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Investigating the Impact of Social Media Marketing Activities on University Brand Preference and Word of Mouth Communication

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of social media marketing activities on university brand preference in South Africa. With the rapid proliferation of social media platforms, universities are increasingly leveraging these channels to enhance their brand presence and engage with students. The effectiveness of such endeavours in shaping brand preferences remains underexplored, particularly in an emerging market context where unique socio-economic factors may influence consumer behaviour. A total of 268 responses were collected from university students in South Africa through an electronic self-administered survey. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyse the data. The findings of this study revealed that social media marketing activities have a positive impact on brand attitude. Furthermore, brand attitude was proven to have a positive impact on university brand preference and word of mouth. However, the findings revealed an insignificant relationship between university brand preference and word of mouth. The study sheds valuable insights into the mechanisms through which social media engagement impacts brand perception and preference, shedding light on the strategic implications for universities seeking to leverage digital platforms to enhance their competitive positioning in emerging markets.

Keywords: social media, social media marketing, brand preference, higher education, university, word of mouth

1. Introduction

Originating in 1966, the phenomenon of ranking higher education institutions has become increasingly common among both national and international institutions (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021). The ranking system's initial objective was to understand each organisation's performance, including academic institutions in the United States (US) (Brankovic, Ringle, & Werron, 2018). The American Council on Education pioneered the development of the ranking system (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021), which was partially responsible for an increased number of social scientists in many countries. Subsequently, the implementation of the system has contributed significantly to the improvement of higher education worldwide, including in South Africa, as universities strive for academic excellence in a highly competitive market (Dembereldorj, 2018).

The criteria used to evaluate higher education institutions has evolved from just the measurement of intellectual paradigm to more than 100 metrics and 200 measurements which cover the university's contribution to research, social responsibility, and the sustainability of resources, amongst other criteria (Baty, 2022). The South African higher education industry has experienced significant growth over the years, which has placed added pressure on universities and colleges to become the institution of preference for prospective students (Matli, Tlapana, & Hawkins-Mofokeng, 2021). According to the Department of Higher Education and Training, the South African higher education industry comprises 160 registered private FET colleges (The Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023), 138 registered private colleges and universities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023) and 26 public institutions (Universities South Africa, 2023).

In essence, the growth of South African higher learning institutions, alongside globalisation, has influenced universities' need to amplify their marketing efforts (du Plessis et al., 2022). Given the intensity of the competition within the industry that goes beyond borders, institutions have to use different marketing strategies including unconventional social media marketing to appeal to potential investors, and sponsors as a means to influence prospective students' university brand preferences (Matli et al., 2021). Moreover, social media has been identified by Yang and Che (2020) as

a marketing tool that has an enormous impact on an individual's social bond to a brand. This makes the study worth exploring to establish the different facets that affect social ties, which influence the consumer's attitude of trust towards the brand and eventually the consumer's university brand preference. Brand preference has been defined by Bronnenberg, Dube, & Gentzkow (2012) with reference to Becker and Murphy (1988)'s theory of rational addiction, as a consumer's intent to subjectively purchase a particular brand over logically available alternatives as a result of one's past experience, perceived product quality, and previous exposure to the brand's advertising.

According to Matli et al. (2021), profit-seeking institutions in South Africa have been pioneers in incorporating social media marketing into their overall business strategy. These institutions have recognised social media as a tool that can be used to encourage students to switch from traditional higher learning institutions and enhance brand preference (Matli et al*.,* 2021). Scholars such as Kartajaya, Kotler and Hooi (2019) identified this as Marketing 4.0, fostered by the new generation of Millennials and Gen Z who demand organisations to move from traditional to digital modes of communication to enhance reach and engagement.

Given the competitiveness of the higher education industry, Dash, Kiefer, and Paul (2021) maintain that it is pivotal when dealing with millennial and Gen Z customers to develop customer relationships that drive brand preference. This has resulted in various brands attempting to establish their own identity in the social media space by using various platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube (Singh, Katoch, & Singh, 2022).

Minimal studies have been conducted on the influence of social media marketing on brand preference among higher education institutions (Yan & Zhang, 2019). Previous literature has focused on the effects of social media marketing on brand attitudes and preferences of consumers within the FMCG industry, and therefore not specific to the higher education institution industry (Yang & Che, 2020; Ceyhan, 2019; Bronnenberg et al., 2012). Although studies around brand preference and Higher Education Institutions have been conducted with a focus on emerging markets, very little research exists on the African markets (Perera, Nayak, & Nguyen, 2022). There is also a need to study the effect of social media marketing on university brand preference within both private and public university institutions as most studies have concentrated on private universities (Perera et al., 2022). There is also an opportunity to establish how each one of the Marketing 4.0 aspects influences the millennials or Gen Z consumers' brand preference as suggested by Dash et al. (2021). This study deviates from the scholarly work mentioned above, by aiming to investigate the impact of social media marketing activities on university brand preferences and word-of-mouth communication within a public, African university.

Research question:

To what extent do social media marketing activities influence brand attitude and university brand preference?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background on the Higher Education Industry both Globally and in South Africa.

