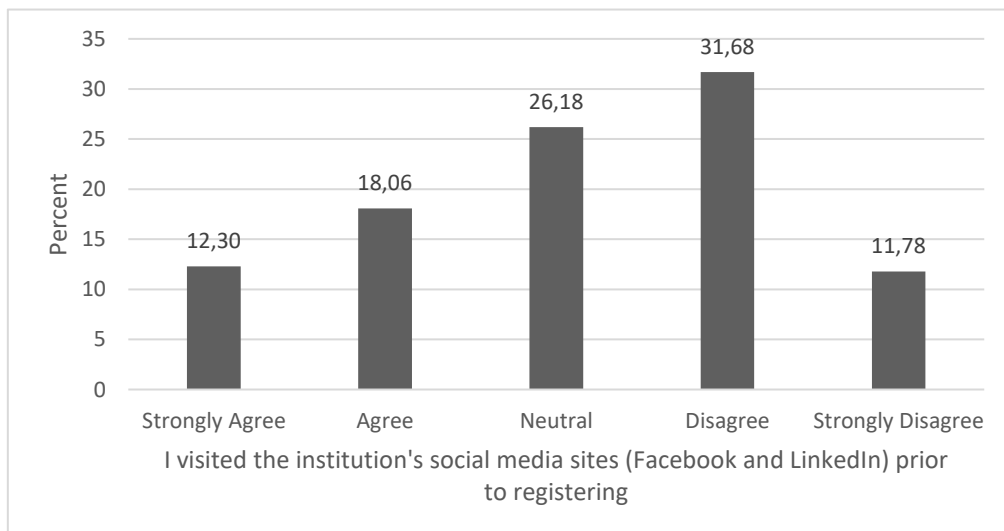


Figure 7: Visited the PHEI's websites prior to registration

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Figure 8 results show that 9.52% strongly agreed and 23.28% agreed that the PHEI's social media sites were relevant, while 41.27% were neutral, 19.05% disagreed, and 6.88% strongly disagreed. With a median and mode of 3, slight positive skewness (0.048), and a platykurtic distribution (kurtosis -0.362), the responses suggest a mild tendency towards positive perceptions, though the overall effect is minimal. These findings align with research on social media's role in branding (Dolan, Conduit, and Goodman, 2015), highlighting that the PHEI's social media content may lack effectiveness, as most respondents did not find it highly relevant or valuable.

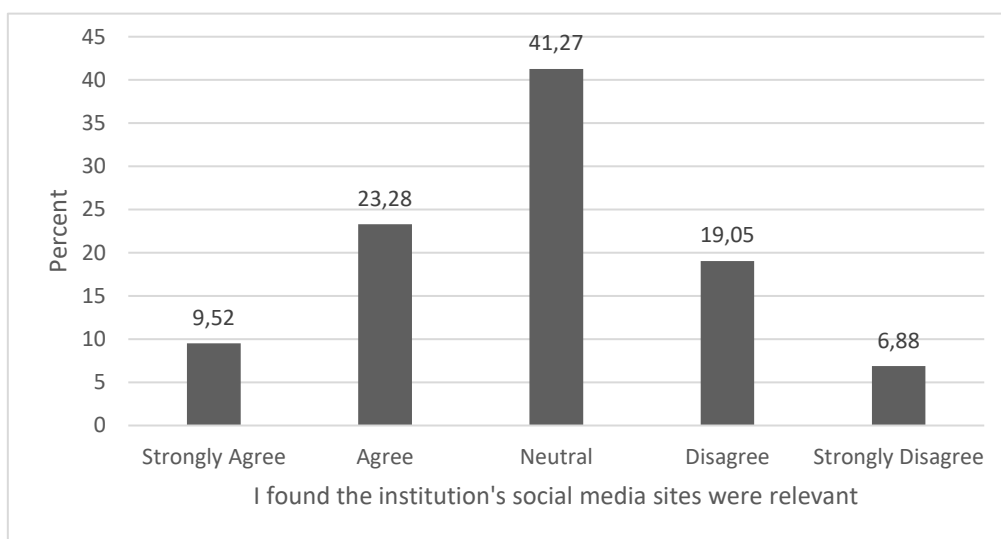


Figure 8: Relevance of the PHEI's social media sites

Figure 9 results show that 9.65% strongly agreed and 21.18% agreed that the information on the PHEI's social media sites was relevant, while 43.16% were neutral, 19.57% disagreed, and 6.43% strongly disagreed. The data, with a slight negative skew (-0.020) and platykurtic distribution (kurtosis -0.299), indicates a tendency toward neutral or less favourable perceptions of the content's relevance and timeliness. These findings align with content marketing principles, which emphasise the need for relevant, engaging content (Pullizzi, 2012; du Plessis, 2017; Pharr, 2019). The neutral responses suggest that the PHEI's social media content may not be effectively engaging or shaping respondents' attitudes.

