



**EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE MARKETING ON STUDENTS' CHOICE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

BY

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA)**

AT

THE INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION (IIE MSA)

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DECLARATION

This is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other University or any other award.

..... 

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DEDICATION

I would want to thank Mr. Gerald Luhanga and Mrs. Ruth Luhanga, my parents. This degree is a result of their hard work as much as it is mine. I would not have reached this goal without them. Thank you also to everyone who contributed to this journey, from the university management, professors, classmates and my extended family and friends.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to Dr. Takesure Zhoua and Dr. Tinayeshe Shumba, my supervisors, for their unwavering support and advice throughout my research. A special thanks to my family and friends: my parents for their steadfast support and resources; my sisters, Geraldine and Ruth, for always believing in me; and my friends Yolanda Mashumba and Jessica Nthani for their constant inspiration and motivation. I am appreciative of my father, Mr. Luhanga, for his financial assistance, which made a substantial contribution to this research project. I am very grateful to my classmates for their helpful critique, remarks, and guidance throughout the thesis. Above all, I'm grateful to God for His faithfulness and love.

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions increasingly recognize themselves as service providers and are emphasizing online marketing to meet students' expectations and needs. This study examines the influence of online marketing strategies on students' choice of higher education institutions, focusing on online information availability, brand image, and online advertisements. A quantitative approach was used, employing a descriptive research methodology. Data were collected from 199 students in urban and peri-urban areas of South Africa through structured questionnaires, with a 68% response rate. The data were analysed using SPSS version 25, utilizing descriptive statistics, regression analysis, chi-square tests and correlation analysis. Results indicate that online information availability significantly influences students' choices [$\beta=0.559$, 95%CI (0.363, 0.755), $p<0.000$]. Brand image also significantly affects their decisions [$\beta=0.244$, 95%CI (0.068, 0.420), $p<0.007$], as does targeted online advertising [$\beta=0.359$, 95%CI (0.165, 0.553), $p<0.000$]. The study concludes that online information availability, brand image and targeted online advertisements significantly impact students' choice of higher education institutions. It recommends that institutions should tailor online marketing strategies to different student segments.

Key Words: Advertising; Brand Image; Higher Education; Online Information; Online Marketing; Social Media; Student's choice.

Table of Contents

DECLARATION	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	xiv
CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY	3
1.3 RATIONALE AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY	4
1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT	5
1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	6
1.6 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES.....	6
1.5.1 Significance of the research.....	7
1.5.2 Research design and methodology.....	8
1.5.3 Research setting	8
1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY.....	9
1.7 DEFINITIONS AND KEY CONCEPTS.....	9
1.7.1 Online marketing.....	9
1.7.2 Target marketing	9
1.7.3 Brand image	10
1.7.4 Higher education institution.....	10
1.7 CHAPTER CONCLUSION	10

CHAPTER TWO	35
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	35
2.0 INTRODUCTION	35
2.1 CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS	36
2.1.1 Identifying needs and motives.	36
2.1.2 Information gathering	37
2.1.3 Evaluation of alternatives	37
2.1.4 Purchase decision.....	38
2.1.5 Post-purchase decision.....	38
2.2 THEORETICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE	39
2.2.1 Overarching theory: Social influence theory	39
2.2.2 Information processing theory.....	40
2.2.3 Consumer behaviour theory.....	41
2.2.4 Brand equity theory.....	42
2.3 VALUE OF THEORIES REVIEWED	43
2.4 EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	44
2.4.1 Influence of information availability on students' decision-making	45
2.4.2 Influence of brand image in influencing students' choices of HEI	47
2.4.2.1 Common product attributes.....	48
2.4.2.2 People and relationships.....	49
2.4.2.3 Values and programmes	49
2.4.3 The influence of target advertising on students' choices of higher education institutions.....	49
2.4.4 The relationship between student HEI choice and online marketing strategies employed.	51

2.4.5 The relationship between students' choices of private HEI and online marketing in South Africa	53
2.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING	55
2.5.1 Constructs for the study	55
2.5.1.1 Target advertising.....	56
2.5.1.2 Information availability	56
2.5.1.3 Brand image	57
2.5.1.4 Students' choice of higher education	57
2.5.1.5 Moderating variables.....	57
2.5.1.6 Control variables	58
2.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY	58
CHAPTER THREE.....	60
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	60
3.1 INTRODUCTION	60
3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY.....	60
3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH TO THEORY DEVELOPMENT.....	62
3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN	62
3.5 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN	63
3.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY.....	66
3.6.1 Reliability	66
3.6.2 Validity	66
3.7 RESEARCH SETTING	66
3.8 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE	67
3.9 SAMPLE SIZE	67

3.10 DATA COLLECTION	68
3.11 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS	69
3.12 DATA STORAGE.....	70
3.13 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY.....	70
3.14 ETHICS.....	70
3.15 LIMITATIONS	71
3.17 PILOT STUDY	71
3.17.1 Pilot study analysis.....	72
3.17.2 Gender	72
3.17.3 Age	73
3.17.4. Education level.....	74
Table 3.3: Education Level.....	75
Figure 3.3: Education Level of the Respondents	75
3.17.5 Province of residence	75
Table 3.4: Province of Residence	76
Figure 3.4: Province of Residence of the Respondents	77
3.17.6 Descriptive analysis	77
Table 3.6 ANOVA	78
Table 3.7 Regression Coefficients.....	79
3.17.7 Reliability test	79
Table 3.8 Reliability Test	80
3.18 CHAPTER SUMMARY	80
CHAPTER FOUR	82
PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	82

4.1 INTRODUCTION	82
4.2 RESPONSE RATE.....	82
4.3 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS	83
4.3.1 Gender.....	83
4.3.2 Age.....	84
4.3.3 Education level.....	85
4.3.4 Province of residence	86
4.4 PSYCHOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF THE ITEMS IN A QUESTIONNAIRE	88
4.4.1 Reliability.....	88
4.4.2 Validity	89
4.4.2.1 Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO).....	90
4.4.3 Face Validity.....	91
4.5 IMPACT OF ASPECTS OF ONLINE MARKETING ON STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION	91
4.5.1 Influence of information availability on students' choice of higher education institutions.....	92
4.5.2 Influence of brand image in influencing students' choices of higher education institutions.....	93
4.6 ANALYTICAL ANALYSIS FOR HYPOTHETICAL VARIABLES	98
4.6.1 Correlation of variables	99
4.6.2 Linear regression analysis.....	100
4.7 SUMMARY.....	103
5.1 INTRODUCTION	104
5.2 CONCLUSION.....	104
5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS.....	106

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT AND POLICY MAKERS	106
5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY	106
REFERENCE LIST	108
APPENDICES.....	119
Appendix 1: Questionnaire.....	119
Appendix 2: Rotated Component Matrix	123
Appendix 3: consent form for participants.....	126
Appendix 4: Ethical Clearance Certificate.....	129
Appendix 6: Language Editor Certificate.....	130

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Questionnaire Development	- 63 -
Table 2: Gender Of Respondents	- 72 -
Table 3: Age Category.....	- 73 -
Table 4: Education Level	- 74 -
Table 5: Province Of Residence	- 75 -
Table 6 Model Summary	- 77 -
Table 7 Anova	- 77 -
Table 8 Regression Coefficients	- 78 -
Table 9 Reliability Test	- 79 -
Table 10: Response Rate	- 81 -
Table 11: Gender Of Respondents	- 82 -
Table 12 Age Category	- 84 -
Table 13: Education Level	- 85 -
Table 14: Province Of Residence	- 86 -
Table 15: Reliability Statistics	- 87 -
Table 16: Item-Total Statistics	- 88 -
Table 17: Kmo and Bartlett's Test	- 89 -
Table 18: Items Related to Information Availability	- 92 -
Table 19: Items Related to Brand Image	- 95 -
Table 20: Items Related to Advertisement	- 97 -
Table 21: Correlation of Variables	- 99 -
Table 22: Model Summary	- 100 -
Table 23: Anova	- 100 -
Table 24: Regression Coefficients	- 101 -

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Consumer Decision-making Process	- 36
Figure 2 Conceptual Framework	- 56-
Figure 3: Gender of The Respondents	- 72 -
Figure 4: Age Category of The Respondents	- 73 -
Figure 5: Education Level of The Respondents	- 75 -
Figure 6: Province of Residence of The Respondents	- 76 -
Figure 7: Response Rate	- 82 -
Figure 8: Gender of The Respondents	- 83 -
Figure 9: Age Category of The Respondents	- 84 -
Figure 10: Education Level of The Respondents	- 85 -
Figure 11: Province Of Residence of The Respondents.....	- 86 -

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CHE - Council on Higher Education.

DHET - Department of Higher Education and Training.

HEI - Higher education institutions.

SSA - Statistics South Africa.

USA - Universities South Africa.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The digital marketing landscape in South Africa is experiencing continuous growth, bolstered by the country's vast population and a rapidly increasing number of internet users. Social media penetration has reached an impressive level, further driving this expansion. With the growth of economy, increased literacy rate and urban population, South Africa shows great potential to become a hub of digital creativity (Nwosu, Bereng, Segotso, Enebe, 2023). A survey conducted in 2023 by Steyn and Gunter found that as digital platforms proliferate and customers' technological awareness increases, they are growing more selective about how they spend their time online. As a result, marketers are adopting a publisher mindset to attract prospects with compelling content and other strategies (Steyn & Gunter, 2023). The digital landscape constantly evolves, but customer-centricity remains a core focus of all marketing strategies. Advancements in technology promise more innovative and effective ways to meet customer needs, offering a bright future for marketers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021).

Research by Tsekouras and Kounetas (2019) indicates that digital marketing has significantly impacted the higher education sector worldwide. Higher education institutions (HEI) face the challenge of remaining relevant to students who rely heavily on technology for communication (Pansari & Kumar, 2018). This change has forced higher education marketers to switch from conventional techniques to web-based and social media strategies to draw in potential students. Students themselves are getting more selective about the schools they enrol, while HEI are becoming more particular about the money they spend and more proactive about attracting new students (Vargo & Lusch, 2021). The growing adoption of digital marketing in the educational sector is highlighted by research conducted by Wuisan and Handra (2023), which recognises the importance of targeting the mobile audience, given that many internet page views come from mobile

devices. This has led to efforts to create exciting and easily accessible content for prospective students.

Globally, higher education is witnessing significant changes, such as forming partnerships, increased competitiveness, and focusing on the global market (Basera & Nyahunzwi, 2019). Educational partnerships are established to address various challenges and goals, including improving student learning, conserving resources, fostering economic development, and enabling international collaborations. Privately owned educational providers are also altering the higher education landscape, providing students with alternative options and driving increased competition (Gujral, et al., 2016).

In South Africa, educational system redesigns have aimed to achieve consistent national qualifications through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Basera & Nyahunzwi, 2019). These modifications have presented both opportunities and risks for HEI. Decreased government support, rising marketing costs and unpaid student fees have prompted institutions to seek new financing streams (Thaba-Nkadimene, 2022). For higher education institutions, projecting the right image to their target market is crucial, as it impacts student enrolment and funding. Online marketing connects institutions with potential students, mainly for-profit or privately run universities. Creative and innovative marketing strategies are essential to retain and attract students (Wilson & Makau, 2018). In the current era of disruptive technology, universities emphasise utilising digital marketing as a crucial tool for institutional promotion (Marcum, 2022). Integrating digital marketing alongside traditional marketing is no longer optional but essential, particularly for achieving success in student recruitment. The growth of digital marketing has revolutionised how businesses leverage technology, acknowledging the technological preferences of the millennial generation as their potential target audience (Gamede, Ajani & Afolabi, 2022). While digital marketing has found applications across various sectors, its proliferation in digital and social media has gained immense popularity. It is becoming a crucial consideration for young people looking to pursue higher education (Gamede et al., 2022).

Building and maintaining relationships with alumni and present and potential students is crucial to marketing in the higher education industry (Collins, Şimşek & Takır, 2022). Universities now use social media to foster and maintain these connections (Dollinger, et al., 2018). However, Abdelwahab et al. (2023) argues that although traditional campus based colleges will not become obsolete, the digital revolution will significantly transform the delivery and support of education and how HEIs generate value. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to look into how the digital revolution has impacted higher education, with a specific emphasis on the implementation of digital marketing (Gamede et al., 2022). Since students belong to the millennial generation, which is deeply immersed in this technology-driven era, their influence on the education landscape is particularly intriguing (Gamede et al., 2022). Thus, understanding the influence of online marketing on students when choosing a higher education institution to attend has become a captivating area for further examination.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There has been a noticeable change recently in the global higher education scene, characterised by a growing dependence on digital platforms for the dissemination of information and decision-making procedures. In South Africa, online marketing strategies have notably impacted how students choose their higher education institutions. The shift towards digital platforms has brought about a myriad of marketing channels, including social media, search engines and institutional websites, which have become integral tools for promoting and disseminating information about various HEI (Bentley-Steyn, 2019). The influence of online marketing on students' choices of HEI is paramount, as it raises critical questions about the dynamics of decision-making processes in the contemporary educational environment. Today's students are more interconnected and digitally savvy than ever, making online marketing a powerful force that shapes their perceptions, preferences, and choices regarding higher education (Abdelwahab, Rauf & Chen, 2023).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the multifaceted impact of online marketing on South African students' decision-making processes when choosing higher education

institutions. It aimed to explore the various online marketing channels employed by institutions, the effectiveness of these strategies, and the elements that students consider influential in their decision-making (Bacon & Bennett, 2013). Understanding the interplay between online marketing and students' choices is essential for institutions seeking to optimise their outreach strategies and enhance their competitiveness in the rapidly evolving higher education landscape (Caro, DeRenzo & Coleman, 2022).

1.3 RATIONALE AND MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The study investigated how students' choices about higher education institutions in South Africa were influenced by internet marketing driven by the need to understand the evolving dynamics of student decision-making in the digital age. Several factors have contributed to the significance, relevance and potential impact of online marketing on HEI, policymakers and marketing professionals. For instance, the rapid digital transformation of education has reshaped how information is accessed and processed. As prospective students increasingly rely on online platforms for information, there is a pressing need to comprehend the consequences of this shift on the higher education sector (MlamboNgcuka, 2019). Higher education institutions in South Africa operate in an increasingly competitive setting. Therefore, understanding how online marketing influences students' choices has been and remains critical for institutions to strategically position themselves and effectively attract students (Abdelwahab, et al., 2023). The pervasive influence of social media on students cannot be overlooked. Institutions must investigate how social media marketing influences students' decision-making processes in order to fully utilise the power of these platforms (Adebesin, et al. 2021).

The study aimed to examine the impact of online reviews on students' perceptions and decision-making. Understanding the role of user-generated content in shaping institutional reputations is essential for institutions striving to maintain a positive online image (Caro, et al., 2022). Lastly, institutional websites serve as digital gateways for information; thus, analysing institutional websites' impact on students' decision-making processes helps institutions optimise their online platforms to meet the informational needs of prospective students (Le, Robinson, Dobebe,2020).

Given these variables, the goal of this study was to offer empirically supported insights that can guide the development of successful online marketing strategies for South African universities. Institutions can adjust and improve their marketing strategies by comprehending the digital elements impacting students' decisions, which will increase their competitiveness in the ever-changing higher education market.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Higher education institutions increasingly recognize themselves as service providers, placing more importance on employing online marketing strategies to fulfill the expectations and needs of their primary clientele, the students (Matikiti, Mpinganjira & Roberts-Lombard, 2018). The significant expansion of colleges and universities, the considerable increase in college education costs, and shifts in population demographics have forced these institutions to reevaluate the significance of student satisfaction for their long-term viability (Abelha, Fernandes, Mesquita & Seabra, 2020). In today's highly competitive educational market, universities are compelled to adopt a market-oriented approach to differentiate their offerings from those of their competitors.

Higher education institutions primarily exist to ensure students' successful completion and progress in education. However, university administrators focus disproportionately on attracting and admitting students rather than effectively managing enrolment (Walker & Mathebula, 2020). Like profit-making institutions, ensuring the satisfaction of admitted students is crucial for student retention. Marketing in the service industry presents unique challenges due to the distinctive characteristics of services and the prevalence of quality, experience, and credence. As a result, consumers perceive higher risk when selecting a service, since evaluating services before purchase is more complex due to their intangibility (Lembani, Gunter, Breines & Dalu, 2020). In this context, higher education institutions can play a significant role as risk mitigators, instilling greater confidence in consumers' decision-making and fostering trust, ultimately leading to increased satisfaction (Collins et al., 2022).

Given the competitive landscape, higher education institutions employ aggressive online marketing tactics (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, Malkawi, Glowatz, Burton & Magni, 2020). To create effective marketing strategies that resonate with domestic and international students, higher education institutions must understand the diverse factors influencing students' decisions regarding which institution to attend. Choosing a university entails substantial investments of time and money, requiring significant involvement and consideration of multiple factors. Today's students are discerning and careful in their choice of higher education institutions, wanting to make the right decision from various options (Crawford et al., 2020). This study examines how online marketing influences students' choices of private higher education institutions in South Africa. Its significance lies in enlightening private higher education institutions about the role of online marketing in influencing students' decisions regarding their study destination.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions outline the aim of the study. A research paper, dissertation, or thesis needs strong research questions for its direction (McCombes, 2023). Research questions that gave focus were as follows:

- How does information availability influence students' choices of HEIs in South Africa?
- How does brand image influence students' choices of HEIs in South Africa?
- What is the impact of targeted advertising on students' choices of higher education institution in South Africa?

1.6 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study focuses on how online marketing influences South African students' decisions about HEI. The research objectives set forth the project's goals and act as a roadmap for gathering data, developing arguments, and developing conclusions, among other stages of the research process (Ryan, 2022). The study's goals are succinctly stated in the following research objectives:

- To examine the influence of information availability on students' choices of HEIs in South Africa.

- To examine the influence of brand image in influencing students' choices of HEIs in South Africa.
- To examine the influence of advertising on students' choices of HEIs in South Africa.