The credibility of a university and the alignment of the course offering with the prospective student's interests and admission point score have always been and continue to be the core significant contributing factors to the prospective student's selection of a higher education institution of choice (Adiyani, Muzakki, Widodo, & Putra, 2021). Given the evolution of humans following the Second World War and the need for constant educational advancement, the higher education institution ranking system was introduced in the year 1966 across the United States (US) by a group of social scientists called the American Council on Education (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021). The inception of the rating system saw an improvement in the quality of education in universities and colleges within the United States (US) which further resulted in the implementation of the rating system by the rest of the Western, Eastern and African countries (Dembereldorj, 2018).

According to Tight (2022), for decades the Eastern and African higher education institutions have relied heavily on the standard operation procedures set by the Western countries. The year 1994 saw the South African higher education institutions take on a slightly differentiated approach of significant focus on transformation, therefore striving to constantly provide equality, inclusivity, and respect in a democratic republic (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). Following 1994, universities and colleges have witnessed a remarkable surge in the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions (Matli et al*.,* 2021).

The growth in prospects has equally resulted in the increased number of higher education institutions, including Western institutions that opened campuses as a result of globalisation (Tight, 2022). According to du Plessis et al. (2022), the growth in the higher education institutions industry has resulted in each institution's need to intensify their marketing initiatives.

2.2 Characteristics, Demand, and Supply of Higher Education in South Africa

Although higher education institutions in South Africa consist of numerous characteristics, their ability to supply quality service remains their core focus (Matli et al., 2021). The industry maintains consistent and quality academic services and qualifications through the strict accreditation of courses as regulated by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the National Association for Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA) for traditional contact classes and distance learning (Zawacki-Richter & Qayyum, 2019). The Western higher education institutions' standard operating parameters remain the anchor to the South African higher education institution industry, and further entail characteristics such as the university's contribution to research, sustainability of resources, social responsibility, and economic growth, amongst other criteria (Baty, 2022). Moreover, as identified by Adonis and Silinda (2021) transformation is a characteristic that South African higher education institutions need to prioritise through the inclusivity of diverse students and staff members, providing support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds through financial aid and campus facilities.

The demand for higher education institutions grew by more than 50% over the years from 1994, with more individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds having the capability to enrol in various programmes, in line with the transformation legislation (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). According to Marín et al. (2020), the demand for distance learning has also grown at a higher rate relative to that of traditional campus-based institutions, following the perceived cost efficiency of studying through distance learning. Characteristics that influence the student's consideration of a higher education institution entail the cost implication, geographical location relative to the distance from their home, the availability of the course of choice, the quality of the academic course, personnel, and campus facilities (Matli et al., 2021).

The higher education institution industry has also witnessed efforts by both the government and private institutions to supply the growing demand for good quality education (Tight, 2022). As stated by The Department of Higher Education and Training (2023), the higher education sector in South Africa consists of 138 accredited private colleges and universities with an additional 160 accredited private FET colleges. The number of public institutions supported by the government is made up of 26 universities and universities of technology (Universities South Africa, 2023).

2.3 History, Demographic Composition, Performances, and Challenges Faced by Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

According to Perera et al. (2020), very little is known about the history of higher education institutions prior to the year 1994. Present-day literature identifies the higher education institutions prior to 1994 as historically white institutions (Adonis & Silinda, 2021), and even less information on the said topic prior to the year 1994. On the other hand, there is more literature available addressing the evolution of distance-based education and online-based education from the inception of this practice by the University of South Africa before the year 1980 (Marín et al., 2020). Following the year 1994, the year of constitutional democracy, several higher education institutions were encouraged by the Department of Education to embark on the journey of transformation, ensuring that all prospective students and current students experienced equality, and human dignity (Adonis & Silinda, 2021).

The years between 1990 and 2000, reflected a significant discovery in academia, regarding the impact of social media and other platforms on millennials' brand preference especially when it came to selecting a University (Matli et al., 2021). In response, universities have embraced this challenge by enhancing their presence on social media and other effective digital platforms (du Plessis et al., 2022). The current major cohort of prospective and current students in higher education institutions are millennials and Gen Z (Dash et al., 2021). These two generational cohorts of focus are very familiar and comfortable with the use of technology and expect it to be incorporated into any organisation for convenience and speed (Khan, 2022). While the two generational cohorts have a similar relationship with technology, the Millennial generation born in the year 1977 to the year 1994 has been identified as one that is more critical of their use of social media while the Gen Z born in the year 1995 and after, is more impulsive with their social media consumption (Senanu, Anning-Dorson, & Tackie, 2023). The presence of a brand online has been described by du Plessis et al. (2022), as a tool to engage with your consumers and therefore build credibility and brand preference.

South African higher education institutions strive to remain relevant, and impactful and provide an overall quality (Baty, 2022). This is evident through various international ranking systems, such as the QS World rankings. According to Fraser (2023), the University of Cape Town continues to lead the industry, ranking at 237, followed by the University of Witwatersrand ranking at 428. The introduction of three new metrics which include employment outcomes, sustainability and international research has the potential to not only change the rankings of South African universities but to influence university policy changes.