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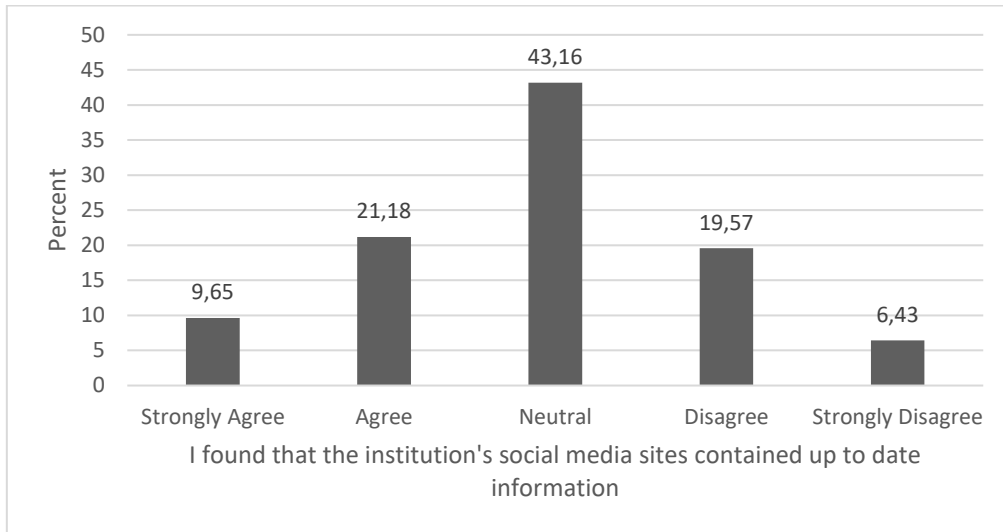


Figure 9: Relevant information on the PHEI's websites

Figure 10 results show that 9.28% strongly agreed and 22.02% agreed that the PHEI's social media sites influenced their perceptions, while 41.91% were neutral, 19.89% disagreed, and 6.90% strongly disagreed. With a median and mode of 3, and a skewness value of 0.007, the responses suggest a mild tendency towards positive perceptions of social media's influence, though the effect is minimal. The platykurtic distribution (kurtosis -0.344) indicates a dispersed pattern of perceptions. These findings suggest that while social media has some influence, many respondents were neutral, highlighting opportunities for improving engagement (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2012; Rutter *et al.*, 2016).

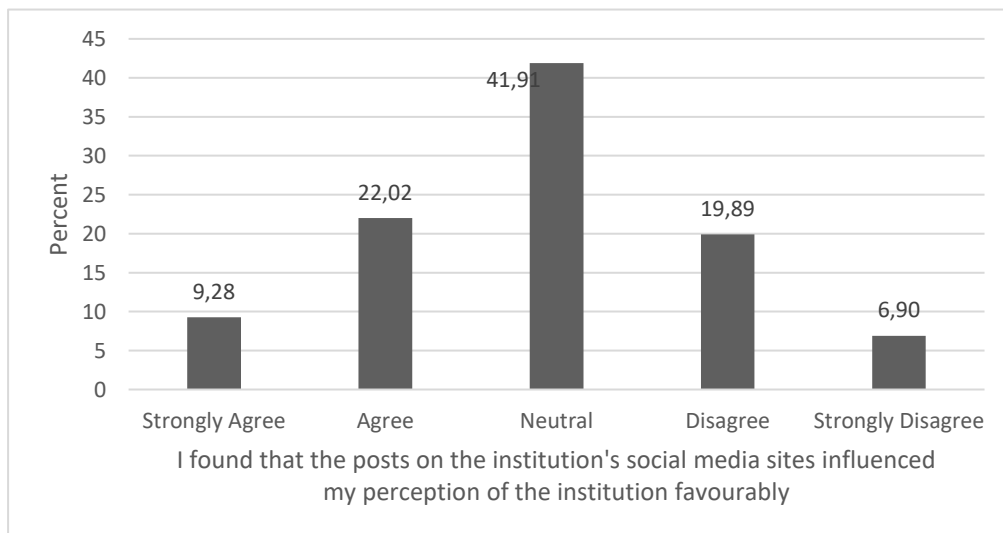


Figure 10: Social media sites influence on respondents' perception of the PHEI's

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Figure 11 results show that 10.87% strongly agreed and 25.54% agreed that the PHEI's social media sites foster trust, while 42.39% were neutral, 14.95% disagreed, and 6.25% strongly disagreed. The median and mode are 3, with a skewness value of 0.147 indicating a slight positive tendency toward trust-building via social media. The platykurtic distribution (kurtosis -0.250) suggests a dispersed pattern of responses. These findings highlight that while social media may have a small positive effect on trust, most respondents were neutral, suggesting the platforms are not effectively engaging prospective students in terms of trust-building (Yu & Yuan, 2019; Shariff, 2020).

