

# Digital Marketing Strategies and Student Decision Making: The Role of Brand Awareness

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing number of higher education institutions in South Africa has led to intense competition in attracting and enrolling potential students. Digital advancement has made potential students rely on the internet to seek information to make an informed decision regarding their choice of higher education institutions. The study aimed to investigate how digital marketing strategies affect prospective students' decision-making process when choosing private higher education institutions. The cluster sampling technique was used to draw a sample of 363 Questionnaires were collected from five private higher education institutions students, namely, Richfield, AAA School of Advertising, Rosebank, MANCOSA, and Varsity College in South Africa. The study utilised IBM SPSS to analyse the data. Ethics clearance was done by the researchers. Verbal consent was provided by the respondents. The results indicated that search engine optimisation (SEO), email marketing (EM), content marketing (CM), and social media marketing (SMM) were all found to have a statistically significant relationship with student decision-making. The results offer the private higher education institutions in South Africa the opportunity to adopt and invest in digital marketing strategies -such as search engine optimisation content marketing, email marketing, and social media marketing, to influence potential students' decision-making on enrolment. This study contributes to the discussion on the digital marketing impact on business performance and extended the theory of the persuasive knowledge model.

**Keywords:** Digital marketing; Search Engine Optimisation; Email Marketing; Content Marketing; Brand awareness; Student Decision Making.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The revolution of technology has shaped marketing theories and how companies conduct business activities. The promotion and selling of products and services to customers have changed from a traditional form to a technological form where sellers and buyers can interact to close business transactions via the internet (Saleem and Siddik, 2021). Digital marketing is a component of new marketing that utilises internet and online digital marketing technologies like desktop computers, mobile phones, and other digital channels such as search engines, social media networks, content marketing, and email to reach their target audience (Saleem and Siddik, 2021; Lavanya and Radhikamani, 2021). Digital marketing is considered as an integral part of our daily lives, as data indicates that internet users have accelerated from 5.3 million in 2009 to 38.13 million in 2021 (Aruleba and Jere, 2022; Hien and Nhu, 2022). Likewise, users in South Africa grew from 20.3 million in 2013 to 45.3 million in 2024 (Statistica, 2024).

Digital marketing contributes to business performance by increasing the competitiveness of the new digital transformation economy (Paşcalău and Urziceanu, 2022), which involves migrating to new technological marketing models where businesses and customers spend more time on the internet, not only to search for and provide information about products and services but also to interact about customers' experiences (Hien and Nhu, 2022). Digital marketing also assists in meeting customers' demand by using the power of interconnected and interactive webs, or, in other words, the power of the Internet, and fulfilling these demands in new and innovative ways (Stokes, 2013). It has proven to be a driving force in campaigns' marketing performance, including higher education institutions (Kusumawat, 2019;

Mehralian and Khazae, 2022; Zahara, Santi, and Farid, 2023).

Businesses have the benefit of adopting digital marketing to support their business activities that require up-to-date and timely information (Mehralian and Khazae, 2022). The use of digital marketing allows companies to create brand awareness using the internet to target audiences (Arshad, Aqeel, Aroo, and Amir, 2023; Baltezarevic, 2023; Harbi and Ali, 2022; Hermawan, 2019; Karen and Zai, 2022; Wan, 2023) in influencing their choice of selecting higher education institutions. Brand awareness indicates the level of brand knowledge and consumers' familiarity with a brand (Alkhaldeh, Al-Salaymeh, Alshare, and Eneizan, 2017; Shahid, Hussain, and aZafar, 2017; Halliru, Kabir, and Abubakar, 2018). Companies, including higher education institutions, can create brand awareness by integrating digital marketing strategies such as search engine optimisation, content marketing, email marketing, and social media marketing (Dewi et al., 2022; Kwarteng-Amaniampong, 2024; Mehralian and Khazae, 2022; Nuseir and Aljumah, 2020; Silbert and Bibin, 2021) as an integral element of the overall marketing strategy (Abed, Dwived, and Williams, 2016) to provide brand information to shape potential decisions.