1.5.1 Significance of the research

Understanding how online marketing influences students' choices is crucial for HEIs to position themselves in the competitive landscape. Insights gained from this research could guide institutions in tailoring effective marketing strategies to appeal to the inclinations and actions of prospective students (Adebesin et al., 2021). The study's findings provide insightful observations for institutions to optimise their digital marketing efforts. Whether through social media, search engine optimisation, or institutional websites, a nuanced understanding of what resonates with students would help institutions refine their online presence and engagement strategies (Venter et al., 2018).

The objective of this study was to enhance student recruitment practices. By identifying the factors that significantly influence students' decisions, institutions can tailor their recruitment messages and activities to align with the inclinations and expectations of their target audience, thereby enhancing their recruitment success (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2019). Moreover, a thorough comprehension of online reviews and the influence of social media on students' perceptions guides institutions in managing and building positive online reputations. Institutions can actively engage with online communities, address concerns and highlight positive aspects to shape a favourable perception among prospective students. The study's insights into the influence of institutional websites on decision-making processes can help institutions enhance the user experience. This includes providing relevant and accessible information, improving website design and ensuring that the online interface aligns with the expectations of the digital-savvy student population (Chigona et al., 2020).

Policymakers in the education sector would benefit from understanding the dynamics of online marketing's on student choices. The research findings could inform policy discussions and recommendations to create an environment that fosters effective and ethical online marketing practices within higher education (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2019). This research has contributed to the academic literature on higher education marketing and student decision-making in the digital era. It fills gaps in existing knowledge and provides a contemporary comprehension of the role of online marketing channels, adding to the academic discourse surrounding digital transformations in education.

1.5.2 Research design and methodology

A descriptive research design was used for this investigation. This strategy included the methodical gathering and examination of numerical data to evaluate the impact of online marketing on students' decisions about HEIs in a quantitative manner. The quantitative research design utilised surveys and questionnaires to gather data from a large sample of students in South Africa. These surveys included structured questions that were designed to measure students' perceptions and preferences related to the choice of a higher education institution.

1.5.3 Research setting

The study was carried out in South Africa, a nation with a diverse higher education environment that includes universities, colleges for technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and other postsecondary establishments. South Africa's higher education sector is characterised by a mix of public and private institutions, each striving to attract a diverse student population. This study focused on urban and peri-urban areas, considering the accessibility of digital resources and the prevalence of online connectivity in these regions (Baddeley & Hitch, 2019). The chosen setting aligns with the diverse nature of HEIs in South Africa and considers the varying contexts in which students make decisions regarding their educational paths (Leithwood & Schumacker, 2020). Urban and peri-urban areas were particularly relevant for this study due to their higher population

density, accessibility to digital infrastructure and the potential impact of urbanisation on students' exposure to online marketing channels. Including diverse institutional types and geographic locations enhances the generalisability of the research findings to the broader South African higher education context (Booyens, 2020).

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

There are five (5) chapters in the structure of this study. Chapter 1 gives the problem's background, rationalisation, objectives, study significance, and research setting. In order to support the idea and conclusions of this study, Chapter 2 offers a thorough grasp of prior research through a review of the literature. This study's research methodology is described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 focuses on the presentation and evaluation of results, comparison with literature, identification of patterns and trends and the conclusion. Chapter 5 provides findings and recommendations. Additional information, such as appendices and references, are provided at the end.

1.7 DEFINITIONS AND KEY CONCEPTS

1.7.1 Online marketing

The process of buying and selling goods and services online is known as online marketing. Internet marketing, web marketing and digital marketing are further terms for online marketing (Piranda, Sinaga & Putri, 2022). Online marketing uses various digital, online and electronic methods to spread a message to potential buyers. The science is the study and analysis necessary to determine whether your marketing initiatives effectively reach your target audience and generate sales (Wuisan & Handra, 2023).

1.7.2 Target marketing

Target marketing directs advertising towards a particular group of individuals most likely to be interested in each good or service (Singleton, 2009). By targeting messaging and campaigns at people or groups who have similar traits, habits, or interests, this focused strategy seeks to maximise marketing resources. To maximise the impact of marketing campaigns, the primary emphasis is on comprehending and satisfying the unique needs of the selected target market.

1.7.3 Brand image

Consumers' perception and impression of a specific brand is known as its brand image (Basera & Nyahunzwi, 2019). It includes a customer's general perception of a brand as well as the feelings and connections associated with it. Positive experiences, consistent messaging and the brand's capacity to fulfil its commitments are the foundation of a solid brand image. It significantly impacts customer decisions and builds enduring bonds with the intended audience.

1.7.4 Higher education institution

An institution that offers post-secondary education and confers degrees is known as a higher education institution (Abdelwahab et al., 2023). Colleges, universities, and technical schools are some of these establishments. They provide venues for cutting-edge study, scholarly advancement and research. Higher education institutions play a critical role in influencing individuals' futures by providing a wide choice of academic programmes and encouraging intellectual growth and skills development.

1.7 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has set the stage for the investigation into the influence of online marketing on students' choice of higher education institutions in South Africa. The study's background has emphasised how higher education is changing, with a notable influence from the advancement of technology. The identified problem focused on the necessity of understanding how online marketing strategies shape the higher education decisions of prospective students in the South African context. The research objectives were outlined, aiming to explore the multifaceted impact of online marketing on students' decision making processes. The study investigates various online marketing channels, their effectiveness, and the factors students consider influential in their choices. The significance of the study was underscored, emphasising the impacts for higher education institutions striving to optimise their outreach strategies in the rapidly changing digital environment. This chapter establishes the framework for an in-depth investigation of the dynamic relationship between online marketing and South African students' selection of

HEI. The study's theoretical and conceptual framework will be established in the upcoming chapter (2), which will delve deeper into the body of research on online marketing in higher education. It will present a comprehensive literature review, establishing the study's theoretical and conceptual framework, identifying gaps and informing the development of the research questions.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The literature review addresses a wide range of concepts to support the research project, which includes the different online marketing strategies used by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa (SA), the relationship between students' HEI choices and marketing strategies employed by other institutions and the extent of the relationship between students' choices of private higher education institutions and online marketing strategies in South Africa. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa (SA) are using online marketing strategies that are currently poorly understood. This literature review offers a thorough study of these strategies. Also, this study offers a thorough rundown of the various online marketing tactics used in higher education. The focus on South African HEIs sheds light on certain marketing approaches that work or don't work in this unique cultural and geographical setting, as well as the digital engagement behaviours of the local student body.

Examining the efficacy of these strategies' as well as their impact on students' perceptions and decisions to attend HEIs, the review takes a comparative approach, paying particular attention to private universities. It indicates current gaps in the literature, which opens the door for future research and provides empirical data and theoretical insights on the effects of specific marketing methods. To improve the efficacy of online marketing for HEIs in South Africa, the project's research questions, methodology and analysis are guided by this thorough literature analysis, which lays the groundwork for understanding the complex relationship between online marketing and student choices in the country's higher education setting.

2.1 CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The choice of higher education institutions in the South African context is a multifaceted sequence of actions wherein individuals engage and behave differently (Hanson & Litten, 2018). This process comprises five key steps, as recommended by Kotler, Wong, Saunders and Armstrong (2020) and these are (1) identifying needs and motives, (2) gathering information, (3) evaluating alternatives, (4) making the purchase decision and (5) conducting post-purchase evaluations. The first step begins with a student recognising the desire to pursue higher education studies, which triggers a need or motive, leading them to seek information about potential higher education providers. Figure 2.1 summarises the steps followed by individuals as they make choices about HEI enrolments.



Figure 1 Consumer Decision-making Process

Source: Kotler et al. (2020)

2.1.1 Identifying needs and motives.

Motivation in the educational context encompasses two interrelated aspects: needs and motives. Needs represent the perceived requirements or desires that students feel are unmet, and they seek to fulfil these through their pursuit of higher education. Conversely, motives are the internal driving forces influencing students' choices and actions when striving to attain educational goals (Schukajlow, Rakoczy & Pekrun, 2023). In the classroom setting, motivation is reflected in a student's willingness and desire to learn, which can be assessed through four key indices: choice, effort, persistence, and level of achievement. When learners are motivated, they demonstrate characteristics of being goal-oriented, leading to increased success and higher academic achievement. Motivated students exhibit a sense of responsibility and initiative, display curiosity and a

willingness to try new approaches, invest genuine effort into their studies and take pride in the quality of their work (Schweder & Raufelder, 2023).

2.1.2 Information gathering

Data collection, whether for business decision-making, strategic planning, research, or other purposes, involves seeking and gathering relevant information, facts and details about various higher education providers and the educational opportunities they offer (Matyskova & Montes, 2023). Making observations or carefully taking measurements are necessary steps in the data collection process. Whether one is undertaking research for commercial, government, or academic objectives, acquiring data allows one to gain firsthand expertise and unique insights into the subject challenge. Though techniques and goals may differ, the general procedure for gathering data is the same in all professions. Surveys are the most widely used method of gathering quantitative data. Closed-ended survey questions restrict respondents to choosing one or more answers, in contrast to open-ended questions in qualitative surveys, which allow participants to give as much or as little information as they would want. Furthermore, demographic data like age, gender, income, and occupation can be gathered through these surveys. You may also ask respondents to rank something on a scale in a closed-ended survey question. It might, for example, provide a proposition and inquire as to whether participants strongly agree, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly. (Bhandari, 2020).

In this study, questions in a closed-ended survey allowed respondents to select one or more options. In addition to gathering demographic data like age and gender, the surveys asked respondents to rate several items on a scale. Participants were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or disagreed strongly with statements that were presented, for example. Online and mail-in survey strategies were employed.

2.1.3 Evaluation of alternatives

Evaluating alternatives in the context of higher education involves a thorough analysis and comparison of various educational paths and institutions. This step is crucial for

individuals to discern which option best aligns with their academic interests, career aspirations and values. Factors such as programme quality, faculty expertise, campus resources and future career opportunities come into play, requiring a balanced assessment of each potential choice. By carefully weighing the pros and cons of different educational alternatives, individuals can make a more informed and confident decision regarding their higher education journey, setting the stage for success in their chosen field of study (Matikiti et al., 2018). To help people match their decisions with their goals and ideals, a thorough examination of programme quality, faculty experience, and job possibilities is conducted.

2.1.4 Purchase decision

The decision to pursue higher education is a significant milestone that reflects a commitment to personal and professional development. This phase goes beyond merely choosing an institution; it represents an individual's resolve to invest time, effort and resources into acquiring knowledge and skills that will shape the future. The decisionmaking process involves considering various factors, including financial implications, programme relevance and long-term career goals. Ultimately, making this choice is a testament to individuals' determination to enhance their prospects and achieve their aspirations through higher education (Matikiti et al., 2018).

2.1.5 Post-purchase decision

According to Matikiti et al. (2018), the post-purchase phase in higher education involves reflecting on the educational journey, evaluating the outcomes, and understanding the decision's impact on one's personal and professional life. This reflection is crucial for assessing the value gained from the investment in higher education, including acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and advancing career opportunities. It also involves considering any challenges and how they were overcome, providing valuable insights for future endeavours. This evaluative process helps individuals appreciate their growth, recognise the benefits of their educational choices, and plan their next steps with greater clarity and confidence.

2.2 THEORETICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage, and Young (2020), theoretical reviews consider theoretical advancements that pertain to the research topic, which aids in connecting each theory with empirical data. Providing a thorough knowledge of the concepts, principles, and models that direct the investigation, the theoretical framework serves as the study's foundation. This section provides the theoretical framework that the researcher uses to explain how online marketing influences South African students' decisions about HEI.

2.2.1 Overarching theory: Social influence theory

Herbert Kelman's Social Influence Theory offers a thorough framework for understanding how people are impacted by those around them. This approach divides social influence into three primary categories: internalisation, identification, and compliance (Walters, 2020). By employing incentives or sanctions, a person or organisation can influence people to comply. Compliance involves individuals being affected by a person or group through rewards or punishments. It includes incentives like financial rewards or recognition, as well as coercion in the form of threats or punishment. Identification pertains to the impact of a person or group on an individual by fostering a sense of identification or similarity (Purani, Kumar & Sahadev, 2019). When individuals perceive themselves as akin to the person or group, they might take on their behaviours, attitudes, or values. The term "internalisation" describes how a person or group influences another person by making them adopt their attitudes, values, or behaviours. In this case, individuals genuinely believe that their attitudes, values, or behaviours are correct and valid (Li, Larimo & Leonidou, 2021).

The focus that Kelman's theory has on the different societal influence mechanisms and the unique processes that give rise to them is a significant advantage (Tsoukas, 2017). This paradigm makes it easier to understand how people are influenced by the people around them, which makes it possible to create strategies or treatments that are specifically designed to address different types of social influence. Furthermore, a lot of situations have used Kelman's theory, including political and social challenges like conflict

resolution and discrimination (Purani et al., 2019). Social Influence Theory is particularly relevant in examining the influence of brand visibility and reputation on students' choices of HEIs. It sheds light on how influential peers, family, and social media positively perceive brand visibility and reputation, thereby exerting a strong social influence on students' decisions regarding their choice of HEI.

2.2.2 Information processing theory

A cognitive development method called information processing theory seeks to clarify how information is encoded into memory (Srinivasan & Swink, 2018). It suggests that people process information rather than just responding to external cues, which improves their memory of unusual business names. The brain's neural networks and behaviours are powerful and intricate, and this theory encompasses how the brain processes information, from receiving stimuli to storing and retrieving it when needed (Wickens & Carswell, 2021). It likens the mind to a computer capable of analysing environmental information, and even in childhood, individuals can accumulate and retain substantial volumes of information, as observed in child development studies according to the information processing theory (Srinivasan & Swink, 2018).

The expectancy theory of motivation is an excellent example of how information processing significantly impacts behaviour since it shows how people process information about behaviour-outcome relationships to build expectations and make decisions (Pachella, 2021). George Armitage Miller, a pioneer in cognition research, is credited with developing the information processing theory. He examined the capacity of working memory and how it relates to "chunking" with short-term memories. According to Kmetz (2020), John William Atkinson, Richard Shiffrin, Alan Baddeley, and Graham Hitch are among the other psychologists proposing multi-stage memory models within the information processing foundation.

The information processing hypothesis consists of three primary parts: executive cognition, cognitive processes, and information stores. Information stores are the different locations in the mind where information is kept, including sensory memory, short-term

memory, long-term memory, and more (Hann Hui, Lee & Png, 2022). Cognitive processes such as perception, coding, recording, chunking, and retrieval all necessitate transferring memory objects across various repositories. According to Baddeley and Hitch (2019), executive cognition refers to people's awareness of how information is processed within their minds, including their comprehension of their strengths and deficiencies.

In the context of higher education institution selection, the Information Processing Theory can shed light on how students perceive and process information about different institutions. Loomes, Owens and McCarthy (2022) believe that theoretical constructs such as attention, comprehension, encoding and retrieval can be employed to examine how students process available information, understand the details provided, store it in memory and retrieve and utilise it in their final decision-making process.

2.2.3 Consumer behaviour theory

Consumer behaviour, the study of how people make purchasing decisions, holds immense significance for businesses seeking to understand their customers and drive sales (Shahab, Ghazali & Mohtar, 2021). Scholars such as John Howard and Jagdish Sheth are notable theorists in this field. They developed the Howard-Sheth Model of Buyer Behavior in 1969, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interactions between consumers' decision-making processes and external influences. Howard and Sheth's work is instrumental in identifying various psychological, social, and situational factors that affect consumer choices. Additionally, Philip Kotler has made significant contributions with his theories on marketing management and consumer behavior, emphasizing the role of psychological and social factors in purchasing decisions (Berdik, Otoum, Schmidt, Porter, Jararweh, 2021).

Businesses closely analyze buying patterns and construct theories and models to gain insights into consumer behaviour. Understanding consumer behaviour enables marketers to capitalize on these insights and predict when and how a consumer will purchase. This understanding helps identify the factors influencing decisions and enables businesses to

develop strategies that proactively influence consumer behaviour (Berdik, Otoum, Schmidt, Porter, Jararweh, 2021).

Several factors shape consumer behaviour, including psychological, personal, and social influences. Psychological factors encompass a person's attitude, perceptions, cognitive abilities, motivations, personality traits, and beliefs (Teece, 2021). For instance, a consumer actively focused on reducing plastic consumption will approach purchasing differently from someone who disregards concerns regarding climate change. Personal traits including geography, gender, age, occupation, and financial status are also very important in determining the purchasing behaviour of consumers. Different age groups, for example, might prefer distinct shopping methods, such as older individuals preferring physical stores over online shopping (Gilal, Chandani, Gilal, Gilal, Channa, 2020). Social influences include a person's social circle, family, community, work or school environment and various affiliations like clubs or organisations. Social class, living conditions and education also shape consumer behaviour. A student, for instance, might seek out certain fashionable items in line with their school's prevailing trends to fit in with peers (Buys & Parumasur, 2021).

In understanding consumer behaviour, businesses can gain valuable insights into factors influencing the choices of their target audience (Sama, 2019). When applied to the context of higher education institutions (HEI), comprehending these influences, such as psychological, personal, and social factors, can shed light on how brand visibility and reputation impact students' decision-making when selecting higher education institutions (Buys & Parumasur, 2021). Appealing to the correct needs can influence the student's decision to enrol at a specific institution.

2.2.4 Brand equity theory

Brand equity is the value associated with a well-known brand. It is based on the theory that well-known and reliable enterprises succeed more. It is made up of a variety of brand assets and liabilities connected to a name and symbol that can raise or lower the perceived value of a good or service. The introduction of the idea of "brand" coupled with

"equity" and "assets," has changed the marketing function, elevating it from tactical strategies to a position of prominence at the executive level (Chen, Li & Zhang, 2020). Brand equity refers to the value attributed to a recognised brand based on the notion that well-established and reputable brands achieve greater success. This transformative shift in marketing thinking has led to a comprehensive understanding of brand equity and its significance within the marketing industry. It empowers marketers to go beyond mere strategic approaches and gain a strategic seat at the executive table (Sadyk & Islam, 2022).