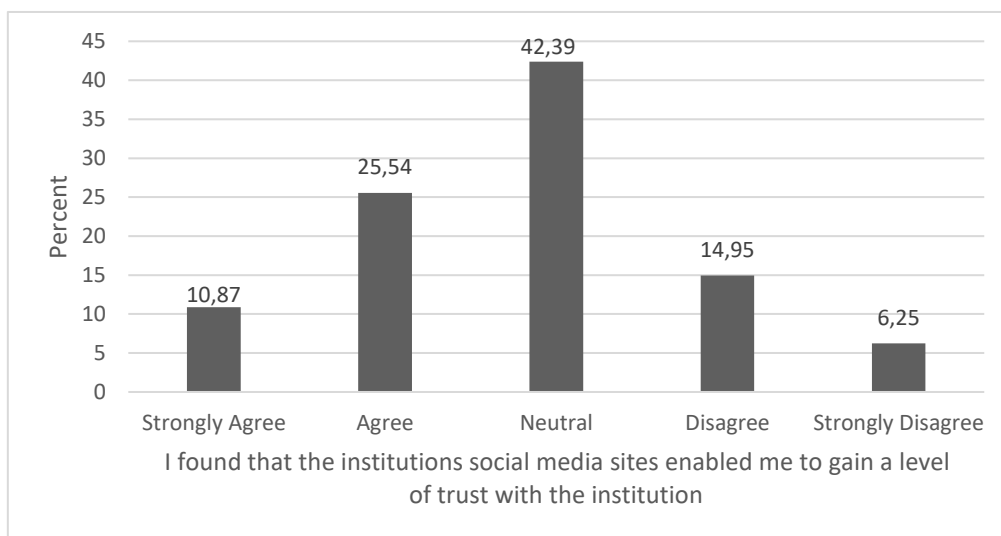


Figure 11: Social media sites credence value amongst respondents

Qualitative Results

The sub themes in this section are derived from the research question regarding the role of digital marketing in the PHEI's overall marketing strategy for student recruitment.

Qualitative Semi- Structured Interview Research Findings

This section presents the findings of the semi- structured interviews conducted with senior marketing staff at both PHEI's.

Role of Digital Marketing Regarding the PHEI Marketing Strategy

Subtheme 1: Leads Generation

"The participant indicates that the recruiters experienced a consistent flow of leads during a recent campaign, suggesting the effectiveness of the digital marketing campaign. They attribute this success

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to the early start of the campaign and the implementation of necessary digital marketing systems to ensure a steady influx of leads throughout the campaign duration.” (Participant MNC01)

“The participant asserts that digital marketing is a leading strategy for PHEI 01 in the higher education landscape, with a significant portion of their budget located to digital marketing efforts. They highlight the impact of digital campaigns by stating that 60% of their students were acquired through digital marketing initiatives, indicating the prominence and success of their digital strategies in student recruitment.” (Participant RBS02)

“The participant emphasises that digital marketing has become a primary focus for PHEI 01, to the extent that senior executives are actively interested in understanding the strategies employed to generate a significant number of leads. The mention of being one of the highest on the platform suggests the institution's success in utilising digital marketing for lead generation.” (Participant RBS 03)

The subtheme of "lead generation" emerged as crucial for digital marketing in PHEIs' student recruitment. Participants highlighted the effectiveness of digital campaigns in generating leads, with Participant MNC01 stressing the importance of early campaigns and using digital systems like search engine marketing for lead acquisition (Nagpal and Petersen, 2021). Participant RBS02 noted that digital marketing contributes to 60% of recruitment, reflecting its efficiency and significant budget. The interactivity of digital platforms enables personalised targeting and trust-building (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021).

Digital marketing methods like email, websites, and social media facilitate lead generation and engagement, producing valuable "Big Data" that optimises strategies with personalised content (Erevelles, Fukawa and Swayne, 2016). SEO techniques improve visibility and ranking, supporting lead qualification (AL Mukhtar, Mahmood and Kareem, 2021). Social media marketing (SMM) also fosters brand-consumer relationships and assists in lead generation (Khan, 2022).