2.4 Higher Education and Social Media Marketing

Marketing 4.0 advocates a transition from relying solely on conventional advertising methods to embracing digital

strategies such as social media marketing in order to interact with customers and cultivate lasting customer relationships that result in brand preference (Dash et al., 2021). The literature on Marketing 4.0 follows the revision of the Marketing 3.0 to now include brand interaction as a contributing construct. Perera et al. (2020) further expand on the brand interaction construct of Marketing 4.0 beyond the dynamic interaction between an individual and a brand. It now encompasses an individual's exposure to a network of interactions involving multiple stakeholders, each of which can influence the level of engagement with the brand.

Many industries including higher education institutions are experiencing growth within the Generation Z and Millennial market segment, with the population of Generation Z alone accounting for 32% of the worldwide population (Singh et al.,2022). These two generations were born into a digital age and according to Puriwat and Tripopsakul (2021), their interaction with a brand online will most likely enhance their experience and influence their purchase intention hence it is critical that brands incorporate intimate social media interaction in their marketing efforts. According to Duffett (2017), the most common and effective social media platforms that university marketers can maximise on in order to provide customised and engaging content entails; Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, WeChat, and Google+.

Word of Mouth continues to be an influential factor towards a consumer's attitude and preference towards a brand even in the context of social media marketing (Oraedu, Izogo, Nnabuko, & Ogba, 2021). Referred to as electronic Word of Mouth, content that consumers or in this case, prospective students consume on a company's online review platforms such as product or service ratings, consumers sharing past experiences on micro-blogs, or even direct messaging one another is considered the most credible interaction with a brand and does influence an individual's perception of the brand, therefore their purchase intention (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

The Millennial and Gen Z cohort has been identified as one that embraces current affairs, obtaining information as it happens, therefore contributing to every brand's need to participate in industry trends (Dash et al., 2021). Social media has entrenched a culture whereby the more an individual knows about the brand the more favourable their attitude is towards the brand (Ibrahim, Aljarah, & Sawaftah, 2021). This is evident as numerous universities make use of their social media to be a part of trends (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021) providing timely, reliable, and perceived accurate information necessary for the university's positive brand image.

The social media marketing information mostly addresses the university ranking criteria such as the university's involvement in research, social responsibility, the sustainable utilization of resources and any other popular topics of concern at any point in time (Baty, 2022). The growth experienced within higher education institutions reflects an opportunity for universities to optimise social media marketing in order to attract targeted prospective students from the pool of Millennials and Gen Z segment (Matli et al., 2021).

3. Empirical Literature

3.1 Dimensions of Social Media Marketing Activities

Entertainment

Entertainment is described as an engagement by an individual in activities that provide them with a sense of joy (Núñez-Gómez, Sánchez-Herrera, & Pintado-Blanco, 2020). Similarly, other literature has described entertainment as the act of escaping or diverting from problems or routines, seeking emotional release or relief, finding relaxation, passing time, or experiencing aesthetic enjoyment (Dzogbenuku, Doe, & Amoako, 2022). In the context of social media marketing a brand's entertainment level is measured by its ability to influence consumers to engage with the brand and subsequently respond to any call-to-action messaging that the brand might be communicating (Perera et al., 2020). The effectiveness of the different facets of social media marketing entertainment is described by Puriwat and Tripopsakul (2021) as a collaboration with above-the-line media, events, retailers, and digital support services through social media. According to Adiyani et al. (2021), the entertainment aspect of a brand's social media platform has a significant positive influence on the consumer's confidence in the brand and purchase decision.

Interaction

Núñez-Gómez et al. (2020) defined brand interaction as an organisation's efforts to get closer to the target audience by participating in the everchanging engagement or collaborative activities with customers or prospects which therefore results in the customer's delightful experience. According to Kim and Ko (2012) during the process of brand interaction consumers engage in content consumption, contribution, and development. The role of brand interaction has experienced an increase in significance within Marketing 4.0, due to the growing impact and speed of technological advancements (Perera et al., 2020).

Brand interaction is now considered to be real-time and continuous through the businesses' ability to engage with consumers and stakeholders through their websites and social media as described by Dash et al. (2021). Effective brand

interaction positively influences the customers' perceived brand identity, image, and integrity (Ibrahim et al., 2021). In the present-day brand interaction can also be defined as the real-time engagement of consumers or potential customers about a brand by means of word of mouth and electronic word of mouth (Puriwat and Tripopsakul, 2021).

Trendiness

Kim and Ko (2012) elaborate on trendiness as an organisation's ability to partake in modern technology, explore new offerings and venture into the development of innovative products or service procedures. Effective interaction in social media marketing is considered by Perera et al. (2020) as a trend that all organisations need to partake in order to avoid being obsolete. Furthermore, Baeshen (2021) explains that by introducing innovative products and services to the market, organisations are able to anticipate and forecast future trends, which has assisted organisations in gaining insights into upcoming market developments. According to Puriwat and Tripopsakul (2021), a brand can further improve its trendiness through *viral* marketing which would essentially be capitalising off innovative marketing and electronic word of mouth.

Customisation

Customisation is the process of analysing consumer behaviour data and segmenting consumers according to the data insights in order to provide segmented consumers with accurately targeted campaigns and content that is of their interest (Lang, Xia, & Liu, 2021). In the context of digital marketing, customisation also includes every IP address having a unique information searching path, based on data from the consumers' digital activity (Kim and Ko, 2012). Social media marketing addresses customisation through tailored messages which can only be delivered following an analysis of demographic or psychographic segmentation of the page followers (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2021).