Specifically, the Brand Equity Theory plays a crucial role when examining the influence of brand visibility and reputation on consumer behaviour (Gul, Liu, Jamil, Kamran & Qaiser, 2021). This theory highlights how a strong brand with high brand equity can shape consumer perceptions and choices. In higher education institutions, a well-regarded brand's visibility and reputation significantly impact how students perceive the institution's quality, credibility, and overall appeal, ultimately influencing their decisions and choices (De Beer & Williams, 2019).

2.3 VALUE OF THEORIES REVIEWED

The theories mentioned above, emphasising social influence and its mechanisms, significantly contribute to understanding individual decision-making, especially in choosing higher education institutions. Here is a brief overview of their contributions to the current study:

Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958) outlines three main social influence mechanisms are internalisation, identification, and compliance. These processes illustrate different ways individuals may adopt attitudes, values, or behaviours to align with those of a person or group based on the depth of genuine acceptance versus superficial expression. This theory provides insights into how complex social factors, such as peer groups, family and social media, impact students' preferences and decisions regarding HEI. Identifying these processes allows the research to develop more targeted strategies to affect potential

students' choices, considering the various levels of internalisation and identification with influential people or groups.

Application to Higher Education Choices: Kelman's theory's relevance to higher education institution selection, especially regarding brand visibility and reputation, is significant. It explains how perceived prestige and reputation, mediated through social contacts and media, can foster deeper internalisation of values, or lead to superficial compliance with norms. This insight is valuable for educational institutions aiming to attract students, enabling more focused marketing and communication strategies.

Similarities and Differences in Theoretical Applications: While these theories share a foundation in highlighting social influence's role in decision-making, they diverge in their focus on influence depth from mere compliance to profound internalisation. This suggests interventions to attract students could be customised to various stages of influence, from enhancing brand visibility to creating a sense of belonging by integrating the institution's values and culture.

These theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how social influence multifacetedly affects students' higher education institution choices. They highlight the need to consider external influence manifestations, like brand visibility and internal psychological processes, such as identification and internalisation. This dual focus provides strategic insights for developing interventions to guide students' decisions towards specific institutions tailored to the unique dynamics of social influence.

2.4 EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review empirically examines the rapidly evolving impact of online marketing in business development, emphasising how it outperforms traditional marketing strategies by successfully connecting businesses with their target clientele. This strategic advantage is crucial in today's digital age, where businesses across various sectors employ diverse online marketing tactics to amplify their reach and engagement. The literature underscores that selecting the most suitable online marketing strategy hinges on several

factors, including budgetary constraints, industry-specific requirements and the target audience's unique preferences and demographic profiles (Berdik et al., 2021).

A critical component of this selection process involves comprehensive market research. This step is essential for identifying the marketing tactics that yield the highest return on investment, thereby guiding businesses in optimising their marketing strategies to meet consumer expectations. Furthermore, empirical studies suggest that the effectiveness of online marketing is significantly enhanced by leveraging consumer data alongside sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) systems. These tools facilitate a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour and enable businesses to tailor their marketing efforts more effectively. As a result, companies can achieve a marked improvement in brand visibility and recognition by cultivating a robust online presence. As detailed by Amron (2018), this strategic approach to online marketing underscores its pivotal role in driving business development and fostering sustainable growth in the digital marketplace.

The empirical literature thus provides a compelling argument for the efficacy of online marketing, presenting it as an indispensable tool for businesses seeking to navigate the complexities of the modern market landscape. By carefully analysing and applying these strategies, organisations can significantly enhance their market position, ensuring long term success and competitiveness.

2.4.1 Influence of information availability on students' decision-making

For this study, information is defined as the processed form of data, including facts, ideas, knowledge, and messages. It can be found in published and unpublished sources and conveyed orally or in print. This information enhances understanding of topics, problems, or events for those who receive or use it (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). In the context of this study, information utilisation refers to the situation where students receive and apply information to make informed decisions and choices. Information availability is defined as various sources students can access during their decision-making processes.

As operationalised here, decision-making involves identifying opportunities for making decisions, considering various courses of action, selecting the most suitable choice from those available, and evaluating past decisions. It is the stage at which plans, preferences and objectives are translated into concrete actions, as described by Tsekouras and Kounetas (2019).

Information availability in student decision-making involves students' ease of systematically gathering relevant information and exploring potential solutions to their educational choices (Vahdat, Alizadeh, Quach & Hamelin, 2021). Many prospective students, often unfamiliar with the university landscape, engage in thorough research within the 'educational market' through the Internet (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019). Faced with the complexity of this decision-making process, prospective students tend to seek information from a diverse range of online sources (Masuda, Han & Lee, 2022). Prospective students do not merely accept the opinions of key information sources at face value; instead, they assess the relevance of the information to their personal circumstances, objectives and values. The capacity of students to evaluate information is influenced by their level of intellectual development (Mudzingiri, Muteba Mwamba & Keyser, 2018) and educational background (De Beer & Williams, 2019). Factors like students' socioeconomic status and aptitude also shape their ability to evaluate online information (Berdik et al., 2021). Parents often exert significant influence on the decisions of prospective university students, especially in cases where the students come from more affluent backgrounds and their parents have firsthand experience with universities (Collins et al., 2022).

Conversely, prospective students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those from townships, may primarily rely on social sources for information, finding it intimidating to approach a specific university directly. They depend on media and social channels to gather information about universities. They tend to avoid consulting direct sources, possibly because their immediate contacts have limited or no exposure to universities. Students who have difficulty evaluating and processing data often turn to third parties for assistance in the decision-making process, such as counsellors (Gamede et al., 2022)

also suggest that students with lower academic performance and limited prior exposure to higher education do not prioritise 'personal' or 'interactive' information sources. Instead, they prefer promotional materials and personal interactions that foster trust and understanding. They place more trust in information from friends than their parents or other family members. They are more likely to believe their teachers, on-campus lecturers and current university students over their parents, university rankings, or career advisors (Benavides et al., 2020).

Conversely though, high achievers place a higher value on and depend more on information from peers, on-campus instructors, career counsellors and university rankings than they do from other sources (Vahdat, Alizadeh, Quach, Hamelin, 2021).

According to a study (Buys & Parumasur, 2021), respondents considered the following three informational factors when choosing a university: (1) information that was readily available regarding the institution's credibility; (2) the institution's online presence; and (3) the institution's online interaction with prospective students. Prospective students with the highest academic aptitude tend to give greater weight to the 'teachers' interpersonal source'. In contrast, those with moderate academic aptitude favour the 'university website,' which is typically controlled by the institution's marketing efforts. Interestingly, when respondents were presented with 'family influence' as a potential factor, it emerged as more critical than guidance from teachers or vocational advisors.

2.4.2 Influence of brand image in influencing students' choices of HEI

Rutter, Lettice, and Nadeau's (2017) highlight that brand image is a pivotal determinant directly impacting product sales. Moreover, they clarify that perceptions and opinions about a particular brand are combined with brand image and visibility. A brand's image includes its essence and traits, making it a key element in the strategy. One of the fundamental aspects to consider is brand visibility, as it functions as a mirror reflecting an organisation's core values (Foroudi, Yu, Gupta & Foroudi, 2019). Even organisations with a range of high-quality products may witness a decline in sales and profits if they suffer from a negative brand image evaluation. Hence, brand image is crucial to a company's

success and long-term strategies. To underscore the significance of brand image, this study aims to explain the various indicators affecting students' choices of HEI. (Li, Larimo, and Leonidou, 2021) explain that establishing brand awareness is a crucial first step in creating brand equity. Establishing strong connections with the pertinent product category or other pertinent signals of purchase or consumption (to increase brand recall) and enhancing brand awareness via repeated exposure (for brand recognition) are two ways to achieve this. When a brand is sufficiently well-known, marketers can concentrate more on building a brand identity. In marketing, the notion of brand image has been thoroughly investigated and has been shown to be of utmost significance.

Brand image is aligned with the associative network memory model, encompassing consumer's consumer brand perception (Amron, 2018). The brand image mirrors consumers' memories shaped by their associations with the brand. In other words, information related to brand associations links directly to consumers' recollections of the brand and holds significance for them. These associations may stem from various aspects of the product, including its characteristics or related facets (Keller, 2019). The corporate image depends on several factors, including the company's image, values and visual identity. All of these factors determine how people view a brand in general. As a result of their interactions and experiences with a brand, customers create associations, and the brand image develops into a dynamic representation of these shared perceptions.

2.4.2.1 Common product attributes

High quality and innovation are two dimensions that significantly contribute to a robust brand image (Keller, 2019). For higher education programmes, high quality can be assessed from various angles, such as the calibre of the faculty, the structure of the programmes, and the university's infrastructure. Notably, programme quality spans all courses and content, aiming to meet students' expectations. Le et al. (2020) posit that all these dimensions positively impact the brand image of Saigon University. The programme's cost is another attribute dimension that positively affects the brand image. The second crucial dimension is innovation, which can be pivotal in establishing strong

brand image associations. Sathya (2017) underscores that perceived innovativeness is a critical competitive advantage, which also holds true for educational institutions. According to Sherman (2022), the quality of services, management, and innovative teaching techniques all have a significant impact on an institution's reputation.

2.4.2.2 People and relationships

Keller (2019) highlights that these elements are linked to the professionalism of employees and the quality of services, delivering high-quality products to consumers. A corporate image associated with customer focus portrays the company is attentive to and concerned about its clients (Keller, 2019). Consequently, human resources' professionalism within a university is pivotal in forging strong brand image associations in students' memories, influencing their choices.

2.4.2.3 Values and programmes

According to Keller (2019), there is a connection between these aspects and social responsibility. A corporate image linked to social responsibility presents the business as supporting creative and social efforts, giving back to the community, and working to improve societal well-being. Le (2018) underscores the positive impact of a university's reputation on its brand image. Additionally, Williams (2022) stresses the importance of reputation in contemporary educational institutions, with universities increasingly focused on building and maintaining a favourable reputation.

2.4.3 The influence of target advertising on students' choices of higher education institutions

In the present day, there are numerous definitions for advertising. Still, it is crucial to acknowledge that its definition and practice have evolved in line with technological advancements and available resources. Starch (in Nan & Faber, 2021, p124-149) defines advertising as "selling in print," primarily limiting its scope to the print media. This restriction stemmed from the fact that during that era, print media was the solely available medium (Nan & Faber, 2021), with other media that we are familiar with today not yet in

existence. Richards and Curran (2023, p75-89) defined advertising as "a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action now or in the future." Their definition strongly emphasises the persuasive function that advertising serves in the communication process. Kotler and Armstrong (2021) state that advertising includes "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor." This term emphasises how impersonal advertising is and how it always has a clear sponsor. Advertising is described as a type of non-personal, paid communication that is disseminated through a variety of media by businesses, nonprofits, and individuals who are recognised in the advertisement by Dollinger, Lodge and Coates (2018), Richards and Curran (2023), and Kotler and Armstrong (2021). These authors have approached advertising from a functional perspective. The aim is to inform or persuade members of a specific audience. Buys and Parumasur (2021) assert that advertising helps prospective consumers learn about and develop a basic awareness of a product or service.

The primary goals of advertising are typically to tell the target audience (Bentley-Steyn, 2019) about the existence of a product, idea, or concept and to influence their awareness, attitudes, and purchase intent, according to Ayanwale et al. (2023). Therefore, institutions run advertisements to inform potential clients—parents and students—about the academic programmes they provide. This reminds and persuades students of the benefits of attending these colleges (Aprin, Chounta & Hoppe, 2022).

Masuda, Han and Lee (2022) state that internet advertising has been shown to be successful in improving an institution's reputation and exposure, particularly in particular geographical locations. According to Jansen and Brenn-White's (2019) survey, the majority of educational institutions use a variety of multimedia advertisements to spread information about their programmes and institution. Print media, direct mail, online ads, email marketing, and outdoor media including billboards, banners, and posters are some examples of these.

2.4.4 The relationship between student HEI choice and online marketing strategies employed.

Online marketing strategies can affect students' decisions about which private higher education school to enrolling South Africa. Institutions that engage with their audience on social media and provide comprehensive online information about their programmes will stand out from the competition. Students will choose important aspects for themselves, either consciously or unconsciously (Amron, 2018). Some students might base their choice of higher education on the HEI's accreditation. Students regard an HEI's academic reputation—that is, its accreditation on a local or global level—and consider it to be a deciding factor when making their selections. HEIs compete for students in the same way that businesses do for customers when it comes to marketing. In this sense, potential students evaluate the reputations of the school's using information from the HEI's social media pages and other internet resources. According to Bae et al. (2020), a Higher Education Institute's positive reputation is crucial since it influences prospective students' decisions. Furthermore, the student's support may be strengthened by a positive reputation. The collective depiction of a HEI, including the media they have produced throughout time, is what defines their reputation (Masuda, et al., 2022).

Grants and finance are other factors that students consider while selecting an HEI. This might also be a system of grants offered to excellent students while they are enrolled in classes. Another important consideration for students choosing an HEI is the cost of tuition. The cost of education negatively impacts the choice of HEI, while financial aid has a favourable impact. Giving parents and children more information when they are still in elementary or high school is a straightforward solution to the problem of financial assistance and the expense of education as a barrier to post-secondary entry.

Additionally, marketing plays a role in helping parents and students make wise decisions in this situation. Low-income students have been forced to select less expensive institutions due to rising tuition rates. However, this aspect might not be challenging to solve. Prior to applying for admission to an HEI, students form strong preferences for

particular HEIs, analyse their qualifications for admission and consider available finance options (Baddeley & Hitch, 2019).

Location and closeness are other crucial factors. The primary justification for enrolling in the institution is that it is close to the student's home or employment. Because of transit options or student housing, an HEI's closeness to a student's home significantly affects their likelihood of attending that institution. The rate of enrolment is thus influenced by proximity to an HEI campus. Although they may not enrol the campus close to their housing, students who often live near campus are expected to attend the HEI that is close by. As a result, home proximity significantly impacts students' decision over which HEI to attend (Berdik, et al., 2021).

Student exchange programmes, extracurricular activities, or athletic and health facilities are some of the primary decision factors for students regarding facilities and services. Service firms apply contact persons and the environment as a sound marketing technique to affect the behaviour of their customers. Consequently, a student's opinion of the reputation or image of the HEI is influenced by contact features such as campus amenities, faculty members, and other workers. This aspect recommends that educational institutions offer better facilities and services, as these will likely impact students' decision-making. Finally, students learn about institutions through various sources, including websites, print and radio media, students, social media, educational displays and the student recruitment department (Jain & Chetty, 2020). Thus, students consult a variety of sources.

Friends are one of the most popular and efficient information channels. The accuracy of information about the HEI must be ensured while using any channel to contact the students. The student's first interaction with the HEI is through the prospectus or website, which has details on admission requirements, images of the school, a list of courses it offers, and advertising and promotional materials. Consequently, both online and offline communication avenues are crucial. Regarding offline communication, there has been a significant rise in the media's commercialisation of HEIs in Africa. The first point of contact

is print communication intended for prospective students through brochures, prospectuses, and student guides (Amron, 2018).

As a result, HEIs need to produce professional documents with realistic and pertinent information, including details about different programmes, a comparison of required and optional courses, assessment procedures include modules for work experience for every year of the academic degrees. Another option to spread knowledge about the courses provided and create a lively platform to talk about job prospects is for HEI representatives to participate in educational fairs and national tours. The main forms of communication are therefore booklets, posters, meetings, sponsorships, billboards, websites, and adverts in newspapers and television. Online communication includes details about discussion boards, social media platforms, and university websites (Breines, 2020). Compared to other methods, like television or print, using the Internet as a marketing tool is significantly affordable. Despite disparities, web marketing enables businesses to offer services to one another.

2.4.5 The relationship between students' choices of private HEI and online marketing in South Africa

The effectiveness and relevance of online marketing techniques influence a student's decision to enrol in an HEI, and there is a considerable association between these two factors in South Africa. An institution increases the likelihood of drawing in and enrolling students by investing heavily in Internet marketing (Bentley-Steyn, 2019). Thus, an institution must create a defined framework for online marketing. The institution can begin implementing the strategy only after deciding what it wants to say and which market to target.

The borders of higher education have been widened by online marketing, and institutions in this field from all over the world can now easily promote their target audiences. Due to the widespread dissemination of information, HEIs have the chance to demonstrate the prospects that students can expect from the services they offer, both domestically and internationally. Social media is essential for connecting faculties with students in

international education (Baltezarevic, 2023). Based on previous studies, Baltezarevic (2023) posits that as many as 83% of young people (aged 18 to 29) use social media globally. For them, it serves as their primary medium for information dissemination.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) has significantly impacted global education by increasing reader traffic. Businesses must work with their marketing teams to produce niche-specific keywords that would attract more customers from their target market because the keywords used by all websites in this field are surprisingly similar. Targeting educated, practical and tech-savvy students require a deliberate strategy that aligns with branded marketing because the goal is to increase exposure and student retention. Baltezarevic (2023) believes that effective communication is facilitated by customer relationship management (CRM) tools.

Online marketing needs to be able to compile information from CRM, third-party websites, social media, and business applications. A multi-touchpoint digital advertising campaign framework was created as part of a comparative study between a business and a global educational institution (Baltezarevic, 2023). It was mentioned that CRM is an important part of the marketing. When making judgments, the institution's website can be a reliable source of information. Prospective students will look for important information on an HEI website before deciding whether or not to apply to their top choice of institution. Search engine rankings favour websites that follow approved accessibility criteria. Creating an interest group for a particular topic, gathering social media directories under one roof, and enlisting student ambassadors and academic experts to promote material are all ways to do this. Search engine rankings favour websites that follow approved accessibility criteria. A website becomes more appealing and effective when social media directories are gathered under one roof, a specific interest group is established, and student ambassadors and academic faculties promote material. It would be ideal for including multimedia content, glowing testimonials from subject-matter experts and personal accounts of current and former students on the website (through a testimony session). Sharing content regarding student experiences on social networks is one of the most successful digital marketing techniques. It is possible to obtain (and later publish) student

statements in text, video, or verbal form (Chen, Li, Zhang, 2020). This is the best form of social proof. These can be submitted as reviews of educational institutions on social media platforms and within Google reviews, in addition to websites and should be emphasised.