Participants emphasised the need for effective lead closure strategies to ensure conversions, suggesting that enhancing both lead generation and closure will enable PHEIs to achieve more targeted recruitment.

Subtheme 2: Brand Awareness

“The participant describes the platform (digital marketing) as amazing, noting a double-digit growth in their entry analysis comparing the previous year to the current one. They attribute this growth to conversations, interactions, and increased awareness among people who were previously unaware but are now engaged with the platform (digital marketing).” (Participant MNC 01)

“The participant mentions using multiple social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram. They emphasize the importance of leads generation, using Facebook for creating

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awareness and Google, including ad words, display, and re-marketing initiatives, as primary tools for their tactical campaigns.” (Participant RBS01)

“The participant highlights that LinkedIn is more suitable for brand awareness rather than leads generation. They contrast this with search and programmatic methods, which they identify as more effective for lead generation. The participant emphasizes the importance of creating awareness for the brand on LinkedIn, considering it a valuable platform for building brand intellectual property (IP).” (Participant RBS03)

“The participant emphasises that their primary goal on social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn is brand exposure rather than lead generation. They believe that consistently being visible to their audience and maintaining a top-of-mind presence is the key driver for their marketing strategy on these platforms.” (Participant RBS02)

The subtheme of "branding" emerged as a key element in PHEIs' student recruitment strategies. Participants highlighted the role of digital marketing in enhancing brand growth and awareness. Participant MNC01 reported double-digit growth driven by digital interactions, especially with previously unaware consumers, demonstrating the reach of digital channels. Participant RBS01 stressed the importance of a multi-platform approach using Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram for brand visibility and lead generation.

Branding, traditionally symbol-based (American Marketing Association, 2019), has evolved with tools like Facebook ads and Google AdWords. Participant RBS03 found LinkedIn more valuable for long-term brand recognition than for immediate lead generation. Digital platforms decentralise branding, enabling co-creation where consumers help shape brand meaning (Mingione & Abratt, 2020), and brands use customer journey models to build authentic relationships (Heinonen, Campbell and Ferguson, 2019). Participant RBS02 emphasised the importance of consistent exposure on platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn to stay top-of-mind.

Digital marketing fosters two-way communication, enhancing brand-consumer relationships, while user-generated content (e.g., eWOM on TripAdvisor and Google Reviews) can strengthen or harm brand reputation (Alghizzawi, 2019). Digital branding enables direct-to-consumer (D2C) channels for more personalised interactions (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019), but brands must balance brand-created and user-generated content to maintain consistent identity (Mingione & Abratt, 2020). The shift to interactive branding promotes loyalty and a deeper understanding of consumers (Rowles, 2022). Overall, the insights suggest that engagement, awareness, and co-creation are vital for building strong brands in the digital age, urging brands to adopt adaptable, consumer-focused strategies.

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Influence of Digital Marketing on Student Perception

This theme is aligned to the research question and objectives of the study. The following sub theme emerged from the interview with the participants:

Subtheme 3: Ambassadors and SMIs, personally relatable testimony

“The participant describes the dynamic interaction on digital platforms where students not only voice complaints but also engage in discussions and provide solutions to each other. This organic interaction is likened to having digital brand ambassadors within the student community who actively participate in discussions and share insights, creating a sense of community and support.” (Participant MNC 01)

The subtheme "ambassadors and SMIs, personally relatable testimony" emerged as a key aspect of digital marketing in PHEIs' student recruitment strategies. Social media influencer (SMI) marketing, which uses opinion leaders to influence consumer opinions, was highlighted as a crucial tool for showcasing the hedonic and utilitarian value of institutions. The process involves five stages: planning, recognition, alignment, motivation, and coordination (Zollo *et al.*, 2020; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021).

There are two main categories of SMIs: micro and mega influencers. Micro SMIs, with 1,000 to 100,000 followers, are noted for their stronger, more genuine relationships with followers, leading to higher engagement and more effective targeting of niche audiences (Park, Lee, Xiong, Septianto and Seo, 2021; Breedlove, 2023; Li, Zhao, Lee, Park, Septianto and Seo, 2024). Mega SMIs, with larger followings, tend to have weaker connections and are seen as more commercially driven.

Participant MNC01 pointed out that the PHEI engages digital brand ambassadors within the student community, fostering organic interactions and a sense of community. This aligns with the concept of Social Media Brand Communities (SMBCs), which have become increasingly popular for cultivating loyal, engaged consumer bases (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021). SMIs contribute to brand awareness and electronic word-of-mouth, are viewed as credible sources of information, and play an advocacy role for the PHEI. These findings support the growing use of SMIs to promote brands and guide prospective students in navigating PHEI systems.