3.2 Word-of-mouth

Jalilvand, Esfahani, and Samiei (2011) have acknowledged word of mouth as one of the most effective means of transmitting information not only limited to social contact boundaries but also through technological advancements such as electronic word of mouth. Oraedu et al. (2020) describe word of mouth as entailing information transmission not only through people who know one another sharing their experiences but even amongst strangers, transmitting information about a brand through reviews, social media posts and comments. Puriwat and Tripopsakul (2021) define word of mouth as a marketing mix tool that builds brand attitude, and trust and has a high conversion rate.

4. Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

4.1 Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

This theory has since been modified by Jacoby (2002) following Mehrabian and Russel (1974)'s first proposal. The framework gives insight into the environmental aspects that will provoke the individual's emotional condition, resulting in certain behavioural changes (Kamboj, Sarmah, Gupta, & Dwivedi, 2018). This model is likened to an information processing model as it focuses on the consumers' cognitive processes to develop and process information to produce a reaction (Sohaib, Safeer, & Majeed, 2022; Wang & Chang, 2013).

The stimulus is referred to as the external environmental element that can affect an organism's cognitive state (Sohaib et al., 2022). It has been presented in previous research where social media marketing activities (SMMAs) have acted as an external environmental stimulus. Therefore, this study proposes the use of social media marketing activities as the stimuli to activate the consumers' exposure to the university's social media (Koay, Ong, Khoo, & Yeoh, 2020). Following the stimuli, the organism is introduced, a concept described by Sohaib et al. (2022) as the response mechanism to the environmental stimuli with an external or internal behavioural response. The external response has been described as the form of an individual's specific behaviour while the internal response would be described as the individual's attitude (Sohaib et al., 2022; Lorenzo-Romero, Alarcon-del-Amo, & Gómez-Borja, 2016). Furthermore, we propose that brand attitude will function as an organism in the current study.

The S-O-R model was developed within the retail industry as a means to study servicescape's (stimuli) influence on the consumer's inner states, therefore, resulting in the enforcement of certain behaviours. The e-commerce environment is familiar with the use of this model to study the various characteristics that encompass e-retailing (Koay et al., 2020). The response to that study entailed positive consumer behaviour like positive word-of-mouth, customer loyalty, and online communication in e-commerce (Koay et al., 2020; Seo & Park, 2018; Sano, 2014). In a study by Aljarah (2020), they utilised the S-O-R model in the context of the tourism and hospitality industry where corporate social responsibility was placed as a stimulus, benevolence trust as the organism, and customer citizenship behaviour as the overall response.

It has been argued by brand researchers that a vital outcome of the S-O-R framework is based on consumer behaviour, in relation to brand communities, which is to increase brand loyalty (Kamboj et al., 2018). The addition of moderating

variables to the S-O-R model strengthens the model to explain current reality (Wang et al., 2022). Observations from various scholars from different industries have supported the use of the S-O-R model as the basis of their theoretical background of the research (Olfat, Ahmadi, Shokouhyar, & Bazeli, 2022; Islam & Rahman, 2017).

4.2 Hypothesis Development

Social media marketing activities (SMMAs) as an environmental response

Kim and Ko (2012) introduced the social media marketing dimensions of entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and word-of-mouth (WOM) through a study of luxury brands. Social media marketing activities are placed in the role of creating customer-based brand equity (Godey et al., 2016). Social media is deemed to be a role player in relationship-building with customers through marketing activities (Seo & Park, 2018; Yang, Hayat, Al Mamun, Makhbul, & Zainol, 2022). Consumers can share experiences on social media platforms whereas user-generated content on social media is seen as an alternative brand-customer interaction (Yang et al., 2022).

Previous studies have shown that the use of social media marketing as a stimulus enhances the customer shopping experience and influences purchasing behaviour (Yang et al., 2022). Studies have shown that they have previously measured social media marketing activities as one generalised concept and not as individual constructs which yielded a significant, positive relationship with brand equity (Khan, Yang, Shafi, & Yang, 2019; Godey et al., 2016).

Social Media Marketing Activities and Brand Attitude

Entertainment, a key aspect of social media marketing, adds a fun dimension to brand content (Yang et al., 2022). Social media users, often viewed as pleasure-seekers, value amusement and entertainment (Khan, 2022). Khan's (2022) study highlights that a well-curated social media page can foster positive brand attitudes. According to Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2015), entertainment can be explained as a sub motivation for example as an emotional release or escape from reality therefore entertaining social media content can be perceived positively by consumers (Gupta & Syed, 2022; Muntinga et al., 2015). A study by Villanueva, Yoo and Hanssens (2008) showed that young consumers' positive brand attitude can increase engagement in a brand's social media via compelling content. It has been suggested that businesses should provide their customers with entertaining content as a strategy to attract a larger audience furthermore increasing their overall brand engagement (Gupta & Syed, 2022). Zarei and Mohammadi (2022) and Killian and McManus (2015) highlight that entertainment in social media enhances customers' positive attitudes, strengthening brand-customer relationships. In the designing of a marketing strategy, entertainment is seen as an essential element in the social media marketing dimensions because the attractiveness of entertainment on social media platforms further increases the brand and overall advertising of the brand (Zarei & Mohammadi 2022).