2.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The conceptual framework explores the influence of information availability, brand image and targeted advertising on students' choices of HEI. The independent variables, for example, information availability, brand image and target advertising, impact the dependent variable, the students' choice of HEI. Figure 2.2 below depicts this study's conceptual model.

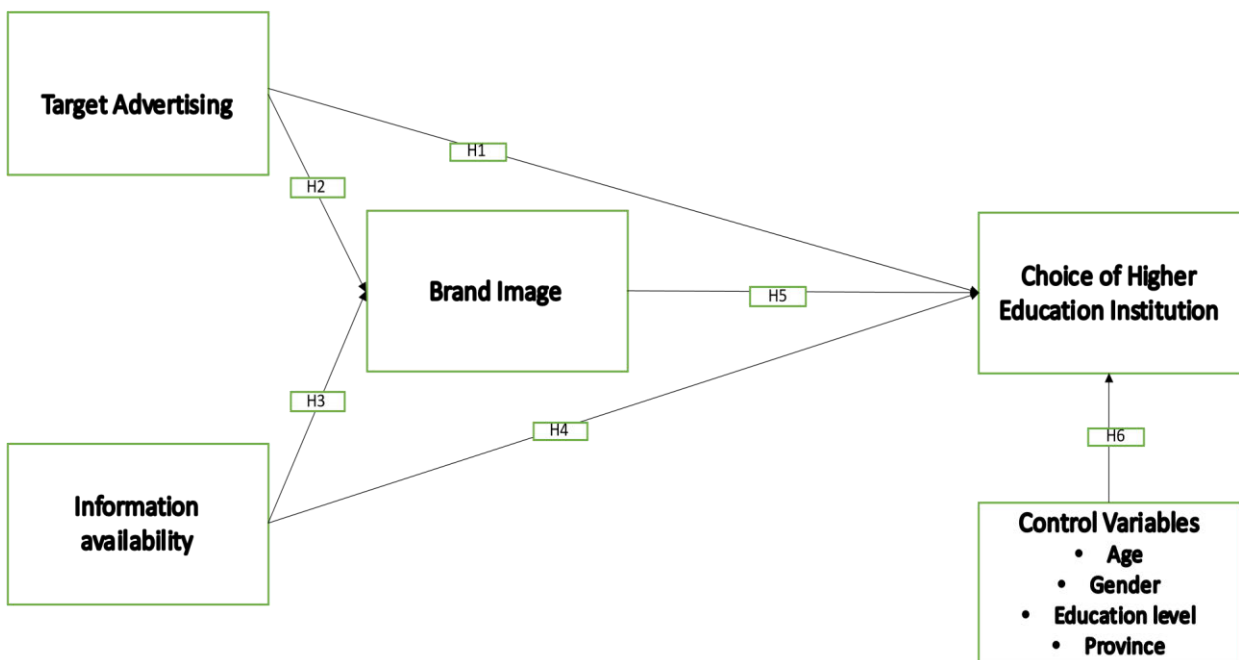


Figure 2.: Conceptual Framework

Source: Compiled by the researcher (2024)

2.5.1 Constructs for the study

The new model summarises the constructs and relationships in the current study. The constructs target advertising, information availability, brand image and choice of higher

education institution. Brand image is the mediator, while control variables are age, gender, education level, and province. The independent variables are unpacked below.

2.5.1.1 Target advertising

Targeted advertising involves using data-driven strategies to reach specific groups of students with personalized advertising messages. The underlying theory here is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which suggests that targeted advertising can engage students more deeply through the central route of persuasion by aligning messages with their interests and preferences (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Studies have shown that personalized advertising significantly increases engagement and conversion rates. For instance, Amron (2018) found that tailored advertising campaigns led to a higher rate of student applications and enrolments. Jansen and Brenn-White (2019) reported that educational institutions that employ targeted advertising strategies see an improvement in their brand image and student attraction. The following hypotheses were drawn:

H1: Effective targeted advertising positively influences students' choices of HEI.

H2: Effective targeted advertising positively influences an institution's brand image.

2.5.1.2 Information availability

This independent variable represents the extent to which universities provide detailed and up-to-date information about their offerings, faculties, facilities, and campus life. The hypothesis is that greater information availability positively influences students' choices of HEI. Universities with comprehensive and easily accessible information are more likely to attract students as they can make well-informed decisions. Information availability pertains to the accessibility and comprehensiveness of the information provided by universities about their offerings. Information Processing Theory suggests that individuals make better decisions when they have access to ample and clear information (Bettman, 1979). Research by James-MacEachern & Yun (2017) highlights that students are more likely to choose institutions that provide detailed and transparent information. Vahdat et

al. (2021) also emphasize that accessible and comprehensive information increases student satisfaction and decision-making confidence. Thus, the hypotheses are:

H3: Information availability positively influences an institution's brand image.

H4: Information availability positively influences students' choices of HEI.

2.5.1.3 Brand image

Brand image refers to the perception and prominence of an HEI's brand from the student's perspective. The Brand Equity Theory posits that a strong brand image leads to increased consumer trust and loyalty, which in turn affects their choice behavior (Keller, 1993). Rutter, Lettice, and Nadeau (2017) demonstrate that a positive brand image significantly influences students' enrollment decisions. Foroudi et al. (2019) found that brand image, encompassing aspects like reputation and visibility, plays a crucial role in attracting prospective students. Thus, the hypothesis is:

H5: Brand image positively influences students' choices of HEI.

2.5.1.4 Students' choice of higher education

This is the outcome variable influenced by the three independent variables. It represents the ultimate decision made by students regarding which higher education institution they choose to enroll. The hypothesis is that information availability, brand image, and targeted advertising significantly affect students' decisions and choices in higher education institutions.

2.5.1.5 Moderating variables

The model is moderated by brand image (H5), which could affect how closely the independent and dependent variables are related. According to this framework, variables that may directly or indirectly affect students' decisions about HEI include the availability of information, brand image and targeted advertising. The strength and significance of these links in student decision-making were determined through research using the hypotheses as a guide. The moderating and mediating variables consider how complex this decision-making process is.

2.5.1.6 Control variables

The control variables for the study are age, gender, income level and provincial location which could affect the relatedness that exists between the independent and dependent variables. The impact of control variables assists marketers when planning their marketing strategies like segmentation, targeting and positioning of the products and services. As mentioned above, the hypothesis is:

H6: Control variables have a negative influence on the choice of HEI.

According to this framework, variables that directly or indirectly affect students' decisions about higher education institutions include the availability of information, brand image and targeted advertising. The strength and significance of these links in student decision making will be determined empirically in the study through rigorous testing of the relationships.

2.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This study's thorough literature research highlights the critical influence of internet marketing tactics on students' decision-making when enrolling in South African private HEIs. The body of research highlights the significant influence that information accessibility, brand perception, and focused (target) advertising have on shaping student decisions. It also suggests that these factors are essential for surviving the cutthroat world of higher education. To provide data-driven knowledge of the influence of these elements on student enrolment decisions, this study attempts to explore the strength and relevance of these factors empirically.

Differences identified in the literature include the following: (1) Approaches to online marketing where the literature reveals diversity in the online marketing techniques employed by various institutions. While some prioritise the breadth of information available to prospective students, others focus on crafting a compelling brand image or leveraging targeted advertising to reach their audience; (2) Impact on student decisionmaking, where the influence of these online marketing strategies on student decisions appears to vary. Some studies suggest that a strong brand image might

outweigh the informational content regarding influence, whereas others argue for the paramount importance of detailed programmes and institutional information.

Similarities Identified in the literature include: (1) The significance of online marketing where, across the board, there is consensus on the critical role of online marketing in attracting students to private HEIs. This reflects a universal understanding of the digital landscape as a vital arena for engaging with prospective students; (2) Empirical testing for understanding impact, where there is a shared methodology in the literature regarding the empirical testing of online marketing's effectiveness. This approach underscores a common acknowledgement of the need for rigorous, data-based analysis to quantify the impact of various marketing strategies.

In summarising the chapter, it is clear that private HEIs in South Africa increasingly rely on sophisticated online marketing techniques to enhance their visibility and appeal to potential students. The effectiveness of these efforts, as evidenced by enrollment numbers, is contingent upon a nuanced understanding of the target demographics and the strategic application of information dissemination, brand positioning and targeted advertising. This study's empirical examination into the efficacy of these strategies promises to offer valuable insights into optimising online marketing for higher education, with the potential to shape future approaches that align with student needs and preferences, thereby fostering an environment of growth and inclusivity within the sector.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework supporting the study was determined and the literature serving as the study's foundation was studied. This chapter delves into the methodology adopted for conducting the study. Research methodology is the systematic procedure used to select, process, and evaluate data related to a study issue. It covers all aspects of the study's research process, including the research plan and distribution of results (Sileyew, 2019). The research methodology in this study offered a thorough explanation of the target population, sampling strategy, data gathering tactics, and data analysis strategies used in the study.

Quantitative research was chosen for this investigation to systematically examine the influence of online marketing on students' choices of HEIs in South Africa. This approach involved collecting and analysing data to identify patterns, relationships, and trends. Quantitative research provided a structured and replicable way to gather insights into the extent and nature of the impact of online marketing on student decision-making (Creswell, 2017). Surveys were used to collect quantitative data from a representative sample of prospective and current students. Creswell (2017) posits that surveys are efficient in gathering data from many participants, allowing for statistical analyses to identify significant patterns and correlations.

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Research philosophies refer to fundamental beliefs and worldviews guiding the methods employed to gather and analyse evidence on a particular subject. Various research philosophies exist, including positivism, realism, idealism, interpretivism, constructivism and pragmatism (Sileyew, 2019). This investigation adopted a positivist research philosophy, gathering information and evaluating quantitative data to explore influence of

online marketing on student choice of HEI in south Africa. As Chasukwa (2019) describes, positivism emphasises the reliability of information derived from observation and measurement. Due to its objective and scientific data collection and analysis techniques, it is suitable for investigating complex and dynamic variables, such as the impact of online marketing. This approach ensured the study's results were trustworthy, precise and replicable for future research. Using a quantitative approach, the study aimed to establish causal relationships between variables, identifying elements contributing to the success of internet marketing initiatives targeting higher education students. Adopting the positivist concept facilitated a thorough understanding of how online marketing influences students' attitudes and behaviours in their choice of higher education institutions in South Africa.

The positivist paradigm is the most suitable paradigm for the quantitative methodology utilised in this study. Positivism is characterised by an empirical approach that seeks to uncover objective, measurable patterns in the social world. It assumes that reality is external and can be observed and measured through systematic and structured research methods (Creswell, 2017). Positivism aligns with the epistemological assumption that knowledge can be gained through empirical observation and measurement. In the context of this research, the aim was to quantify and systematically analyse the influence of online marketing on students' choices, adhering to the positivist belief in the existence of observable patterns and causal relationships. Positivism asserts the existence of an objective reality that can be studied independently of the researcher's subjective interpretations. The research aimed to identify and analyse objective patterns in the data, reflecting the positivist belief in an external reality that is not dependent on individual perspectives (Creswell, 2017). Kothari (2011) believes the positivist paradigm is also inherently tied to quantitative methods, emphasising measurement, statistical analysis, and identifying patterns through numerical data. In this study, thus, the use of surveys is aligned with the positivist tradition of systematically quantifying and analysing social phenomena.

Lastly, positivism supports generalisability, where research findings derived from a sample can be applied to a broader population. The quantitative methodology in this study

aimed to generate generalisable insights into the influence of online marketing on students' choices within the South African higher education context (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021). The positivist paradigm was well-suited for this study as it provided a methodological framework that aligned with the study's emphasis on systematically measuring and analysing the impact of online marketing on students' choices of HEI in South Africa. Quantitative methods are consistent with the positivist tradition of empirical enquiry and systematic observation.

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH TO THEORY DEVELOPMENT

The primary three approaches for theory development area identified by Saunders, Philip and Thornhill (2019) as being deductive, inductive, and abductive. The deductive approach was chosen for this study due to its suitability for testing hypotheses derived from existing theories or literature. By employing a deductive research approach, the study aimed to systematically investigate the influence of online marketing on students' choices of HEIs in South Africa. This approach allowed the researchers to develop specific research questions based on established theories and industry standards, providing a structured data collection and analysis framework. Moreover, using quantitative methods such as surveys, questionnaires, and statistical analysis facilitated the rigorous examination of relationships between variables and the validation of theoretical propositions. Ultimately, the deductive approach enabled the study to contribute concrete and measurable insights into the impact of online marketing on students' decisions, offering valuable implications for university marketing strategies in the digital era.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Kothari (2011), a research design provides a framework for a study by providing a method for collecting, calculating, and evaluating data. A descriptive research design was used for this investigation. This method entails the methodical gathering and examination of numerical data in order to evaluate the impact of internet marketing on students' choice of HEI. The quantitative research design utilised surveys and

questionnaires to gather data from a large sample of students in South Africa. Students' opinions and preferences about online marketing as well as how they decide which higher education institution to enroll were measured by the structured questions in these surveys. Also gathered was information on the efficacy of different institutions' online marketing strategies. Statistical methods, such as regression analysis and correlation, were applied to analyse the collected data and identify potential relationships between online marketing efforts and students' choices of HEI. Using a quantitative research design, the investigation aimed to provide concrete and measurable insights into the impact of online marketing on students' decisions, contributing to a better understanding of how universities can effectively use online marketing strategies to attract and retain students in South Africa.

3.5 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The study's research questions were carefully crafted using ideas from two original sources: Bohara, Gupta and Panwar (2019) and Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011). The research questions were based on current information and industry standards since these sources were chosen for their applicability and subject matter expertise. The research questions were improved and specifically crafted to fit the study's objectives by using information from numerous sources, eventually raising the investigation's level and scope. On a five-point Likert scale, 1 denotes Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly agree (5) for the items on the measurement tool. Table 3.1 below shows the original constructs, adopted items and their sources.

Table 3: Questionnaire Development

Construct	Original items	Improved Items	Source
Target Marketing	- Social media marketing has a significant influence on colleges and the institutions of higher learning regarding admissions and marketing. - It is through the university's website that influenced me to join - Before your choice of studying at USIU, did you find their web pages, customer service and email helpful towards providing relevant information.	- I would consider a private higher education institution with a strong online presence. - Target advertising aligns with my interests and preferences regarding HEI. - I would consider a higher education institution that advertises specifically to my demographic through targeted advertising. - I have visited a higher education institution's website or social media page as a result of seeing a targeted advertisement. - Online advertisements of private HEI affect my perception of the institution. - Social media posts from current students at private HEI help to inform my decision-making process.	(AL-AZZAM1 & AL-MIZEED, 2021) (Omboi, 2021) (Mutali , 2021)
Brand Image	- social media is the most effective tool for both the students and the school administration. - I depended on social media information sources. - Higher education institutions are becoming increasingly aggressive in their marketing activities to convey an image that is favorable to their public	- Online marketing influences my choice of private higher education institutions. - Online marketing influenced my choice of institution over traditional marketing methods (such as brochure or paper-based ads. - You will likely consider a higher education institution with a strong brand. - You rely on the reputation or ranking of a higher education institution when deciding which institution to choose. - You need to choose a higher education institution that is widely recognised and respected in the industry or field you are interested in.	(Omboi, 2021) (Mutali , 2021)

		• Do you believe that HEI brand image contributes to better networking and job opportunities after graduation? • A higher education institutions' brand image positively impacts your perception of its quality and credibility. • I think online marketing is an effective way for private HEI to reach prospective students.	
Information availability	• I use social media sites did you visit for university course information. • I contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university course using social media. • I depended on social media information sources	• The way private HEI present themselves online reflects their overall quality and reputation. • The quality of a private higher education institution's website affects my perception of the institution. • I am more likely to choose a private higher education institution if I see positive online reviews. • Online marketing content for HEI is of high quality. • Online marketing accurately describes the institution. The information found in the online marketing materials was clear and understandable. • The online marketing materials were visually appealing.	(Al-Azzam & AIMizeed, 2021) (Omboi, 2021) (Mutali, 2021)
Choice higher of education	• Social media marketing is the best tool that determined study selection and university of choice. • I contact university students or staff to get their opinion on a university course using social media	• Online marketing, including university websites and social media, significantly impacts my choice of institution. I have been swayed by online promotions, discounts, or scholarships of by HEI when deciding where to pursue my studies. • I trust information provided by HEI through their online marketing materials. • I find online reviews and testimonials influential in my decision-making process for selecting a higher education institution. • Online marketing efforts impact my decision-making process for choosing a higher education institution.	(Omboi, 2021) (Mutali, 2021)

3.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

3.6.1 Reliability

This study conducted a reliability test to determine which factors or items to examine, discuss, and utilise. A pilot study was carried to enhance reliability by visiting the targeted sample and distributing questionnaires before the data collection date. This allowed testing and comparing of the results obtained from the same sample and set of questions. The consistency of the results confirmed the reliability of the study. Respondents were encouraged to provide their responses freely, and confidentiality was ensured to maintain privacy (Kothari, 2011; Polit & Beck, 2018). This created a free and fair environment for data collection.

3.6.2 Validity

Data validity refers to the quality of the research procedures, ensuring accuracy, truthfulness and meaningfulness (Jain, Kothari & Kumar, 2016; Kothari, 2011). The researcher collected data from registered students at institutions of higher learning who formed part of the targeted population. Closed-ended questions were employed in the instruments used for data collection. The investigation questionnaire was pretested by sending the tool to various specialists and students to refine and restructure them, ensuring they align with the study objectives and achieve validity (Jain et al., 2016). However, data reliability pertains to the precision and consistency of the data obtained in the study, particularly concerning the methods used to measure research factors (Polit & Beck, 2018). Face validity was carried to ensure the validity of the measuring instrument.