Focused Group Interview Findings

This section presents the focus group interview conducted amongst the PHEI's registered students.

Digital Marketing Credibility to the PHEI's Brand Reputation

Subtheme 4: Testimonials

“The research participant outlines a process for evaluating an institution, starting with testimonials and comments on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. They consider talking to current

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students for firsthand experiences as the most valuable. The participant suggests that engaging with the institution directly over the phone is essential for obtaining facts and reassurance about its stability.” (Participant P4)

The subtheme "testimonials" emerged in response to the research question regarding the role of social media and websites in enhancing a PHEI's credibility from a prospective student's perspective. Participant P4 noted that social media comments and testimonials helped reassure them about the institution's credibility and provided valuable insights into its processes. This aligns with the concept of digital word-of-mouth (E-WOM), where social media marketing (SMM) influences consumer decisions (Li *et al.*, 2020).

Strategies like buzz marketing and viral campaigns, which involve current events or celebrity endorsements, are key methods for generating E-WOM and enhancing brand credibility (Zollo *et al.*, 2020; Al-Zahari *et al.*, 2023). The intersection of social media, E-WOM, and influencer marketing highlights how digital marketing shapes brand perception and strengthens the reputation of institutions (Oh *et al.*, 2020).

Discussion

The study revealed insights into the influence of social media engagement on brand perception, trust, and equity within private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa. WhatsApp was identified as the dominant platform, with 65.8% of respondents using it daily for three or more hours. Other marketing-related platforms, such as SEO, email, content marketing, and LinkedIn, were also important for engagement. Qualitative findings highlighted digital marketing's effectiveness in lead generation and brand awareness, supporting existing literature on the role of digital channels in multi-stakeholder engagement and customer journey development (Heinonen *et al.*, 2019).

The research emphasised the importance of content relevance in digital marketing, with most respondents indicating that the content on PHEI websites and social media was relevant to their needs. This aligns with the view that content marketing is crucial for creating brand awareness and engaging the target audience (Pulizzi, 2012; du Plessis, 2017; Pharr, 2019).

The study also established a connection between digital marketing and student perception. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that PHEI websites and social media influenced respondents' perceptions. The role of social media influencers (SMIs) and digital brand ambassadors was key in positively impacting brand image, reinforcing the importance of credibility through testimonials and social media comments, which foster electronic word of mouth (Li, Larimo and Leonidou, 2020).

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Theoretical contributions include empirical support for digital marketing's role in building brand equity within the private higher education sector. Unlike traditional product-based sectors, education branding focuses on building intangible experiences that foster trust and credibility, highlighting the strategic role of digital marketing in shaping perceptions and influencing future research.

Conclusion

Digital transformation has significantly impacted organisations across various sectors, including private higher education institutions (PHEIs), which are adopting digital marketing capabilities (DMC) in response to technological advancements (Sürmelioglu and Seferoglu, 2019; Benavides, Tamayo Arias, Arango Serna, Branch Bedoya and Burgos, 2020; Homburg and Wielgos, 2022). PHEIs have begun implementing digital strategies to cater to the growing use of digital technology by prospective students, but challenges remain due to limited capabilities, vision, and commitment to effective implementation (Benavides et al., 2020; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2021).

Digital marketing platforms are valuable for creating and sustaining brand awareness, offering targeted approaches for different market segments and providing valuable market intelligence, thus creating a competitive advantage for PHEIs (Petrescu, Krishen and Bui, 2020; Ahmad and Khan, 2023). To maintain momentum, PHEIs are increasing investments in human resources and finances towards digital marketing, with plans to make it their primary marketing strategy. However, the theme of a complementary marketing mix suggests that traditional marketing methods still hold relevance in the sector. The global trend of digital transformation is evident in the shift towards digital channels and data-driven approaches, such as using tools like Google Analytics to optimise marketing efforts (Peter and Vecchia, 2021).

Based on these findings, the research highlights several key implications for PHEIs:

- Strategic investment in digital marketing capabilities: Institutions must allocate resources effectively to enhance their digital marketing strategies, ensuring they remain competitive in an evolving digital landscape.
- Balancing digital and traditional marketing approaches: While digital marketing offers significant advantages, traditional methods still play a role in building trust and engagement, particularly in markets with limited digital access.
- Leveraging data-driven insights for competitive advantage: Utilising analytics tools enables institutions to refine their strategies, improve student recruitment efforts, and strengthen market positioning.

By addressing these implications, PHEIs can better navigate digital transformation and optimise their marketing strategies to enhance brand awareness and student engagement.

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