Interaction is explored in social media as the two-way communication between brands and consumers to discuss products and services (Muntinga et al., 2011). Social media allows consumers the opportunity to exchange ideas with like-minded individuals and these interactions play a significant role in the development of enthusiasm and subsequent affection toward a certain brand (Cheung, Pires, & Rosenberger, 2020; Leckie, Nyadzayo, & Johnson, 2016; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgon, 2012). The study conducted by Cheung et al. (2020) found that interaction had the biggest influence on consumer-brand engagement and consequently deemed interaction, eWOM, and trendiness as vital for marketers to pay attention to when planning social media marketing activities. Consumers developing high levels of engagement on a brand's social media contributes to the formulation of a positive brand attitude with consumers (Malarvizhi, Al Mamun, Jayashree, Naznen, & Abir, 2022). Several studies have indicated that social media is a more useful tool than traditional media when determining consumers' attitudes towards a brand (Khan, 2022; Abzari, Ghassemi, & Vosta, 2014). Furthermore, Khan (2022) expanded on the relationship that interaction levels between brands and consumers on social media yield a positively related attitude towards a brand.

Scholars have defined trendiness as the ability of a brand to produce trendy content (Hazzam, 2022; Yadav & Rahman, 2017; Kim & Ko, 2012). Consumers see social media platforms as reliable sources to obtain information (Khan, 2022; Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). Naaman, Becker, and Gravano (2011) described trendiness as a tool to grab the attention of users through the use of the latest information and trends. An interlinked relationship is developed with the social media marketing activities dimensions as found in the study done by Ibrahim, et al., (2021). He explained in the findings of this study that marketers are able to increase customer satisfaction by utilizing elements from each dimension to improve customer-company relationships by providing timely and trendy content about the brand. Ibrahim (2022) examined the impact of specific SMMA dimensions of trendiness, customisation, and WOM on brand equity on social media platforms for telecommunications companies. What has been noted is that SMMA dimensions are only studied based on their relevance to a particular study thus information specific to all five dimensions mentioned is varied (Ibrahim, 2022). Researchers have concluded that trendiness is effective in increasing the likelihood of their brand's social media which in turn can build positive knowledge and brand attitude in consumers' minds (Cheung et al., 2020; Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017).

Customisation and Brand Attitude

Customisation, in the context of social media, is described as how various social media channels develop custom information that reflects user preferences (Algharabat, 2017; Schmenner, 1986). Customised services are offered by brands according to their consumers' preferences. This can have a positive influence on enhancing their affection toward a brand (Cheung et al., 2020; Phan, Thomas, & Heine, 2011). A study by Kim and Ko (2012) and Seo and Park (2018) revealed customisation and trendiness were found to have a significant and positive influence on consumers of luxury brands and fashion. Customisation has the ability to make consumers feel important which will assist in building customer-firm relationships through social media (Gupta & Syed, 2022). Relationship building is the essence of customisation as services are used to create satisfaction through their customer preferences (Gupta & Syed, 2022). According to a study by Zarei and Mohammadi (2022), customisation of social media products can pique the interest of consumers and furthermore will increase brand awareness and good brand image. A notable finding from the study relating to how social media marketing activities can influence Gen Z consumers' travelling preferences, has found that customisation lacked any significant influence on Gen Z consumers (Lang et al., 2021). However, it has been reported that customised social media marketing activities influence the consumers' formation of cognitive experience and brand attitude therefore impacting their primary preference for a brand (Malarvizhi et al., 2022; Cheung et al., 2020).

Based on the above discussions, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: Social Media Marketing Activities has a positive relationship with brand attitude.

Brand Attitude and Brand Preference

According to Shin, Kim, Lim and Kim (2014), brand attitude is described as the basis of consumers' actions, and it is a consistent reaction or behaviour to certain objects. Brand attitude is based on the familiarity and confidence customers have shown with a particular brand (Ramesh, Saha, Goswami, Sekar, & Dahiya, 2019). Companies need to explore and recognize who their buyers are. The ability to identify their consumers' needs and wants avails the opportunity to create brand loyalty and willingness to buy (Ramesh et al., 2019). In prior studies, it was proven that the key to understanding brand preference is based on the consumers' attitude model (Yasri, Susanto, Hoque, & Gusti, 2020; Kronrod & Huber, 2019;). According to Kronrod and Huber (2019), the most essential elements for brand preferences are consumers' brand memory and attitudes. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2: There is a positive relationship between brand attitude and brand preference.

Brand Attitude and word of mouth

Consumer attitude toward a brand reflects perceptions shaped by consumer-brand interactions (Foroudi, Palazzo, & Sultana, 2021). Factors such as brand characteristics, attachment, and congruence significantly influence these attitudes. Favourable attitudes are crucial in competitive markets as they drive loyalty and enhance brand equity (Pace, Balboni, & Gistri, 2017).