3.7 RESEARCH SETTING

The research setting for this study encompassed both urban and peri-urban areas. The choice of this setting was grounded in recognising the diverse socio-economic and geographical contexts within South Africa, and the researcher considered the accessibility of digital resources and the prevalence of online connectivity (Collins, et al., 2022). The

inclusion of both urban and peri-urban settings aligned with the contextual diversity of South Africa, offering a comprehensive understanding of how online marketing impacts students' choices across different environments. Urban areas represented hubs of educational activity and digital connectivity, while peri-urban areas contributed insights into the dynamics of regions undergoing urbanisation and transformation (Kotler, Wong, Saunders & Armstrong, 2020). This research setting choice was supported by demographic and urbanisation trends in South Africa, acknowledging the importance of considering varying contexts to draw meaningful and representative conclusions about the influence of online marketing on higher education choices.

3.8 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

In this investigation, non-probability sampling was used due to the presumed difficulties in adopting probability sampling for respondent selection. Specifically, convenience sampling, or availability sampling, was utilised to select participants based on their availability. Chasukwa (2019) describes convenience sampling as involving choosing sampling units solely based on the researcher's convenience. This approach allows for quick data collection at a lower cost, making it suitable for this study's objectives. Therefore, respondents were selected based on availability using convenience sampling as the preferred non-probability method.

3.9 SAMPLE SIZE

A study's sample size refers to the number of unique observations or data points included in the research. It represents a subset or grouping of people or items selected from a larger population to serve as a representative sample. The sample size computation considers various factors such as the population size, range and the desired level of confidence in the results (Bouchrika, 2022). This study used a sampling technique recommended by Chasukwa (2019); thus, the Slovin formula was used to compute the final sample size (Nalule & Mugera, 2018). The Slovin equation helped to devise the appropriate quantity of questionnaires were given to the participants, forming part of the study's sample size (Slovin, 1960). Students from a private higher education institution in South Africa were targeted.

The sample size was established utilising the Slovin Equation from a target population of 384,160 (Statista, 2023). Using the following information:

- Population size = 384,160
- Confidence level = 95%
- Margin of error = 5%
- Population standard deviation = approximately 18.22

The formular for the sample size: $n = \frac{N * Z^2 * a^2}{E^2 * (N-1) + Z^2 * a^2} \dots\dots\dots (i)$
Where: n = Sample size to be studied
N= Population size e = margin of error (5%) a= is the
population standard deviation (approximately 18.22).

Based on the Slovin Equation discussed , the sample size for this study was

$$n = \frac{384,160 * (1.96)^2 * (18.22)^2}{(0.05)^2 * (384,160 - 1) + (1.96)^2 * (18.22)^2}$$

$n = 168$

Bringing this to a round number, the necessary sample size for this investigation is **170**.

3.10 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection plays a vital role in acquiring firsthand knowledge and unique insights into the research problem, whether for business, governmental, or academic purposes (Bhandari, 2020). Quantitative data was gathered for this study on the influence of online marketing on students' decisions about higher education in South Africa. Based on the existing literature, a closed-ended survey was designed and utilised as the method for data collection. Respondents chose one answer for each question in the survey.

Both primary and secondary data sources were used in the investigation. For primary data collection, structured questionnaires were utilised, as they aligned well with the descriptive research design and facilitated obtaining objective responses to research questions (Chasukwa, 2019). The questionnaires were administered to students at a private higher education institution to gather their views and opinions. A google forms link

was shared through their student emails. Additionally, secondary data was collected through documentation or documentary review, supplementing the insights obtained from the primary data collection process.

3.11 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

The primary data collection instrument for this investigation was a structured survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to elicit responses from participants regarding their perceptions of online marketing and its influence on their choices of higher education institutions. The survey included closed-ended questions with predetermined response options, facilitating quantitative analysis (Saunders, et al., 2019). Upon collection, the data was meticulously organised and stored in a secure electronic database. Each survey response was assigned a unique identifier to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Data entry was conducted systematically, minimising errors, and ensuring the accuracy of the dataset. Duplicate entries and outliers were identified and addressed during the data cleaning (Creswell, 2017).

Quantitative data analysis was carried out using statistical software, known as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The following analytical techniques were employed:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies and percentages, were employed to summarise and present the demographic characteristics of the participants and key variables (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021).
- **Inferential Statistics:** Inferential statistical analyses, such as regression analysis, chi-square tests and correlation analyses, were conducted to examine relationships between variables and identify significant predictors of students' choices (Saunders, et al., 2019).
- **Subgroup Analyses:** The study included stratified analyses to investigate differences in responses according to demographic variables, including age, gender, and geographic location. This provided a nuanced understanding of the diverse influences on student decision-making.

3.12 DATA STORAGE

The collected data was kept secure and stored in electronic format on password protected servers and cloud-based platforms. Access to the data was restricted to authorised personnel (the researcher and supervisors) involved in the research project, ensuring compliance with data protection and privacy regulations. Regular backups were performed to prevent data loss and maintain the integrity of the dataset (Chasukwa, 2019).

3.13 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

Measures were done to guarantee the reliability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research process in order to increase the investigation's credibility and integrity (Creswell, 2017). Using member checks, running pilot studies, and keeping a thorough audit log of the study procedure were all part of this.

3.14 ETHICS

"Ethical considerations in research" refers to a set of concepts that direct research designs and procedures. The ethical considerations aid researchers in their behaviour while conducting the research, acting as a driving force to maintain the research's moral and ethical nature (Bhandari, 2022). The following characteristics of the the researcher's role were used in the study:

- Before completing the survey, the participant's consent was obtained.
- The study supported the complete anonymity and confidentiality of its participants; neither names nor other identifying information would be disclosed.
- The researcher informed participants of the survey's duration.
- The participants received assurances from the researcher that the data they provide would be safely stored.
- The researcher ensured that the volunteers suffered no harm as a result of the study; that is any harm—physical, social, psychological, or otherwise—was minimised to the utmost.
- All information given to the participants was truthful.

- The researcher ensured that volunteers were not coerced into taking part in the study, and respondents were informed that there was no compensation for participating in the study.

3.15 LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study may be limited in their generalisability to the entire South African higher education landscape. The sample, while carefully selected, may not fully represent the diversity of all institutions and student populations in the country (Creswell, 2017). The researcher carefully described the sample characteristics and study context to enhance generalisability. Additionally, the sampling technique increased the sample's representativeness by ensuring diversity across critical demographic factors.

Social desirability bias and recall bias are potential consequences of relying solely on self-reported data from surveys. This means that participants may not have given answers that were motivated by what they thought was socially acceptable or may have had trouble recalling specifics from the past. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2021). As a mitigation strategy, the researcher employed anonymous surveys, emphasising the importance of honest responses and validating self-reports against other objective measures where feasible.

3.17 PILOT STUDY

Piloting the instruments in a study is a critical step to confirm the reliability and validity of the research instruments prior to the main stage of data collecting. Piloting involves testing the survey instruments, questionnaires, or measurement tools with a small subset of the target population to identify and rectify potential issues. This process helped refine the instruments, ensure clarity and improve the overall data quality (Creswell, 2017).

Piloting was crucial as it helped the researcher to identify and rectify potential issues in the instruments, ensuring that the data collected was valid and reliable. Feedback from participants during the pilot phase revealed unclear or ambiguous questions, allowing the researcher to improve the clarity of the instruments. Piloting was essential in the research process to enhance the quality and effectiveness of data collection instruments,

contributing to the study's overall validity and reliability by identifying and addressing potential issues before full-scale implementation (Creswell, 2017). The pilot study's findings are presented in the following sections.

3.17.1 Pilot study analysis

The pilot study included 31 participants, including specialists and students. Through this procedure, the instrument was improved, clarity was ensured, and the overall quality of the data was raised. Piloting was essential since it enabled the researcher to spot and fix any potential problems with the instruments, guaranteeing the validity and dependability of the data gathered. Through participant feedback, the researcher could clarify any unclear or ambiguous questions and make the instruments more explicit. The sample for this pilot study consisted of 34 participants who completed online questionnaires and have a higher education background. Some were students, and others were specialists in the field.

3.17.2 Gender

The data from Table 2 and Figure 3 indicate that out of 31 participants, 12 (38.7%) were female, while 19 (61.3%) were male. This suggests that a larger proportion of the interviewees were female. These results align with previous research indicating a predominance of females in similar studies (Shumba & Saruchera, 2023).

Table 3.1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	19	61.3
Female	12	38.7
Total	31	100

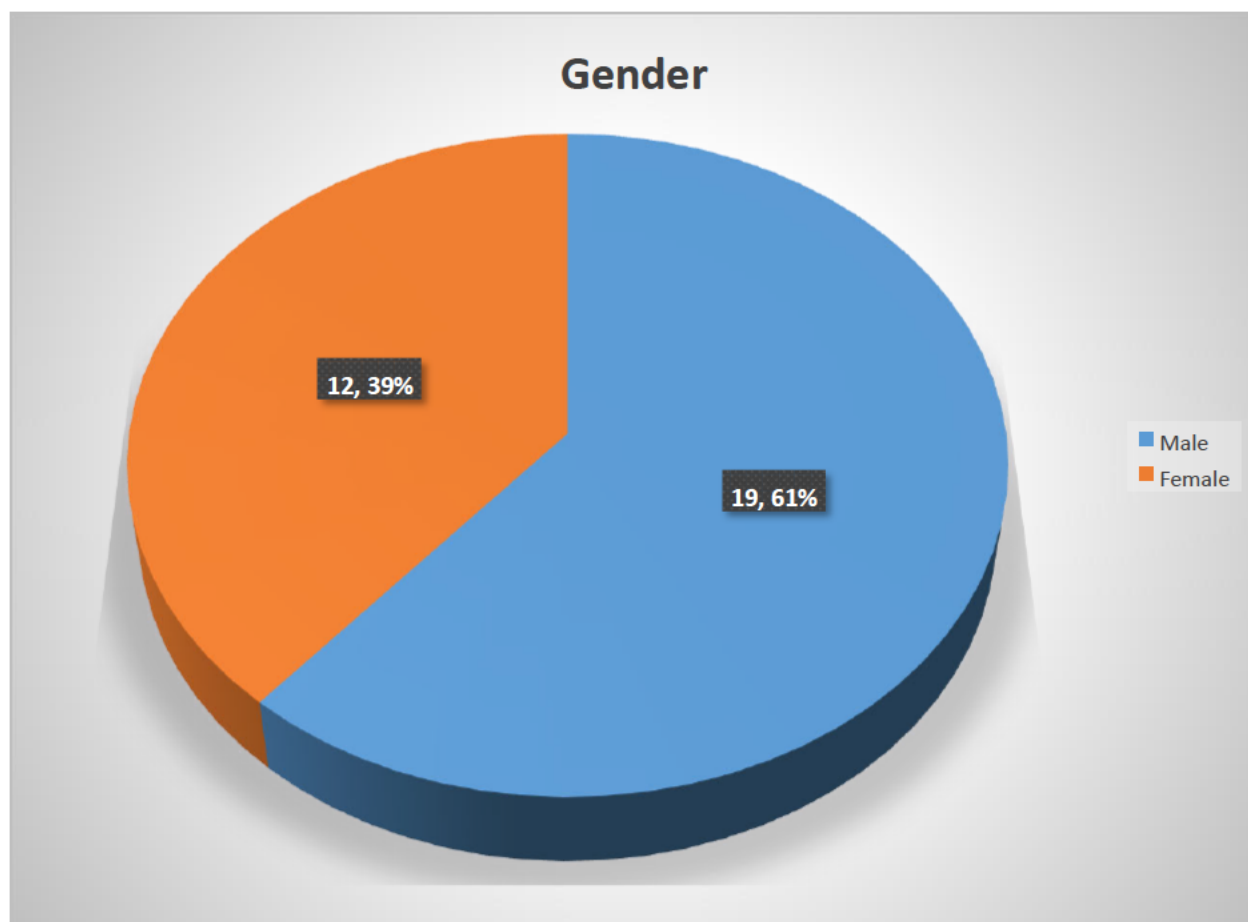


Figure 3.1: Gender of the Respondents

3.17.3 Age

The researcher also examined the age distribution of the respondents as part of the demographic characteristics in the pilot study. Table 3 and Figure 4 below present the results for the age distribution. The data indicate that 15 respondents (48.4%) were between 25 and 34 years old, 15 respondents (48.4%) were between 18 and 24 years old, and 1 respondent (3.2%) was between 35 and 44 years old. These findings reveal that a significant majority (at least 90%) of the interviewed respondents were aged below 40 years.

Table 3.2: Age Category

Age category	Frequency	Percent
18-24 years	15	48.4
25-34 years	15	48.4
35-44 years	1	3.2
Total	31	100

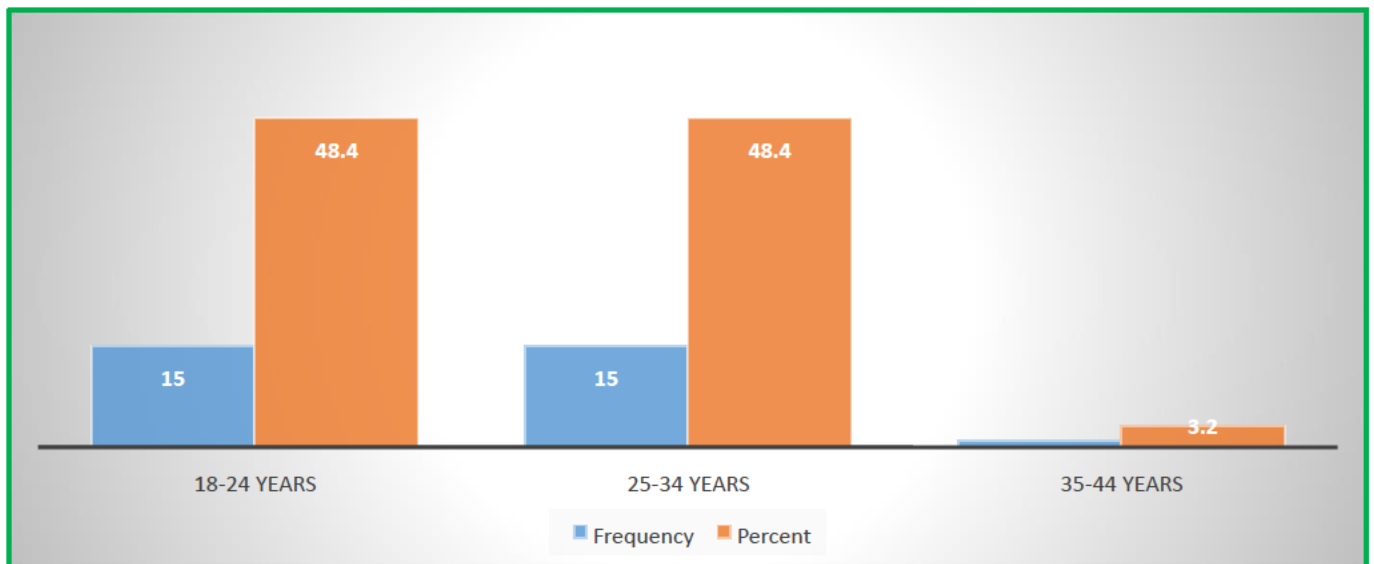


Figure 3.2: Age Category of the Respondents

3.17.4. Education level

Based on the data presented in Table 4 and Figure 5 below, the results of the pilot study show that education levels among the respondents reveal a notable trend towards higher qualifications, with post-graduate degrees being the most predominant at 74.2%, followed by Grade 12 education, diplomas, and degrees at 12.9%, 6.5%, and 6.5% respectively. This distribution indicates a substantial proportion of respondents with advanced academic backgrounds. As noted by Bombaij and Dekimpe (2020), the participants' educational background is crucial for ensuring the validity of their responses, as individuals with formal education are more likely to grasp concepts accurately compared

to those without formal education. The pilot study's findings indicate that most participants had a formal education and a good understanding of higher education concepts. Consequently, the responses gathered from these participants are considered valid, enhancing the reliability of the pilot study's results.

Table 3.3: Education Level

Education level	Frequency	Percent
Grade 12	4	12.9
Diploma	2	6.5
Degree	2	6.5
Post Graduate	23	74.2
Total	31	100

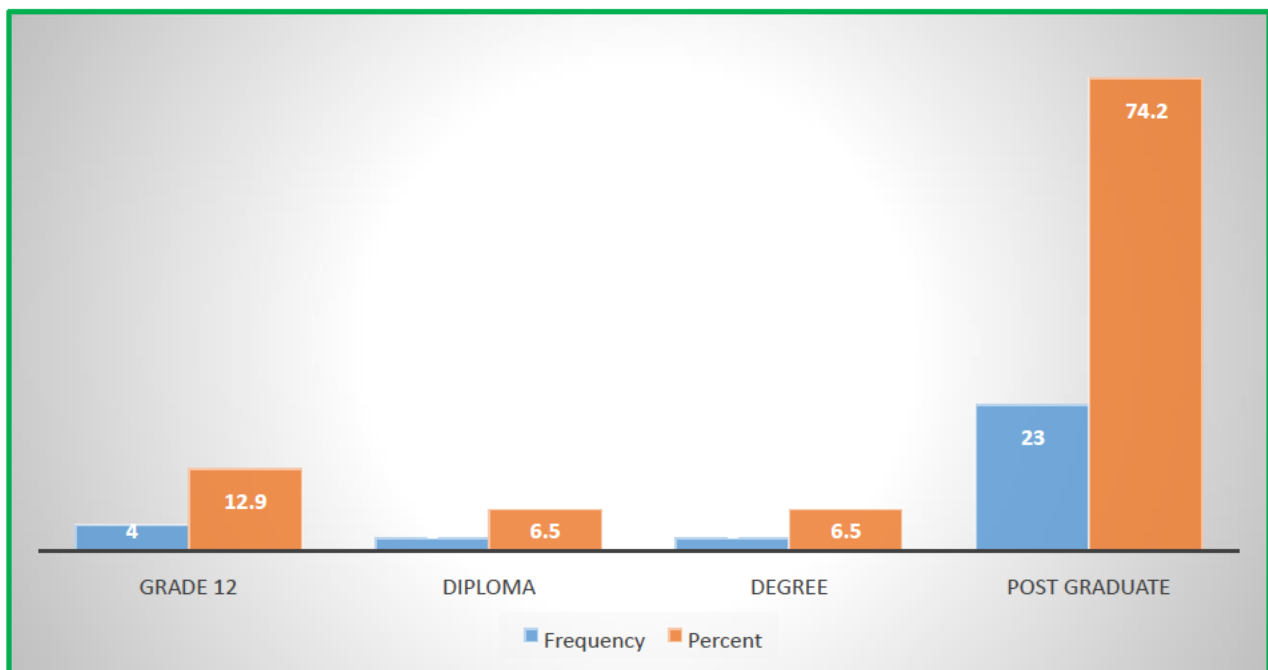


Figure 3.3: Education Level of the Respondents

3.17.5 Province of residence

Furthermore, this study sought information on the province of residence among the participants. Considering the results shown in Table 5 and Figure 6 below. The Free State

province stands out with the highest number of respondents at 22.6%, followed by Gauteng at 19.4%, Mpumalanga at 12.9%, and KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape, and Western Cape each accounting for 9.7% of the sample. The Eastern Cape, North West, and Limpopo provinces have relatively lower representation, ranging from 3.2% to 6.5%. This geographical distribution sheds light on the regional variation within the sample, reflecting a broad range of perspectives and experiences that can enrich the investigation's analysis and add to a more comprehensive understanding of the research context. Therefore, the majority of the respondents from this study were from Western Cape.