Hentzen, Hoffmann, and Dolan (2023) asserted that consumers who are unaware of a brand fail to search for information due to a lack of awareness of such a brand. Research indicates that higher education institutions create and utilise collaborative relationships with various stakeholders like companies, industries, alumni, and research institutions to create brand awareness (Camilleri, 2019; Stukalina, 2019). However, Kusumawat (2019) stressed that students interact with various digital marketing media to seek information about higher education institutions that are prevalent in digital media inform their decision-making higher education institutions choices. Additionally, Rajkumar, Saranya, Joseph, and Sudhahar (2022) draw the conclusion that students struggle to obtain comprehensive information about higher education institutions' programme details, admissions procedure, and answers to questions and doubts. This makes prospective students more anxious about making decisions based only on digital marketing strategies. Insufficient or absent such information can occasionally divert students' attention, preventing them from paying attention long enough to make inform decisions (Wan, 2023). A thorough understanding of digital marketing analytics is required to augment monitoring, identify key performance indicators,

and track progress towards overall business objectives (López García, Lizcano, Ramos, & Matos, 2019; Kwarteng-Amaniampong, 2024; Saura, Palos-Sánchez, & Suárez, 2017).

Although this strategy is crucial to higher education institutions, no prior study has examined how digital marketing strategies influence of creating and enhancing brand awareness that draws attention to, captures, and impacts the decision-making processes of prospective students regarding private higher education institutions in South Africa (Helmi and Pius, 2018; Kusumawat, 2019). Enrollments at private higher education institutions have suffered as a result, with the majority of prospective students choosing to attend public higher education institutions. Therefore, it is now essential to carry out this study in order to broaden the research on digital marketing and its influence on students' decision-making in the South African setting. The study aimed to investigate how digital marketing strategies affect prospective students' decision-making process when choosing private higher education institutions using the mediating role of brand awareness that improves enrolments. The study's findings can be used by a range of private higher education institutions to focus on and make investments in digital marketing strategies that will raise their brand awareness and help them draw in more students by influencing their selection of private higher education. By expanding the persuasive knowledge model, a theoretical framework that explains consumers' processing mechanisms when exposed to persuasion messages (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Ham, Nelson, and Das, 2015; Chen and Cheng, 2019). This model has focused on getting a target to comply with, by creating messages that cause the recipient to change their attitude towards the message sender or think differently about the sender and using opinion leaders and reference groups to influence change (Kirmani and Campbell, 2008). It is expected that the study would add to the conversation on literature on digital marketing. The remaining sections of the study are organised as follows: The literature study and formulation of the hypotheses are contained in Sections 2-4. The study's research methodologies are explained in depth in Section 5, its results are presented and discussed in Section 6, its implications are discussed in Section 7, and its limitations and future research direction are presented in Section 8.

## **II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

### **2.1 Digital marketing strategies**

Due to digitalisation, companies have altered their business practices during the past few

decades. The aim is to create awareness and a perception that impacts the decision-making processes of customers (Al-Azzam and Al-Mizeed, 2021; Karen and Zia, 2023). Digital marketing indicates the use of the internet and other online-based digital technologies, such as smartphones, desktop computers, and other digital media and platforms, to advertise goods and services is known as digital marketing (Lavanya and Radhikamani, 2021; Saleem and Siddik, 2021). "Use of electronic data and applications for planning and executing the conception, distribution, and pricing of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individuals and companies' objectives" is how Harbi and Ali (2022) define digital marketing. In other words, digital marketing involves focusing all marketing efforts on mobile apps, laptops, tablets, and other internet-connected technical devices in order to influence and attract the opinions and purchase decisions of potential clients (Dara, 2016; Harbi and Ali, 2022). Digital marketing comes with strategies that efficiently and effectively leverage the internet as a platform. Search engine optimisation (SEO), content marketing (CM), email marketing (EM), and social media marketing (SMM) are some of the strategies that are employed (Lavanya and Radhikamani, 2021; Muhktar, Mohan, and Chandra, 2033; Saleem and Siddik, 2021) by companies. Brand awareness can be increased and improved by utilising these strategies (Wan, 2023) to influence consumer decisions. The next parts include digital marketing strategies and their effects on students' selection of private higher education institutions, and the overall effect of digital marketing on students' selection of private higher education institutions.