Word of mouth (WOM), described as the degree to which consumers of brands can share information and content on social media, also plays a pivotal role in a company developing a strong brand (Foroudi et al., 2021; Godey et al., 2016). Foroudi et al. (2021) highlight its impact on brand attitudes, while Pace et al. (2017) and Wu and Wang (2011) emphasize that positive WOM fosters desirability. Moreover, Chu and Chen (2019) affirm a positive relationship between brand attitude and WOM intention. Given the above discussion, the following hypothesis was postulated:

H3: There is a positive relationship between brand attitude and word of mouth

Brand Preference and word of mouth

The brand preference, particularly of universities, has been set out by Kamal Basha, Sweeney, and Soutar (2020) as a result of the student or any other stakeholder's favourable perception of the institution. A number of attributes have been identified as influencing stakeholders' perception of a university, which entails the quality of the university's academic service provision, the contribution of the research to the greater industry and the overall public reputation of the university (Yan & Zhang, 2019). Perera et al. (2020) further expands on the topic of brand preference by identifying social media brand positioning by universities as a tool for developing a relationship with stakeholders as a competitive advantage in order to influence their perception, preference, and subsequently their willingness to associate themselves with the university brand. Foroudi et al. (2021) emphasise that WOM affects brand attitudes, which indirectly drive brand preference. Similarly, Chu and Chen (2019) affirm that positive WOM reinforces loyalty and fosters deeper connections with the brand, amplifying consumer preference. Given the positive association between consumer preferences and word of mouth behaviour as identified by Engriani and Aulia (2019), the following hypothesis was developed:

H4: There is a positive relationship between brand preference and word of mouth

Research model

Based on the above discussion, a research model is proposed (see Figure 1)

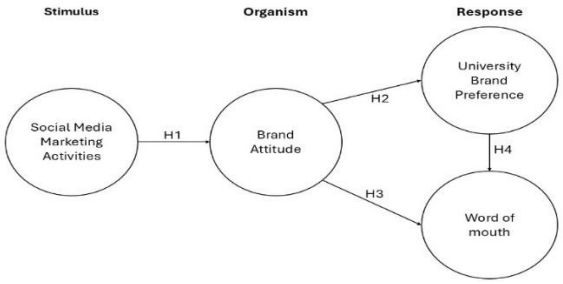


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram

Source: (Authors own construction, 2024)

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Sampling and Data Collection

Data was collected through an online self-administered questionnaire which was distributed online through a university student database. This sample consists of university students who are active social media users. Siddiqui (2013) advises on a sample size between 200 and 400 when evaluating 10 to 15 indicators through structural equation modelling. This desired target for the study was therefore targeted. A convenience non-probability sampling approach was used to collect data. Data was collected from 325 respondents. The total of valid responses was 268. According to Sastedt, Ringle, and Hair (2014), a sample of 268 is adequate for analysing data using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM).

5.2 Measurement Instrument

Measures of Entertainment (4 items), adapted from (Zhang, Li, Liu, & Ruan, 2021), Interaction (4 items), adapted from (Algharabat, 2017), Trendiness (4 items), adapted from (Khan et al., 2019), Customisation (4 items), adapted from (Zhang et al., 2021; Yan, Tan, Loh, Hew, & Ooi, 2021), Word-of-Mouth (4 items), adapted from (Algharabat, 2017), Brand Attitude (4 items), adapted from (Erdoğmuş & Ergun, 2016), University brand preference (4 items), adapted from (Nair, Dileep, & Walia, 2023; Kumar, Dhir, Talwar, Chakraborty, & Kaur, 2021). A 5-point “Likert scale” was used to evaluate these factors.

6. Results

6.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The respondent’s profile is summarised in Table 1. As depicted above in Table 1, 52.2% of respondents identified as female, and 45.9% as male. The majority of the respondents were between 18 to 25 years old, constituting 80.6% of the total. The prevalence of participants aged 18 to 25 years old can be attributed to the fact that a university consists mostly of undergraduate students who are more likely to belong to that age cohort according to Matli et al. (2021). Considering the demographic results mentioned above, it is highly justifiable that the largest segment in terms of marital status is "single." This conclusion is based on the fact that 88.8% of the 268 respondents reported their marital status as single. The majority of participants were undergraduate students, with 74.6% of respondents falling into this category. Based on this data, it is evident that the majority of participating respondents, approximately 37.3% (n=100), reflected a household income of less than R25 000 per month. This is identified by Kirsten, Botha, Mduduzi, and Pretorius (2022) as the relatively lower class and suggests that a significant majority, of the respondents, have limited purchasing power.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	140	52.2
Male	123	45.9
Prefer not to say	5	1.9
Age		
18-25	216	80.6
26-35	24	9
36-45	18	6.7
46-55	10	3.7
Marital status		
Single (living alone)	238	88.8
Married	22	8.2
Prefernot to say	8	3
Education		
Undergraduate student	200	74.6
Honours student	36	13.4
Master's student	27	10.1
PhD. student	5	1.9
Household income		
Less than R10 000	68	25.4
R10 001- R25 000	32	11.9
R25 001- R40 000	27	10.1
R40 001- R55 000	18	6.7
R55 001- R60 000	11	4.1
More than R60 000	44	16.4
Prefer not to say	68	25.4

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

6.2 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling) method. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) method. A two-step data analysis procedure was followed in this study. The first step is to test the measurement model to establish reliability and validity while the second step involves assessing the structural model to test the hypothesised relationships.

Measurement model

Outer loading values indicating reliability should be greater than 0.70 (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Table 2 shows outer loadings, indicating reliability. Item C1,C2,C4, E1, and I4 are within the threshold range.