Table 3.4: Province of Residence

Province of residence	Frequency	Percent
Eastern Cape	2	6.5
Free State	7	22.6
Gauteng	6	19.4
KwaZulu-Natal	3	9.7
Limpopo	1	3.2
Mpumalanga	4	12.9
North West	2	6.5
Northern Cape	3	9.7
Western Cape	3	9.7
Total	31	100

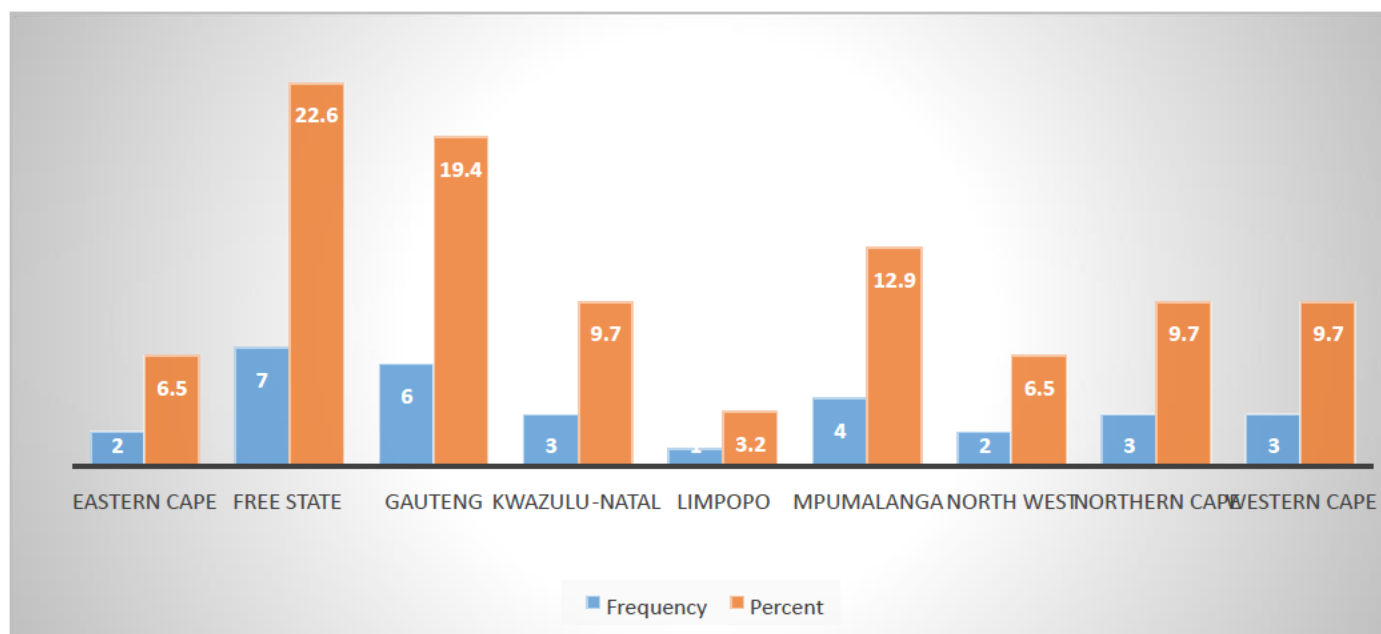


Figure 3.4: Province of Residence of the Respondents

3.17.6 Descriptive analysis

A pilot study is a trial or pre-test that aims to ascertain whether a selected method is appropriate for gathering the necessary data to explain a phenomenon. (Majid, Othman, Mohamad, Lim, & Yusof, 2017). A brief study was conducted by the researcher involving 31 participants. The researcher benefited from the pilot study in understanding if the questionnaire was reliable and validity to measure what is intended in the study.

Table 3.5 Model Summary

Model			R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	Change Statistics	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1			.557 ^a	.311	.221	.27053	.311	3.454	3	23	.033	

a. Predictors: (Constant), Information Availability, Target Advertising, Brand Image

Table 3.6 is the model summary. The regression analysis explores how Information Availability, Target Advertising and Brand Image collectively influence the decisionmaking process regarding the choice of a Higher Education Institution. The model accounts for 31.1% (R square) of the variability in this decision, indicating a moderate level of explanatory power.

Table 3.6 ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.758	3	.253	3.454	.033 ^b
	Residual	1.683	23	.073		
	Total	2.442	26			

a. Dependent Variable: Choice of HEI

b. Predictors: (Constant), Information Availability, Target Advertising, Brand Image

The ANOVA results imply that the overall regression model is statistically significant ($F = 3.454$, $p = 0.033$), suggesting that at least one of the predictor variables (the independent variables) significantly contributes to predicting the choice of HEI.

Table 3.7 Regression Coefficients

Model		Coefficients B	Standardized Std. Error	Standardize d Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0 Lower Bound	Confidence Interval r B Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.714	.605		2.832	.009	.462	2.967
	Brand Image	.254	.127	.373	1.992	.058	-.010	.517
	Target Advertising	.140	.124	.210	1.135	.268	-.116	.396
	Information Availability	.113	.135	.158	.836	.412	-.167	.393

a. Dependent Variable: Choice of HEI

When looking at individual predictors, the constant term (representing the baseline) is 1.714, showing statistical significance, and Brand Image appears to have a potential impact ($t = 1.992$, $p = 0.058$). For both Target Advertising and Information Availability, the p-values are greater than the conventional significance level of 0.05 ($\text{Sig.} > 0.05$) or alpha at 5%. In statistical terms, this suggests that these predictors are not statistically significant in predicting the dependent variable (Choice of HEI) in this model. Therefore, based on the given results, Target Advertising and Information Availability are not considered statistically significant predictors.

3.17.7 Reliability test

This study conducted a reliability test to determine which factors or items to examine, discuss, and utilise. A pilot study was carried out to enhance reliability by visiting the targeted sample and distributing questionnaires before the data collection date. This allowed testing and comparing the results from the same sample and set of questions.

The consistency of the results confirmed the reliability of the study. Respondents were encouraged to provide their responses freely, and confidentiality was ensured to maintain privacy (Kothari, 2011; Polit & Beck, 2018).

Table 3.8 Reliability Test

	Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items
1.	Brand image	8	0.775	0.791
2.	Target Advertising	6	0.608	0.611
3.	Information availability	7	0.666	0.682
4	Choice of higher education	5	0.252	0.277

The reliability test results had Cronbach's alpha values close above 0.7, which is the recommended threshold for measuring the internal consistency of the measuring instrument. The items measuring the choice of higher education construct had a very low score of 0.252, and the researcher had to discard the items. The new questions measuring the construct were adopted from other validated scales, which improved the construct's reliability score.

3.18 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In Chapter 3, the research methodology utilised to examine the impact of online marketing on South African students' choice of HEI was thoroughly described. The study's limits and ethical considerations were covered, along with the research design, demographic and sampling, data gathering tools, data collection processes, and data processing approaches. This chapter presented a clear and comprehensive overview of the chosen research methodology, demonstrating a systematic approach to investigating the influence of online marketing on students' choices of HEIs in South Africa. The methods aligned with the research objectives and were designed to yield reliable, valid and

meaningful insights into the study's focal area. The inclusion of ethical considerations and acknowledgement of limitations enhanced the transparency and rigour of the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The study's results are presented in this chapter according to its objectives. On the other hand, the study starts by outlining the respondents' demographics and response rate.

4.2 RESPONSE RATE

In the study, the percentage of participants that successfully completed the survey questions relative to the entire sample size is called the response rate, or return rate. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a survey response rate of 65% or higher is excellent for data analysis in research. In this study, the researchers distributed 199 questionnaires to the students. Out of all the surveys that were sent out, 135 of them had a successful response rate of 68%, and 64 of them had an incomplete response rate of 32%. Consequently, moving on to data analysis in this study was made possible by the excellent response rate of 68%. This information is presented in Table 10 and Figure 7.

Table 4.1: Response Rate

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage
Successfully completed	135	68
Not completed (missing values)	64	32
Total	199	100

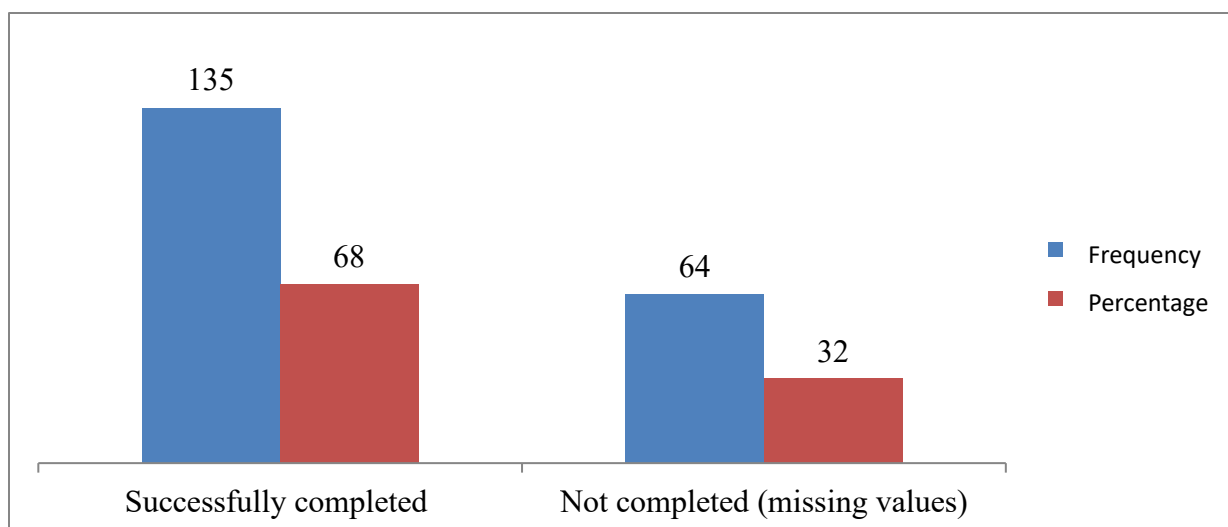


Figure 4.1: Response Rate

4.3 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The information collected on the participants' demographic characteristics included age, gender, education level and place of residence.

4.3.1 Gender

According to the findings in Table 11 and Figure 8, a total of 77 participants were female, representing 57% of the total. On the other hand, the 58 participants, representing 43%, were male. This means that most of the respondents interviewed were female. The findings correspond with earlier studies where females dominated (Shumba and Saruchera, 2023; Mutanho and Shumba, 2023).

Table 4.2: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	58	43
Female	77	57
Total	135	100

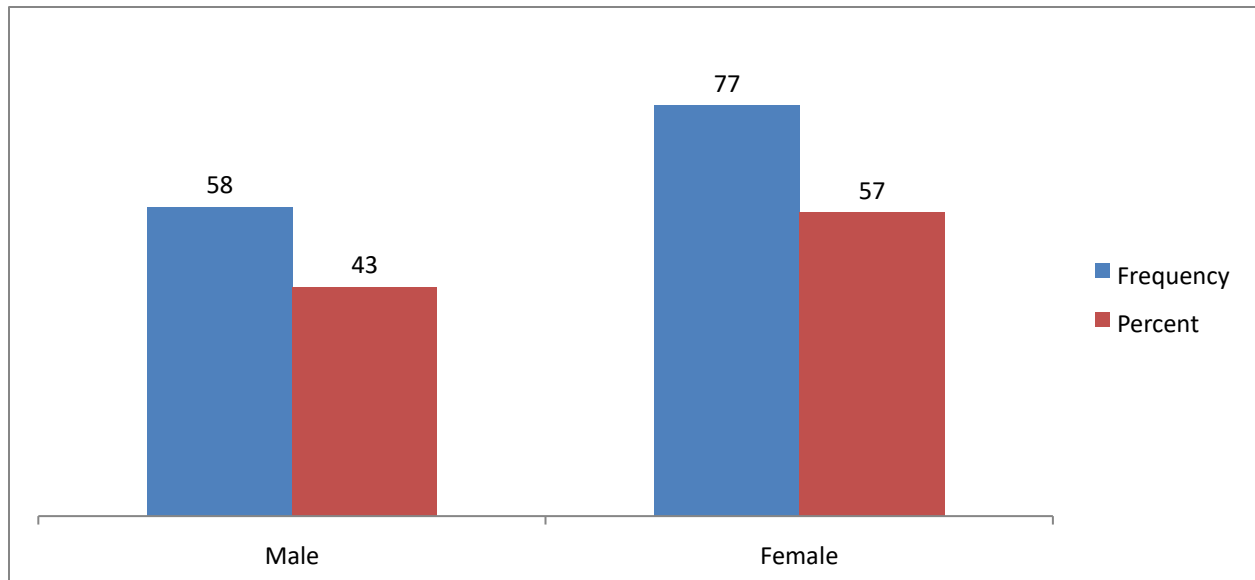


Figure 4.2: Gender of the Respondents

4.3.2 Age

Age of the respondents was another variable that the researcher sought to gather under demographic characteristics. The results for age distribution of the respondents are presented in table 9 and figure 5 below. The findings show that 59 respondents representing 44% were aged between 25 and 34 years, 61 respondents representing 45% were aged between 18 and 24 years, 11 respondents representing 8% were aged between 35 and 44 years (24%) and 9 participants were aged 20 and 30 years (5%). These results show that at least 70% of the respondents that were interviewed were aged above 40 years. Therefore, the characteristics of the respondents that were interviewed were elder people who commonly patronize the shops.

Table 4.3 Age Category

Age category	Frequency	Percent
18-24 years	61	45
25-34 years	59	44
35-44 years	11	8
45+ years	4	3
Total	135	100

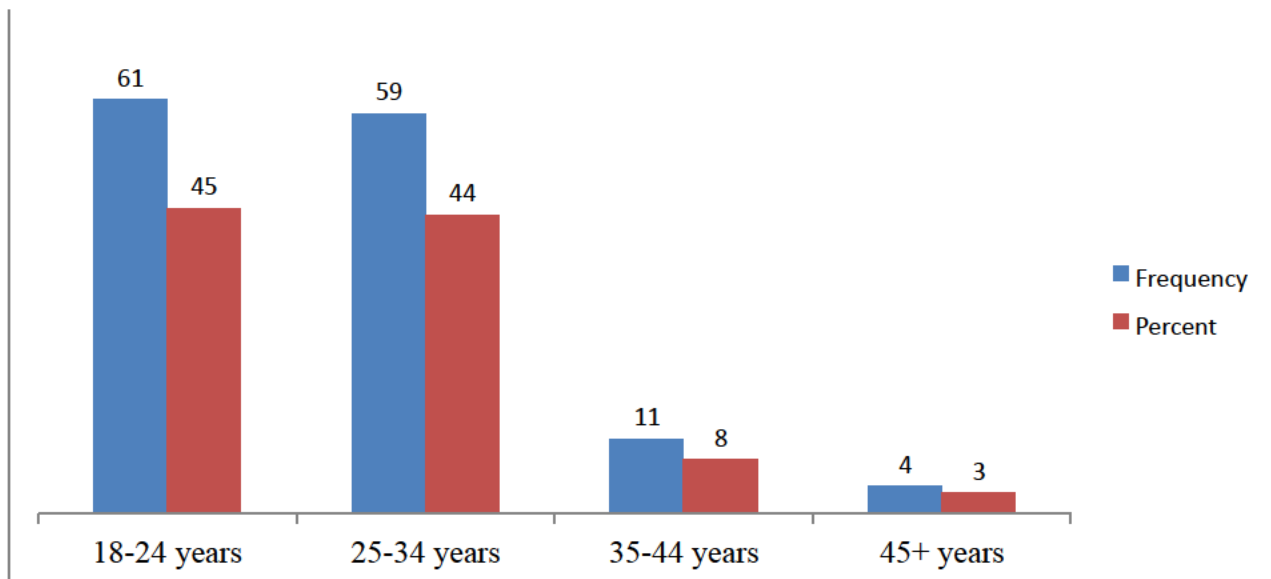


Figure 4.3: Age Category of the Respondents

4.3.3 Education level

Based on table 13 and Figure 10 below, the results show that 83 respondents representing 61% had degrees as their highest qualification. The study found that 32 respondents representing 24% had post-graduate degrees and 20 respondents representing 15% had diplomas as their highest qualification. According to Bombaij & Dekimpe (2020), the respondents' level of education is essential to validate the responses, as those with formal education can understand concept more than those

without formal education. In the findings of this investigation, it was observed that most of the respondents engaged in this study had a formal education and had the knowledge of higher education. This entails that most of the responses from the participants are valid, which makes the results reliable.