### **2.1.1 Search engine optimisation and brand awareness**

A search engine is a web-based tool that helps internet users find the information they are looking for. The goal of SEO is to drive more website traffic to those who are part of the intended audience (Zilincan, 2015; Raju, 2019). These are visitors looking for additional top-of-funnel information as well as customers who are actively searching for the goods and services the company provides. SEO can focus on a variety of search types, such as picture, local, video, news, academic, and vertical search engines tailored to a particular industry (Yasmin, Tasneem, and Fatema, 2015). Search engine optimisation raises brand awareness even if its primary goal is to improve and boost organic traffic to the brand (Terrance, Shrivastava, and Kumari, 2018). According to a study by Mandal and Sajjad (2020), an organization's brand

awareness is influenced by the employment of SEOs.

### **2.1.2 Content marketing and brand awareness**

The goal of content marketing is to use content to connect, engage, and reach customers. Users can learn useful information from this content, which consists of blog entries, infographics, banner ads, and movies. Consumers. Content marketing involves producing valuable and pertinent digital brand material without actively attempting to sell goods or services. It also builds brand awareness and occurs before the consumer makes a purchase choice (du Plessis, 2022). Effective content marketing attracts and retains consumers by conveying brand messages that strengthen and expand brand awareness—recognition and recall—and persuade them to choose the brand (Alkharabsheh and Zhen, 2021). According to Ahmad, Musa, and Harun's (2016) content marketing study, efficient social media content marketing helps to communicate brand information to customers in a way that draws them in and keeps them interested in the business. Mandal and Sajjad's (2020) research concluded that content marketing is essential for increasing brand awareness.

### **2.1.3 Email marketing and brand awareness**

Gaining new consumers and keeping hold of current ones are the two main goals of email marketing. Email marketing offers a better return on investment (ROI) than traditional marketing when a message about the products or services is sent to an existing or potential customer. This is because the organisation can track all of its customer interactions through emails (Karen and Zia, 2022; Makrides et al., 2020; Yasmin et al., 2015). Email is a great way to build brand awareness, stay at the top of customers' minds, and promote repeat business, according to earlier research (Krishnaprabha and Tarunika, 2020) by providing users with valuable information; otherwise, people wouldn't stay subscribed. According to Mandal and Sajjad (2020), a well-crafted email can have an impact on a company's brand awareness.

### **2.1.4 Social media marketing and brand awareness**

Social media can be more effective for communication when compared to other traditional media such as newspapers, televisions, and radio (Ganesha and Ganapati, 2019). It is a digital channel where users participate, share, and create content such as banners, posters, videos, and

advertisements (Tritama and Tarigan, 2016). This helps people connect to each other to create, sell, and purchase products and services (Ganesha and Ganapati, 2019). Chierici, Del Bosco, Mazzucchelli, and Chiacchierini (2019) revealed that the usage and good management of social media improve brand awareness. Studies by Ganesha and Ganapati's (2019), Febriyantoro's (2021), and Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, and Fuller (2013) conclude that the use of social media platforms by organisations enhances their brand awareness. Similarly, Matin, Khoshtaria, and Todua (2022) demonstrated that social media influences customer brand awareness. Another example comes from Pegoraro Scott and Burch (2017), who utilised strategic Facebook influence and revealed that Facebook influences brand awareness.

### **III. BRAND AWARENESS AND STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING**

Brand awareness indicates the level of consumers' familiarity with a brand and is a key element of brand value (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2013). Brand awareness is also the knowledge, extent, and ability of the consumer to recognise and recall the brand from the product category that influences the purchase decision-making process. The knowledge of the brand is what consumers use to judge and build strong relationships with a particular brand (Alkhalaf et al., 2017; Shahid, Hussain, and aZafar, 2017; Kahn, Jadoon, & Tareen, 2016; Khurram, Qadeer, & Sheeraz, 2018; Shwastika & Keni, 2021).

In the very competitive marketing landscape of today, higher education institutions need to focus more on branding. It makes no difference if the university is private or public; branding is a crucial tactic for connecting with and attracting prospective students in both cases. At different higher education institutions, branding draws in, holds on to, and boosts student enrollment (Alam, Faruq, Alam, and Gani, 2019). Brand awareness, brand recognition, and brand recall are important factors in consumer decision-making for a brand (Shahid et al., 2017; Tali and Nautiyal, 2022). When a brand is seen, its symbol, logo, or everything associated with it is recognised and remembered. In order to raise brand recognition, organisations are now supplying the necessary information through traditional or digital media (Jain and Yadav, 2017). A component that impacts students' decision-making process is the accessibility of information such as pictures, charts, videos, and other resources. Sending postings and getting comments also turns the entire exchange