Table 2. Factor loadings

	Outer loadings
BA1 <- Brand attitude	0,831
BA2 <- Brand attitude	0,728
BA3 <- Brand attitude	0,737
BA4 <- Brand attitude	0,814
C1 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,643
C2 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,693
C3 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,746
C4 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,601
E1 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,680
E2 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,702
E3 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,773
E4 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,793
I1 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,716
I2 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,818
I3 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,811
I4 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,610
TRE3 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,704
TRE4 <- Social Media Marketing Activities	0,637
UBP1 <- University brand preference	0,787
UBP2 <- University brand preference	0,840
UBP3 <- University brand preference	0,809
UBP4 <- University brand preference	0,849
WoM1 <- Word of mouth	0,837
WoM2 <- Word of mouth	0,793
WoM3 <- Word of mouth	0,845
WoM4 <- Word of mouth	0,703

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

An acceptable Cronbach's alpha value should be equal to or exceed 0.7 (Bonett and Wright, 2015). A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.6 is permissible, however, any value below 0.5 is not acceptable and is therefore unreliable (Trizano-Hermosilla & Alvarado, 2016). All values within this study are above 0.6 as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Construct reliability and convergent validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Social Media Marketing Activities	0,924	0,935	0,508
Brand attitude	0,783	0,860	0,607
University brand preference	0,840	0,892	0,675
Word of mouth	0,806	0,874	0,634

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

As the literature suggests, three different tests help to test the discriminant validity. The Cronbach alpha (>0.7), CR (>0.7), and average variance extracted (AVE) (>0.5). According to Saunders et al., (2023) a Cronbach's Alpha result of $0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$ is deemed acceptable, therefore one can deduce that all the items measured in the study are satisfactorily reliable. Composite reliabilities for the current study range from 0.860 and 0.935. AVE ranged between 0.508 and 0.675. AVE of 0.5 and above is recommended. We assessed the Fornell Larcker and heterotrait –monotrait (HTMT) ratio to test the discriminant validity. The HTMT ratio has recently gained preference over Fornell and Larcker (Baloch et al., 2017; Henseler, Hubona, & Ray et al. 2016) Fornell and Larcker's tests in Table 4 exhibit values greater than the correlations among the variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All the HTMT ratio results exhibited in Table 5 are lower than the 0.90 threshold, except for one. This may imply that word-of-mouth and brand attitude constructs are not sufficiently distinct. After examining the cross-loadings it is evident that all indicators load more strongly on their intended construct, thereby confirming discriminant validity.

Table 4. Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Brand attitude	Social Media Marketing Activities	University brand preference	Word of mouth
Brand attitude	0,779			
Social Media Marketing Activities	0,663	0,713		
University brand preference	0,581	0,414	0,822	
Word of mouth	0,749	0,569	0,606	0,796

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

Table 5. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	Brand attitude	Social Media Marketing Activities	University brand preference	Word of mouth
Brand attitude				
Social Media Marketing Activities	0,786			
University brand preference	0,700	0,460		
Word of mouth	0,927	0,663	0,723	

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

Testing of collinearity

VIF results are below the recommended threshold of 5 (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991). This means that there are no issues of multicollinearity in the data (see Table 6).

Table 6. Collinearity statistics (VIF)

BA1	2,029
BA2	1,516
BA3	1,505
BA4	1,906
C1	1,753
C2	2,037
C3	2,158
C4	1,584
E1	2,149
E2	2,471
E3	2,777
E4	2,696
I1	2,070
I2	3,043
I3	2,829
I4	1,563
TRE3	1,950
TRE4	1,697
UBP1	1,856
UBP2	2,134
UBP3	1,763
UBP4	1,927
WoM1	1,911
WoM2	1,781
WoM3	1,837
WoM4	1,405

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

Results of the model fit.

The study found that the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) had a value of 0.080, which is considered a good fit. Values less than 0.10 or 0.08 are considered acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The d-ULS value of 2.266 indicated a strong fit since lower values are suggestive of a better fit. The d_G demonstrated a value of 0.686, indicating a moderate fit. The Chi-square value of 1025.404 was taken into account, considering the sample size, and recognizing its propensity to increase in larger samples. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) value of 0.755 suggests a satisfactory fit.

Table 7. Model fit summary.

	Saturated model
SRMR	0,080
d_ULS	2,266
d_G	0,686
Chi-square	1025,404
NFI	0,755

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

Assessment of structure

The outer model indicated acceptable findings for reliability and validity. See Table 8.

Table 8. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

	Hypotheses	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values	Decision
H1	Social Media Marketing Activities -> Brand attitude	0,774	0,777	0,038	20,187	0,000	Supported and significant
H2	Brand attitude -> University brand preference	0,710	0,714	0,067	10,647	0,000	Supported and significant
H3	Brand attitude -> Word of mouth	0,834	0,844	0,112	7,452	0,000	Supported and significant
H4	University brand preference -> Word of mouth	0,135	0,125	0,124	1,092	0,275	Not supported

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

7. Discussion

The hypothesis, H1 posited that there would be a positive relationship between social media marketing activities and brand attitude. Based on the findings, the hypothesis is supported (β=0.774, p=value=0.000) Therefore, H1 is accepted. H2 posited that there would be a positive relationship between brand attitude and university brand preference. Based on the findings, the hypothesis is supported (β=0.710, p-value=0.000). Therefore, H2 is also accepted. H3 posited that there would be a positive relationship between brand attitude and word of mouth. Based on the findings, the hypothesis is supported (β=0.834, p-value=0.000). Therefore, H3 is accepted. H4 posited that there would be a positive relationship between university brand preference and word of mouth. However, based on the findings, the hypothesis is not supported (β=0.135, p-value=0.275). Therefore, H4 is not accepted.