Table 4.4: Education Level

Education level	Frequency	Percent
Diploma	20	15
Degree	83	61
Postgraduate	32	24
Total	135	100

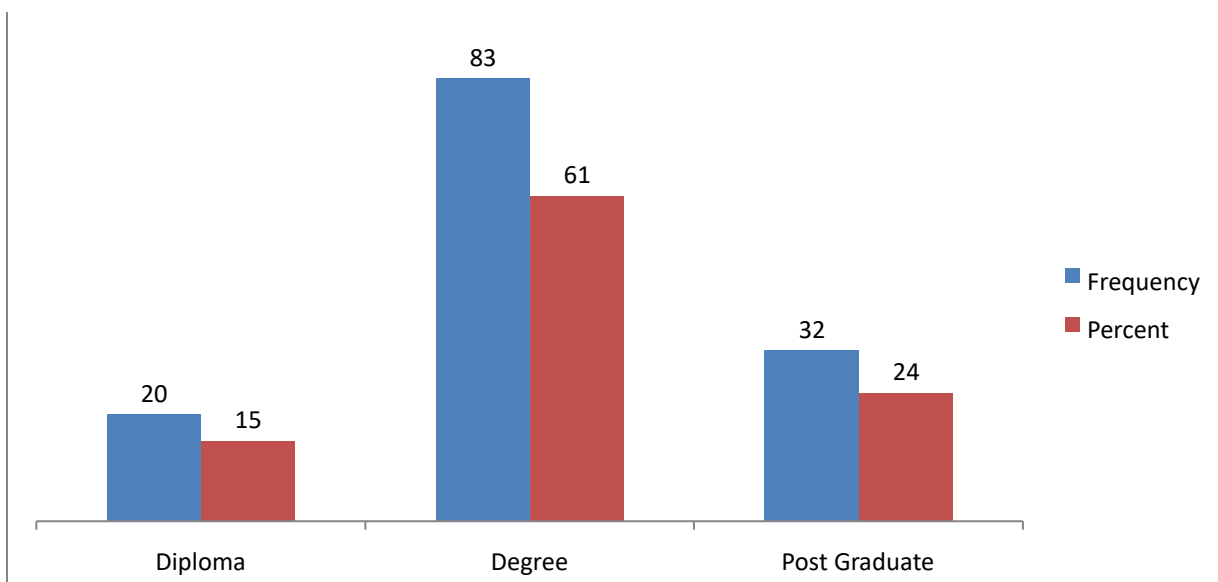


Figure 4.4: Education Level of the Respondents

4.3.4 Province of residence

Furthermore, this study sought the information of the province of residence among the participants. Based on the results presented on table 4.5 and figure 4.5 below, majority of the participants (n=66, 49%) interviewed were from the Eastern Cape followed by those from KwaZulu-Natal (18, 14%). The study also found that few participants interviewed

were from Free State (n=5, 4%), Northern Cape (n=4, 3%), Western Cape (n=11, 8%), Mpumalanga (n=10, 7%), Limpopo (n=12, 9%) and Gauteng (n=6, 4%). Therefore, majority of the respondents from this study were from Western Cape.

Table 4.5: Province of Residence

Province of residence	Frequency	Percent
Eastern Cape	66	49
Free State	5	4
Gauteng	6	4
KwaZulu-Natal	18	14
Limpopo	12	9
Mpumalanga	10	7
North West	4	3
Northern Cape	3	2
Western Cape	11	8
Total	135	100

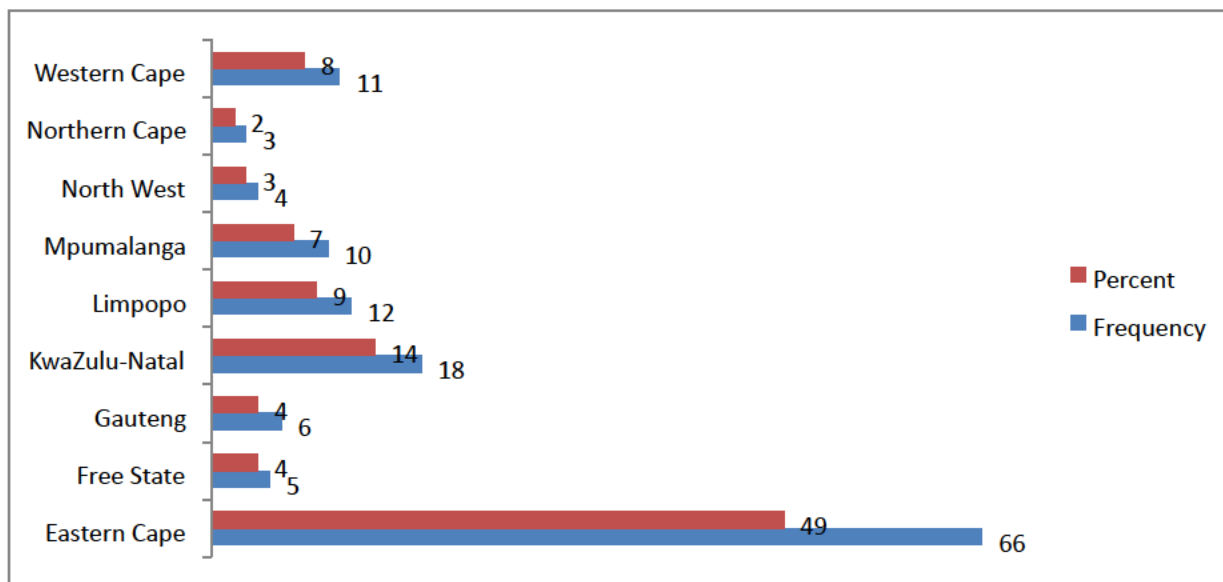


Figure 4.5: Province of Residence of the Respondents

4.4 PSYCHOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF THE ITEMS IN A QUESTIONNAIRE

4.4.1 Reliability

According to Gliem and Gliem (2003), an alpha of 0.9 is excellent, 0.8 is good, 0.7 Acceptable, 0.6 questionable. Based on the Table 15, the overall reliability test for this study show that the alpha value is 0.915. This indicates that the study's reliability is excellent. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for internal consistency of the scale is compared to the total Cronbach's Alpha for each individual item in Table 4.7. The item is deleted when the Cronbach's Alpha for the items is less than overall Alpha. The study kept all the items because the results indicate that there is little variation in the Alpha values. It matters to remember that a high Cronbach's alpha score does not imply that the scale is unidimensional, even though it does show that the items have good internal consistency. As a result, factor analysis is done to ascertain a scale's dimensionality.

Table 4.6: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.915	.916	26

Table 4.7: Item-Total Statistics

Items	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Item 1	91.60	176.884	.553	.631	.911
Item 2	91.60	177.033	.507	.554	.912
Item 3	91.01	177.769	.541	.531	.911
Item 4	90.96	181.431	.438	.524	.913
Item 5	90.86	180.898	.467	.573	.913
Item 6	90.84	182.505	.415	.523	.913
Item 7	90.97	176.268	.663	.648	.909
Item 8	91.05	178.318	.558	.427	.911
Item 9	91.23	178.641	.636	.577	.910
Item 10	91.41	181.064	.510	.450	.912
Item 11	91.56	179.412	.518	.477	.912
Item 12	91.43	180.456	.389	.368	.914
Item 13	91.44	177.114	.576	.496	.911
Item 14	91.44	177.876	.483	.463	.913
Item 15	91.66	179.525	.444	.429	.913
Item 16	91.39	180.106	.483	.440	.912
Item 17	91.34	177.107	.572	.538	.911
Item 18	91.56	181.876	.433	.447	.913
Item 19	92.11	178.562	.524	.521	.912
Item 20	91.60	183.899	.378	.471	.914
Item 21	91.36	182.291	.522	.467	.912
Item 22	91.39	175.194	.690	.586	.909
Item 23	91.72	177.562	.568	.472	.911
Item 24	91.82	180.505	.472	.530	.912
Item 25	91.49	177.162	.581	.836	.911
Item 26	91.47	176.967	.585	.859	.910

4.4.2 Validity

The psychometric analysis included examining the validity of the questionnaire's items. The study questionnaire consisted of 26 items (questions). The validity of the questionnaire, which was used to measure the respondent's perceptions on the choice of

higher learning education institutions, was evaluated using factor analysis. To achieve this, the study performed principle component analysis for dimension (item) reduction to have a more optimal representation that will be used as a composite measure for the subsequent analysis. To extract only dimensions (items) that load well in each factor, the principal components extraction method with Varimax and Kaiser normalization method of rotation were employed.

4.4.2.1 Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)

It is assumed that the p value for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity should be less than 0.05 and that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy should be larger than 0.50. Furthermore, the study returned items that had loading values higher than 0.45. The loaded items were extracted based on the Eigenvalue of greater than 1 (Sigh, 2020). Only those items with an Eigen value of greater than one was retained. All 26 items were loaded. Furthermore, if the item loaded is significant on two factors, only that with the higher loading was considered. The results presented in Table 17 below show that KMO of Sampling Adequacy is 0.848 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chi-Square=1639.563, $p < 0.000$) show that the requirements were met.

Table 4.8: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.848
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1639.563
	Df	325
	Sig.	.000

4.4.2.2 Rotated Component Matrix

The component matrix in appendix 3 represent the rotated component analysis factor matrix. The coefficients, also known as factor loadings, show the degree of correlation between the variables.. The rotted component matrix represents 7 factors after obliging rotation, i.e., non-orthogonal and the rotation converged in 9 iterations. The close

examination of the factor correlations indicates that the factor loadings which did not load well must be removed and the process helped to remain with four constructs measuring the model. The way items are grouped inside each factor offered the best clue to the significance of the factor.

4.4.3 Face Validity

There is a confusion among scholars on the definition of face validity, e.g., Connell, Carlton, Grundy, Buck, Keetharuth, Ricketts, Barkham, Robotham, Rose, and Brazier, (2018), Turner et al. 2018, Turner, 1979. The most recent definition is by Holden (2010: 637) who argued that "...face validity is the appropriateness, stability or relevance of the test and its items as they appear to the persons answering the test." The same view were expanded by Robson, Davina and Mark (2023) who described types of face validity which include validity by assumption, where. There is no need for statistical validation because validity is so strong. By definition, validity occurs when the purpose of the test is specified, and validity by hypothesis occurs when the test satisfies the study's practical need. The researcher run inferential statistics in testing validity of the measuring instrument. The study run validity tests to ensure quality of data collected and understand the experiences of the participants. The process led to better data quality as incomplete responses were dropped from the study.

4.5 IMPACT OF ASPECTS OF ONLINE MARKETING ON STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Each research objective's findings are presented in this section. Examining how online marketing influences South African students' choice of higher education institutions was the main goal of the study. The study specifically looked into how students choose their higher education school based on information availability, brand image, and advertisement.. The results for each research objective are presented and discussed below.

4.5.1 Influence of information availability on students' choice of higher education institutions

This was the first objective of the study. Respondents were asked to specify the extent of their agreement with statements related to the influence of information availability on students' choice of HEI. Based on Table 4.9 below, the results show that most respondents (65%, n=70) agree that the availability of information on a private higher education institution's website affects their perception of the institution.

These findings align with previous research by Collins et al. (2022), who noted that parents often exert significant influence on the decisions of prospective university students, especially those from affluent backgrounds. Such students may not make decisions solely based on online information, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds often rely more on social sources and media channels for information about universities, as approaching universities directly can be intimidating (Collins et al., 2022).

Additionally, the study found that at least half (51%, n=69) of the respondents agree that the information found in online marketing materials was clear and understandable. Furthermore, 88 respondents, representing 63%, agree that the availability of online information, including university websites and social media, significantly impacts their choice of institution. The mean values in Table 4.9 also indicate that most participants agree with these statements.

These results are supported by Mudzingiri et al. (2018), who asserted that potential students assess the relevance of information about universities in relation to their personal circumstances, objectives, and values, rather than accepting it at face value. Simon and Soares (2019) add that the capacity of students to evaluate information is influenced by their intellectual development and educational background. Given that most participants in this study had a higher education level, their responses likely reflect their intellectual capacity.

Moreover, factors such as students' socioeconomic status and aptitude shape their ability to evaluate available online information (Berdik et al., 2021). Therefore, the level of education among participants might have influenced their responses.

Table 4.9: Items Related to Information Availability

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
	Percentage (n)					
The availability of information on website of a private higher education institution's affects my perception of the institution	3%(4)	8%(11)	24%(32)	50%(68)	15%(20)	3.61
The information found in the online marketing materials was clear and understandable.	2%(3)	8%(11)	39%(52)	44%(60)	7%(9)	3.45
Availability of online information including university websites and social media, significantly impacts my choice of institution.	2%(3)	9%(12)	25%(34)	47%(64)	16%(22)	3.67

SA=strongly agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly disagree

4.5.2 Influence of brand image in influencing students' choices of higher education institutions

The second objective of the study was to establish the influence of brand image on students' choices of higher education institutions. According to Foroudi et al. (2019), brand visibility is a fundamental aspect of brand image, reflecting an organization's core values. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements related to brand image.

The findings from Table 4.10 show that a majority of respondents (79%, n=107) agree that they are likely to consider an HEI with a strong brand. Additionally, 82% (n=112) agree that they rely on the reputation or ranking of a higher education institution when making

their choice. These findings are in line with Le (2018), who found that reputation has a significant positive impact on the brand image of educational institutions, leading to higher trust and enrolment.

However, 82% (n=110) of participants disagree with the statement that an institution's brand image positively impacts their perception of its quality and credibility. This contrasts with Keller (2019), who argued that high quality and innovation are crucial dimensions of a strong brand image, encompassing faculty Caliber, program structure, and university infrastructure. The discrepancy suggests that while brand recognition is important, students may differentiate between brand image and perceived quality in more nuanced ways.

Furthermore, while 77% (n=77) consider that the way private HEIs present themselves online reflects their overall quality and reputation, 86% (n=115) disagree with the need to choose an institution widely recognized in their field. This finding supports Enache (2017), who emphasized the critical role of reputation in contemporary educational institutions, suggesting that reputation-building is essential for local and international recognition.

The results indicate that higher education institutions should focus on enhancing their online presence and brand visibility, as these factors significantly influence student choices. However, they should also ensure that their online representations accurately reflect their program quality and overall reputation, addressing potential discrepancies between perceived brand image and actual quality. The study's findings confirm some aspects of the theories discussed in the literature review, such as the importance of brand visibility and reputation (Foroudi et al., 2019; Le, 2018). However, the disagreement regarding the impact of brand image on perceived quality suggests a need for further investigation into how students form these perceptions and the factors influencing them.

In conclusion, while the results support the notion that brand image and reputation are vital in influencing students' choices, they also highlight areas where higher education institutions can improve their marketing strategies to align better with students'

expectations and perceptions. This alignment is crucial for ensuring that the brand image accurately reflects the institution's quality and offerings.

Table 4.10: Items Related to Brand Image

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
	Percentage (n)					
You will likely to consider a higher education institution with a strong brand	2%(3	7%(10)	11%(15)	42%(5 ')	37%(50)	4.04
You rely on the reputation or ranking of a higher education institution when deciding which institution to choose	4%(5	1%(1)	13%(17)	48%(6 i)	34%(47)	4.10
You need to choose a higher education institution that is widely recognized and respected in the industry or field you are interested in	42%(56)	44%(59)	10%(14)	3%(l)	2%(2)	2.09
The way private HEI present themselves online reflects their overall quality and reputation.	39%(53)	16%(22)	27%(37)	4%(i)	13%(17)	2.39
Online marketing content for HEI is of high quality.	4%(5	4%(6)	42%(56)	39%(5 i)	11%(15)	3.50
Online marketing accurately describes the institution.	5%(7	30%(40)	36%(48)	25%(3 l)	4%(6)	2.94
I trust information provided by HEI through their online marketing materials	4%(5	17%(23)	37%(50)	37%(5 i)	5%(7)	3.23
I believe that higher education institutions' brand image contributes to better networking and job opportunities after graduation	2%(3	2%(2)	12%(16)	42%(5 ')	42%(57)	4.21
A HEI' brand image positively impacts your perception of its quality and credibility	47%(63)	35%(47)	13%(17)	2%(i)	4%(5)	4.08
The online marketing materials were visually appealing.	2%(2	3%(4)	28%(38)	59%(8 i)	8%(11)	3.70

4.5.3 Influence of advertising on students' choice of higher education institution

The third aim of the research was to determine the influence of advertisement on students' choice of higher education institution. According to Akanbi et al. (2017), the main goal of

advertising is typically to announce the availability of a product, idea, or concept to the target audience and influence their awareness, attitudes, and purchasing behaviour. In the context of higher education, advertisements aim to engage prospective students and their parents by creating awareness about the academic programs offered by institutions (Ayanwale et al., 2023), ultimately persuading and reminding them of the advantages of enrolling.

Findings from this study show that 55% (n=75) of those surveyed disagreed with the assertion that targeted advertising aligns with their interests and preferences regarding higher education institutions. However, most participants (72%, n=97) agreed that they would consider a private higher education institution with a strong online presence. This finding aligns with Jansen and Brenn-White (2019), who found that institutions using a mix of print media, direct mail, billboards, banners, posters, and online advertisements were more successful in persuading prospective students.

Moreover, the study found that 53% (n=73) of participants agreed that they would consider an institution that advertises specifically to their demographic through targeted advertisement. This supports Hossler et al. (2018), who reported that online advertising enhances institutions' image and visibility, particularly within specific geographic areas.

On the other hand, 62% (n=82) of participants disagreed with the statement that they have visited a higher education institution's website or social media page as a result of seeing a targeted advertisement. Similarly, 73% (n=98) disagreed with being swayed by online promotions, discounts, or scholarships when deciding where to pursue their studies. These findings contrast with Trotter (2019), who indicated that students form strong preferences for specific institutions, analyse their qualifications for admission, and consider available finance options prior to applying.