into a potent publicity process. Therefore, in order to raise awareness and sway the decisions of prospective students, higher education institution is required to furnish such material. Different digital marketing tactics are used by marketers today to build brand awareness. (Ken and Zia, 2023; Karam and Saydam, 2015). Digital marketing can be used to increase brand awareness through media. According to the study by Bohara, Suri, and Panwar (2022), as brand awareness creates the majority of information, it is crucial in the higher education institutions decision process for parents and students. Karen and Zia's (2023) study concluded that the level of awareness of higher education institutions brands influences their decision-making for enrollment. Similarly, Baltezarevic (2023) and Wan (2023) also concluded that digital marketing strategies improve and enhance brand awareness.

### **IV. DIGITAL MARKETING (SEO, CM, EM AND SMM) AND STUDENT DECISION MAKING**

Digital marketing involves the promotion of goods or services via digital technology, such smartphones and online display advertising (Kusumawati, 2019). According to Stokes (2013), digital marketing uses the internet's ability to connect and interact with digital marketing strategies to create demand from consumers and then finds creative ways to meet that need. Consumer decision-making is influenced by digital marketing strategies, according to a study conducted by Garg, Bansal, and Singla (2020).

Digital marketing has a positive impact on students' decision-making, according to several higher education institutions' research. For instance, Kusumawati's (2019) study on the impact of digital marketing on student decision-making found that students use digital marketing more frequently in higher education institutions to research the institutions before selecting a preferred option, which helps to shape students' decision-making. Similarly, Baltezarevic's (2023) evaluation of the role of digital marketing in the education industry concluded that higher education institutions have embraced digital marketing strategies to advertise their service delivery and connect with prospective students to influence their choice of faculty to enrol in. Research conducted by Al-Azzam and Al-Mizeed (2021) and Dhote, Jog, Gavade, and Shrivastava (2015) found that students' decisions about which higher education institutions to attend are influenced by digital marketing strategies. Similar findings from Harbi and Ali (2022) concluded that students are

influenced by digital marketing, as the majority of prospective students use the internet to search for programme information from several higher

education institutions to influence their decision-making. Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual model and formulated hypotheses of the study.

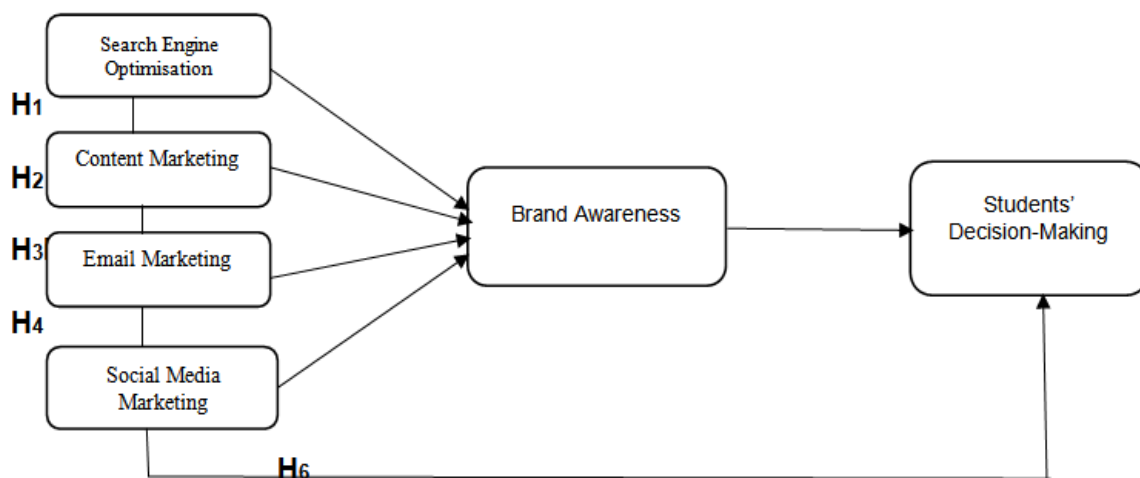


Figure 1: Research conceptual model

**H1:** Search engine optimization statistically influences brand awareness of private higher education institutions.

**H2:** Content marketing statistically influences brand awareness of private higher education institutions.

**H3:** Email marketing statistically influences brand awareness of private higher education institutions.

**H4:** Social media marketing statistically influences brand awareness of private higher education institutions.

**H5:** Brand awareness statistically influences students' decision-making of private higher education institutions' enrolments.