Table 9. R-square

Constructs	R-square
Brand attitude	0,439
University brand preference	0,338
Word of mouth	0,604

Source: Authors' own compilation using PLS-SEM

If R^2' s value is 0.75 or higher, it means that independent variables have a substantial effect or significant impact on the dependent variable. If the R^2 value is 0.5, it implies a moderate impact, and when the R^2 value is 0.25 or less, it suggests a minor impact (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). The value of R^2 in the current research is 0.439 for brand attitude, 0.338 for university brand preference, and 0,604 for word of mouth which indicates moderate explanatory power (see Table 9).

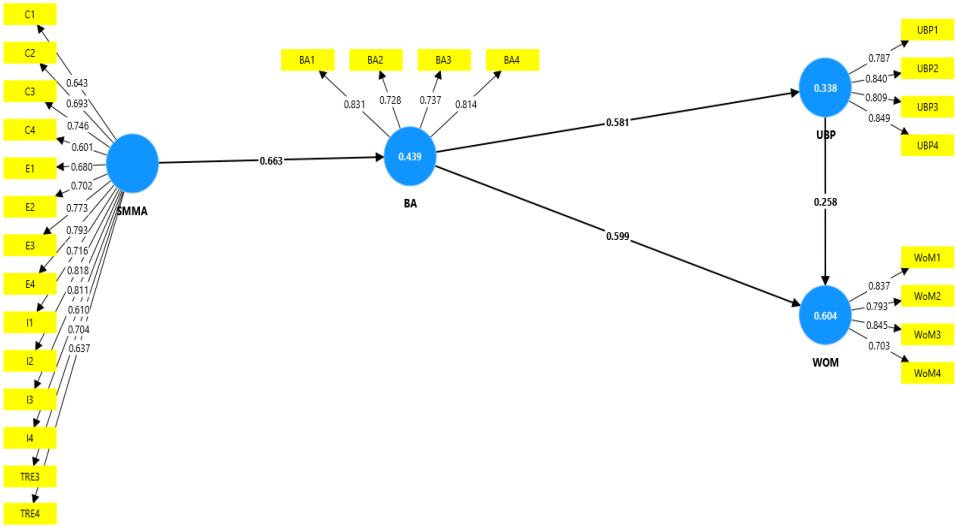


Figure 2. Structural Model

8. Conclusion, Contributions, Recommendations, and Future Research

The contributions of the study have significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical marketing strategies in the higher education sector, particularly in engaging with Generation Z consumers through social media platforms.

8.1 Theoretical Implication

This research integrates the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory into the study of marketing consumer behaviour, broadening its application in the higher education sector. It offers insights into how social media marketing activities influence brand attitude, and by extension university brand preference and word of mouth. By applying the S-O-R model to the higher education industry – an area less explored compared to fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) – this study enriches the understanding consumer behaviour in the context of university branding. Focusing on an African country and public higher education institutions, the research addresses gaps literature, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of university brand preference dynamics, particularly in emerging markets. Additionally, it examines how social media marketing activities (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customisation) influence Generation Z's brand

preference and word of mouth, providing valuable insights into the preferences and behaviours of this demographic group.

8.2 Marketing Implication

The study highlights the importance of targeting Generation Z cohorts for higher education institutions. It emphasises the need to create content that resonates with their language, culture, and social media consumption patterns, which can help marketers better engage with this demographic group. Additionally, the study provides practical insights for optimising social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram to drive brand attitude, brand preference, and word of mouth communication. This could be achieved through video content such as campus tours and student testimonials which showcase campus life and student achievements. The study also highlights the need for marketers to adopt strategies such as running competitions and integrating students into social media campaigns, to enhance engagement and brand awareness. Moreover, the study's findings emphasise that by understanding student perceptions of entertainment, interaction, and trendiness universities can tailor their marketing efforts to meet the expectations of their target audience and enhance their brand appeal within emerging markets.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

The study was based on quantitative methods, which may not have captured the opinions of participants. The study focused exclusively on current students at a specific university, limiting the pool of potential participants. This limitation undermines the external validity of the study's results, as they may not be representative of other universities or populations. Future studies could look at comparing the effectiveness of social media marketing activities between public and private higher learning institutions and investigate how factors such as entertainment value, trendiness, interactivity, customisation, and word-of-mouth influence students' decisions when choosing between public and private institutions. Moreover, incorporating theories such as consumer behaviour theories, decision-making models, and socio-psychological theories could provide a richer framework for understanding the factors driving social media marketing activities and brand preference in the context of university selection.

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Authors contributions

Chulumanco Potelwa was responsible for data collection and drafting the manuscript. Thato Phale was responsible for data collection and drafting the manuscript. Aaron Koopman was responsible for study design, drafting and revising of the manuscript. Prof. Neo Ligaraba was responsible drafting and revising of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Each author has contributed equally to the study.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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