These mixed results highlight the complexity of online marketing's impact on students' choices. While targeted advertising can enhance visibility and appeal, it may not directly

translate to immediate engagement or decision-making. These findings provide nuanced insights into how different aspects of online marketing influence students' choices and suggest that a multifaceted approach, considering both direct and indirect effects, may be necessary for higher education institutions.

Table 4.11: Items Related to Advertisement

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
	Percentage (n)					
I would consider a private higher education institution with a strong online presence.	2%(2)	4%(5)	23%(31)	55%(74)	17%(23)	3.82
Target advertising aligns with my interests and preferences regarding HEI	48%(65)	7%(10)	31%(42)	13%(17)	1%(1)	3.64
I would consider a higher education institution that advertises specifically to my demographic through targeted advertising.	3%(4)	10%(13)	34%(46)	42%(57)	11%(16)	3.49
Online advertisements of private HEI affect my perception of the institution	3%(4)	11%(15)	23%(31)	47%(64)	16%(21)	3.61
I have visited a higher education institution's website or social media page as a result of seeing a targeted advertisement.	46%(62)	16%(22)	14%(19)	4%(5)	20%(27)	3.62
I have been swayed by online promotions, discounts, or scholarships of by HEI when deciding where to pursue my studies.	33%(44)	40%(54)	16%(21)	4%(5)	8%(11)	3.33

SA=strongly agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly disagree

4.6 ANALYTICAL ANALYSIS FOR HYPOTHETICAL VARIABLES

This section involves the analysis of how the independent and dependent variables are correlated. The section begins with the correlation between the variables.

4.6.1 Correlation of variables

The correlation was conducted to determine whether there is a significant correlation among the variables. Table 4.12 shows that, at the 1% significance level, there is a significant ($r=0.679^{**}$, $p<0.00$) positive relationship between influence of advertising and students' choice of higher education institution. This means increase in access to online advertisement influence students on choice of higher education institution. The results also show that at 1% significance level, there is a positive relationship ($r=0.601^{**}$, $p<0.0001$) exists between influence of brand image and students' choice of higher education institution. This also means that an increase in brand image of the institutions leads to positive increase in students' choice of the higher education institution. Similarly, at a 1% significance level, there is a significant ($r=0.607^{**}$, $p<0.0001$) positive relationship between information availability and students on choice of higher education institution. Additionally, the study discovered a substantial positive correlation. between brand image and information availability, brand image and advertisement, information availability and advertisement.

Table 4.12: Correlation of Variables

Correlations					
		students' choice of higher education institution	Influence of advertising	Influence of information availability	Influence of brand image
Students' choice of higher education institution	Pearson Correlation	1	.679**	.607**	.601**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	135	135	135	135
Influence of advertising	Pearson Correlation	.679**	1	.591**	.521**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	135	135	135	135
Influence of information availability	Pearson Correlation	.607**	.591**	1	.566**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	135	135	135	135
Influence of brand image	Pearson Correlation	.601**	.521**	.566**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	135	135	135	135
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					

4.6.2 Linear regression analysis

The predictor and respondent's linear relationship variables are described by a linear regression analysis. A "slope coefficient" is used to quantify the impact of the predictor variables on the response variables (Ho, 2006). Consequently, the linear connection between the independent and dependent variables is ascertained using linear regression analysis.

Table 4.13: Model Summary

Model Summary									
Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R ² Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.755 _a	.570	.561	.559	.570	57.964	3	131	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant), brand image, advertising information availability									
b. Dependent Variable: students' choice of higher education institution									

The model summary is represented in Table 4.13. The adjusted R square of the model was 0.561. This means that 56.1% of the variation or changes that are observed in students' choice of higher education institution can be clarified by the predictor variables. This also implies that 43.9% of the changes or variations that are observed in students' choice of higher education institution are explained by other variables other than the current predictors.

Table 4.14: ANOVA

ANOVA^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	54.356	3	18.119	57.964	.000 ^b
	Residual	40.948	131	.313		
	Total	95.304	134			

The ANOVA test also informs us that there were significant variations amongst the views of respondents on students' choice of higher education institution and predictor variables with $F(3, 131) = 7.466$, $p < 0.000$. The Regression coefficients in table 4.15 show the results for predictor variables that effect on students' choice of higher education institution.

The unstandardized coefficients for the predictor variables are lower than the standardized variables due to normalization of their standard deviations to 1. The results from the table below show that all the factors (predictor variables) significantly affect students' choice of higher education institution.

Table 4.15: Regression Coefficients

Coefficients								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	-.002	.335		-.005	.996	-.665	.661
	Advertising	.559	.099	.417	5.637	.000	.363	.755
	Information availability	.244	.089	.210	2.742	.007	.068	.420
	Brand image	.359	.098	.265	3.667	.000	.165	.553
a. Dependent Variable: students' choice of higher education institution								

Additionally, considering all factors constant, the investigation found that a one unit increase in online advertising among the higher education institutions would significantly leads to 0.559 [95%CI (0.363, 0.755), $p < 0.000$] increase in students' choice of higher education institution. These results show that online advertising for higher education institution positively affect students' choice of higher education institution. Similarly, The findings indicate that a one unit increase in information availability would significantly lead to 0.244 [95%CI (.068, 0.420), $p < 0.007$] increase in students' choice of higher education institution, considering all factors constant. These results also show that there is positive relationship between the availability of online information and students' choice of higher education institution. Furthermore, the results show that there is positive relationship between brand image and students' choice of higher education institution. Based on the results and considering all factors constant, a one unit increase in brand image of the institution would significantly lead to 0.359 [95%CI (.165, .553), $p < 0.000$] increase in

students' choice of higher education institution. Therefore, the hypothesis which imply that there is no connection between online marketing strategies and students' choice of higher education institution is rejected.

4.7 SUMMARY

This chapter presented the results based on the study objectives. However, response rate, participant's characteristics were presented first. The chapter further focused on the descriptive analysis of the results based on the objectives. It has further presented the inferential results by computing regression analysis. In the following chapter, recommendations and a conclusion are covered.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The information in this chapter provides a summary of the findings according to the study objectives. The study further suggests areas of future study and the recommendation that need to be implemented by the HEIs.

5.2 CONCLUSION

This study focused on the influence of marketing strategies on students' choice of higher education institutions. Specifically, the research aimed to examine the influence of information availability, brand image and advertisement on students' choice of HEI. The evidence shows that information availability, brand image and advertisement influence the choice of HEI by students in South Africa.

Objective 1: Influence of information availability on students' choice of HEI

The study findings from this study show that information availability influences students' choice of HEI. The study concluded that the availability of information on the website of any private HEI affects students' perception of the institution. This study also concluded that the information found in the online marketing material was clear and understandable to the students. Similarly, the study concluded that the availability of online information including university websites and social media, significantly impacts participants' choices of institution. The results of this investigation also align with those of other earlier investigations conducted in a related field. Additionally, the results demonstrate a significant association between students' choice of higher education institution and the availability of information. Similarly, the regression analysis shows that the availability online information significantly affects the students' choice of higher education institution.

Objective 2: Influence of brand image on students' choice of HEI

This was another objective of the study. The study findings from this objective conclude that participants are likely to consider higher education institutions with a strong brand. The study also concludes that participants rely on the reputation or ranking of a higher education institution when deciding which institution to choose. This is attributed to the facts that participants would want to associate with institutions that have brand visibility which is recognised. Further, the study findings conclude that most participants consider that the way private HEI present themselves online reflects their overall quality and reputation. This is due to the assertion that reputation plays a very positive impact on brand image of the institution. Additionally, the study concluded that most participants believe that HEI' brand image contributes to better networking and job opportunities for participants after graduation. The results of the correlation analysis indicate a positive association between students' choice of higher education institutions and the institution's online brand image. In a similar vein, the results of linear regressions demonstrate that students' choice of higher education institution is strongly influenced by brand image.

Objective 3: Influence of online advertising on students' choice of HEI

The results of this investigation revealed that most participants would consider a private higher education institution with a strong online presence of advertisement. One of the reasons is that through advertisements more prospective students got persuaded and make preference of the institution. The study also concluded that participants would consider a higher education institution that advertises specifically to their demographic through targeted advertisement. Further, the investigation found that there is positive correlation between online advertisement and students' choice of higher education institution. Similarly, the study concluded that online advertisement has a major impact on students' decision about higher education institution.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Based on the findings, the following are the research recommendations:

- The investigation recommends that HEIs should always improve their information online as this influence students' perception of the institution.
- The investigation recommends that the HEIs should improve their performance, ranking and reputation as these influence students to opt for such institutions.
- The study further recommends that online advertisements should target different segments of the students.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT AND POLICY MAKERS

Here are some recommendations for government and policymakers.

- Encourage higher education institutions to invest in easily accessible online information about courses, faculty, facilities and admission processes, supported by government funding or incentives for infrastructure improvement.
- Advocate for higher education institutions to build strong brand images reflecting quality, reputation, and value through consistent messaging, positive experiences, and policymaker-provided branding guidelines or workshops.
- Offer research grants to delve deeper into the impact of marketing strategies on student enrolment, encouraging academic institutions to contribute valuable insights to the higher education sector.
- Facilitate partnerships between HEIs and marketing experts to implement innovative techniques tailored to the education sector.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

There is number of limitations that my affects the generalization of the current results. The decision making by students on the choice of higher education institution is cognitive process which is influenced by various factors. Hence analysing such factors requires establishing of different factors through development of validated items (questions) that can tap unobservable factors that affects decision making. These factors need to be analysed by the use structural equation model (SEM). Therefore, this study recommends

that future study should focus on analysing the factors influencing students' choice of HEI by the use of structural equation model.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

I am conducting a research project under the supervision of the research committee of the Faculty of Commerce as a requirement for completing my master's in business administration degree at a private higher education institution.

This study project aims to investigate the ways in which online marketing influences South African higher education students' decision to attend a particular institution as well as to ascertain the present attitudes of students regarding online marketing. Would you kindly help us by filling out the questionnaire that is attached? Completing the easy-to-use questionnaire should take you five to ten minutes. Every response is anonymous, and the information gathered will only be used for future study. No third parties will receive access to this information with approval.

SECTION A

Please mark with an "X" in the appropriate box

1. Gender

Male	1
Female	2
Other	3
I prefer not say	4

2. Age

18-24 years	1
25-34 years	2
35-44 years	3
45+ years	4

3. Which province do you come from in South Africa

Yes	1
No	2

4. What is your highest qualification?

Grade 12	1
Diploma	2
Degree	3
Postgraduate	4

SECTION B

Please select how you perceive each of the following where:

SA= Strongly Agree A=Agree NS=Not Sure D=Disagree SD=Disagree Strongly

Brand image			SA	A	NS	D	SD
BR1		Online marketing influences my choice of private HEI.					
BR2		Online marketing influenced my choice of institution over traditional marketing methods (such as brochure or paper-based ads.)					
BR3		You will likely consider a higher education institution with a strong brand.					
BR4		You rely on the reputation or ranking of a higher education institution when deciding which institution to choose.					
BR5		You need to choose a higher education institution that is widely recognised and respected in the industry or field you are interested in.					

BR6		Do you believe that HEI' brand image contributes to better networking and job opportunities after graduation?					
BR7		A higher education institutions' brand image positively impacts your perception of its quality and credibility.					
BR8		I think online marketing is an effective way for private HEI to reach prospective students.					
Target advertising			SA	A	NS	D	SD
TA1		I would consider a private higher education institution with a strong online presence.					
TA2		Target advertising aligns with my interests and preferences regarding HEI.					
TA3		I would consider a higher education institution that advertises specifically to my demographic through targeted advertising.					
TA4		I have visited a higher education institution's website or social media page as a result of seeing a targeted advertisement.					
TA5		Online advertisements of private HEI affect my perception of the institution.					
TA6		Social media posts from current students at private HEI help to inform my decision-making process.					
Availability of information			SA	A	NS	D	SD
AI1		The way private HEI present themselves online reflects their overall quality and reputation.					
AI2		The quality of a private higher education institution's website affects my perception of the institution					

AI3		I am more likely to choose a private higher education institution if I see positive online reviews.					
AI4		Online marketing content for HEI is of high quality.					
AI5		Online marketing accurately describes the institution.					
AI6		The information found in the online marketing materials was clear and understandable.					
AI7		The online marketing materials were visually appealing.					
Choice of Higher Education Institution			SA	A	NS	D	SD
CH1		Online marketing, including university websites and social media, significantly impacts my choice of institution.					
CH2		I have been swayed by online promotions, discounts, or scholarships of by HEI when deciding where to pursue my studies.					
CH3		I trust information provided by HEI through their online marketing materials.					
CH4		I find online reviews and testimonials influential in my decision-making process for selecting a higher education institution.					
CH5		Online marketing efforts impact my decision-making process for choosing a higher education institution.					

Thank you for participating!

Appendix 2: Rotated Component Matrix

4		You rely on the reputation or ranking of a higher education institution when deciding which institution to choose.				.828			
5		You need to choose a higher education institution that is widely recognized and respected in the industry or field you are interested in				.752			
6		I believe that HEI' brand image contributes to better networking and job opportunities after graduation?							.796
7		A higher education institutions' brand image positively impacts your perception of its quality and credibility							.481
8		I think online marketing is an effective way for private HEI to reach prospective students.			.495				
9	TA1	I would consider a private higher education institution with a strong online presence.	.442						
10	TA2	Target advertising aligns with my interests and preferences regarding HEI	.489						
11	TA3	I would consider a higher education institution that advertises specifically to my demographic through targeted advertising.	.716						
12	TA4	I have visited a higher education institution's website or social media page as a result of seeing a targeted advertisement.	.711		.614				
13	TA5	Online advertisements of private HEI affect my perception of the institution	.613						

14	TA6	Social media posts from current students at private higher education institutions help to inform my decision-making process.			.614				
15		The way private HEI present themselves online reflects their overall quality and reputation.					.479		
16		The availability of information on website of a private higher education institution's affects my perception of the institution						.521	
17		I am more likely to choose a private higher education institution if I see positive online reviews.		.489					
18		Online marketing content for HEI is of high quality.					.752		
19		Online marketing accurately describes the institution.					.653		
20		The information found in the online marketing materials was clear and understandable.						.684	
21		The online marketing materials were visually appealing.							.499
22		Availability of online information including university websites and social media, significantly impacts my choice of institution.						.401	
23		I have been swayed by online promotions, discounts, or scholarships of by HEI when deciding where to pursue my studies.	.573						
24		I trust information provided by HEI through their online marketing materials					.590		

25		I find online reviews and testimonials influential in my decision-making process for selecting a higher education institution.		.843					
26		Online marketing efforts impact my decision-making process for choosing a higher education institution.		.858					
		Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.							
		a. Rotation converged in 9 iterations.							

Appendix 3: consent form for participants



Annexure H(a)– PARTICIPANT OR RESPONDENT CONSENT FORM

Explanatory information sheet and consent form for participants
To whom it may concern, My name is Annie Luhanga and I am a student at The IIE's MSA. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of DR, Takesure Zhoua about the influence of online marketing on students' choice of higher education institutions in South Africa and also to deduce the current perception of students when it comes to online. I hope that this research will inform marketing strategies in private higher education institutions with the aim of creating a more supportive academic environment for higher education students. I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer this so that you can make an informed decision. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me. Once you have read all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.
What will I be doing if I participate in your study?
I would like to invite you to participate in this research because all responses are anonymous and the results will only be used for research purposes. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to you to assist us by completing the attached questionnaire. If you decide to participate, you can still choose to withdraw at any time or decide not to answer particular interview questions.
Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?
Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about your perception on the influence of online marketing on your choices of higher education institutions in South Africa. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating. Detail the potential risks and how it will be managed by the researcher. Indicate how the ethical considerations will be applied in the context of the study.
Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary.
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so.
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.
- You may also refuse to answer any questions.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at IIE MSA, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research, but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my Masters in Business Administration. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

Annie Luhanga

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Participant or respondent consent

I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by Annie Luhanga about what online marketing strategies influence students' choices of higher education institutions in Gauteng?

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

- I agree to be interviewed for this research.
- My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
- My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.
- I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.
- I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

Signature	Date

Appendix 4: Ethical Clearance Certificate







Our Ref: M: 791023
Enquiries: research@ie.ac.za

23 October 2023

Outcome of Ethics Clearance Application for Master of Business Administration

Student Name: Annie Luhanga
Student number: [REDACTED]
Brand and campus: IIEMSA

Dear Annie,

Thank you for submitting the ethics clearance application for the study:
Examining the influence of online marketing on student's choice of higher education institutions in South Africa.

We are pleased to inform you that the IIE's Higher Degrees Committee considered and granted ethics clearance. This means that you may proceed with data collection on condition that you reflect and implement the changes proposed by the IIE Higher Degrees Committee to the satisfaction of your supervisor. If you are collecting data from a specific organisation, ensure that you have a gatekeeper's letter that confirms their approval of the data collection being done.

You are reminded that any changes made to the research methodology or title of the research study must be resubmitted to the IIE's Higher Degrees Committee for approval. Kindly ensure that all ethical considerations are duly applied whilst collecting, analysing and interpreting the data for the completion of your research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact your programme team or supervisor directly.

All the best with your research.

[REDACTED]

Dr WH Engelbrecht
Chair: Higher Degrees Committee

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- 129 -

Appendix 6: Language Editor Certificate

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28 February 2024

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

EDITING OF TREATISE: MS A LUHANGA (ST10239166)

This serves to confirm that I edited MS Luhanga's MBA Treatise, which is to be submitted to the Business School of the Independent Institute of Education (IIE).

I edited the language, punctuation and layout. I also edited the in-text referencing as well as the reference list. I have no knowledge as to whether the student accepted all my corrections; thus, I cannot be held responsible for any further errors.

Regards



Ms L. Kemp

B. A. (Hons English); MBA

Member of the Nelson Mandela University Editors' Forum