**H6:** Digital marketing (SEO, CM, EM and SMM) overall statistically influences students' decision-making of private higher education institutions enrolments.

## V. RESEARCH METHODS

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the study (Sutanapong and Louangrath, 2015). A quantitative research method was used, and primary data was collected using a self-administrative questionnaire given to respondents. Permission was obtained from various private higher education institutions, and cluster and simple random sampling probability techniques were applied (Datta, 2018; Etikan and Bula, 2017). Given that South Africa's internet user base increased from 20.3 million in 2013 to 45.3 million

in 2024 (Statistica, 2024), there are sufficient reasons to look into the impact of digital marketing on private higher education institutions' brand awareness and their overall influence on potential students' decision-making process regarding enrollment in private higher education institutions. As a result, 363 sample sizes were selected using the Orban (2021) criteria from five private HEIs in South Africa: Richfield (120), AAA School of Advertising (45), Rosebank (80), MANCOSA (75), and Varsity College (43).

For this study, a survey approach was selected, and a questionnaire served as the tool for gathering data. The survey comprised multiple sections, such as one on demographics and another on digital marketing strategies, brand awareness, and student decision-making. In addition to questions on demographics, every question on the survey uses a 5-point Likert scale. The data was analysed using IBM SPSS, and the results are shown in the section that follows.

## VI. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 6.1 Response rate

329 of the 363 questionnaires that were sent to respondents were returned and satisfactorily filled out, representing a 91% response rate. This indicates that 329 questionnaires were utilised in the data analysis. Table 1 below provides a detailed presentation of the results.

**Table 1: Response rate**

HEI	Questionnaire Distributed	Returned	Percentage (%)
Richfield	120	113	
AAA school	45	45	
Rosebank	80	64	
MANCOSA	75	69	91
Varsity College	43	38	

### 6.2 Testing of Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) reliability

For every variable, the questionnaire's validity and reliability were computed, and the results from Cronbach alpha values varied from 0.71 to 0.92.

### 6.3 Demographics characteristics of respondents

The data set relevant to the demographic characteristics of the respondents was collected in the first section, which constituted four closed-ended questions where respondents could select one answer from a predetermined list. The four questions related to the gender and age of the

respondents and how often, in general, the respondents search for information via traditional and digital media.

A limitation of descriptive statistics is that they cannot be applied to all types of data (Kaliyadan & Kulkarni, 2019), which is the case for item 1 (gender of the respondent), item 2 (age of respondents), item 3 (how often, in general, the respondents search for information via the traditional media), and item 4 (how often, in general, the respondents search for information via the digital media). Table 2 hereunder presents the summary of the results.

**Table 2: Demographics characteristics of respondents**

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	75	23
	Female	254	77
Total		<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Age	18-20	132	40
	21-25	176	53
	26-35	22	7
Total		<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Frequency of info search via traditional media	Once every week	14	4
	Once every month	63	19
	Once in some months	252	77
Total		<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>
Frequency of info search via digital media	Everyday	279	85
	Every 2 days	46	14
	Between 3 to 7 days	4	1
Total		<b>329</b>	<b>100</b>

According to the data, 23% of the 329 respondents were men and 77% of the respondents were women. Additionally, according to the data, the age group of 21 to 25 had the highest percentage (53% of the sample). The age group of 26–35 years old scored the lowest in the sample, accounting for 7%, while the younger age group of 18–20 years old recorded 40%, indicating the second highest score in the sample. Table 2 shows that 77% of the sample, or more than three-quarters of the total, stated that they looked for information

once a month through traditional media, while 19% of the respondents said they did so monthly. Merely 4% of the participants do a weekly search for information via traditional media. According to the data, the majority of respondents—85% and 14% of the sample, respectively—search for information via digital media every day and every two days. Merely 1% of participants stated that they conduct information searches using digital media once every three to seven days.

#### 6.4 Correlation Analysis between Variables

The Pearson correlation analysis was computed to determine the direction and degree of the correlations between the variables used in this

investigation. In order to guarantee the strongest possible correlation between the variables, the outliers discovered in the raw data were further eliminated. Table 3 shows all the results.

**Table 3: Results of the correlation matrix**

	Search Engine Optimisation	Content Marketing	Email Marketing	Social Media Marketing	Brand Awareness	Student's Decision-Making	Digital Marketing (Overall)
Search Engine Optimisation	1						
Content Marketing	0.57	1					
Email Marketing	0.69	0.52	1				
Social Media Marketing	0.53	0.68	0.41	1			
Brand Awareness	0.11	0.79	0.67	0.89	1		
Students' Decision Making	0.56	0.67	0.57	0.77	0.51	1	
Digital Marketing (overall)	0.31	0.58	0.71	0.50	0.64	0.88	1

Table 3's correlation results show that, whereas content marketing has a large positive connection (0.79), search engine optimisation has a poor association (0.11) with brand awareness. Brand awareness and email marketing were shown to be strongly positively correlated (0.67). Brand awareness and social media marketing were shown to be strongly positively correlated (0.89). Furthermore, students' decision-making and brand awareness had a strong positive association (0.51),

but students' decision-making was correlated by digital marketing (0.88).

#### 6.5 Regression analysis between the variables

Analysis of regression was done. The purpose of the regression study was to ascertain how much digital marketing (SEOs, CM, EM, and SMM) predicts students' decision-making. Tables 4 and 5 below provide a summary of the results.

**Table 4: Regression coefficient results for variable brand awareness**

Parameter	B	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Constant	-1373.98		3,137	0.00
Search Engine Optimisation	0.92	0.96	3.04	0.01
Content Marketing	47.90	0.17	37.08	0.00
Email Marketing	21.87	0.21	5.29	0.00
Social Media Marketing	37.56	0.98	34.65	0.00

$R^2 = 0.997$   
 R-value = 0.998  
 Adjusted R Square = 0.995  
 Std. Error of the Estimate = 2168.975

Based on the results, the following regression equation was determined:  
 $y_{hat} = b_0 + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + b_3x_3 + b_4x_4$

$$\hat{y} = -1373.986 + 0.92x_1 + 47.90x_2 + 21.87x_3 + 37.56x_4$$

where:  $x_1$  = search engine optimization,  $x_2$  = content marketing,  $x_3$  = email marketing  $x_4$  = social media marketing.

With an  $R^2$  value of 0.99 for the coefficient of determination, it can be inferred that social media, email, content, and search engine optimisation are statistically significant predictors of students'

decision-making. Additionally, the  $R^2$  value of 0.99 shows that digital marketing (search engine optimisation, content marketing, email marketing, and social media marketing) accounts for 99% of the variance in students' decision-making. Below is a summary of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) findings for regression analysis:

**Table 5: Analysis of variance - ANOVA**

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.085E10	3		601.75	0.00
	Residual	36069295.328	6	3.617E9	0.34	
	Total	1.089E10	9			

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Search engine optimisation, Content marketing, Email marketing, Social media marketing.  
 b. Dependent Variable: Students decision making

Table 5 presents the calculated F value of 601.75 for the variance resulting from the regression analysis. With three degrees of freedom in the numerator and six in the denominator, the critical value of F at the significance level of 0.05 is 4.754. A comparison of the F values provides support for the acceptance of hypothesis  $H_6$ . This indicates that the multiple regression model has a considerable impact on the dependent variable through mediating variable. Finding out which regression coefficients may be zero and which may not be another requirement for the investigation.

Drawing from this, it is evident that an individual evaluation of the regression coefficients was determined.

### 6.6 Independent t-test for gender

Using the sample independent t-test, significant differences between gender and the study's variables were found. The findings were compared after the mean test scores for the variables and gender were determined. Table 6 presents the condensed results.

**Table 6: Independent sample tests (t-test) for gender**

Variable	Mean	t-value	p < 0.05
Search Engine Optimisation	3.03	13.47	0.05
Content Marketing	3.99	23.08	0.00
Email Marketing	3.87	14.11	0.02
Social Media Marketing	4.68	25.98	0.00
Brand Awareness	3.79	21.59	0.04
Students' Decision Making	4.11	24.96	0.00

Statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$

An understanding of the outcomes is given by the independent sample t-test. For instance, social media marketing is highly valued by students ( $m = 4.68$ ), demonstrating the significance of social media in raising brand awareness and, consequently, impacting consumers' decision-making. strongly supported by a p-value of 0.00

and a high t-value of 25.98, which indicate a significant difference. The mean score for student decision-making was 4.11, with a t-value of 24.96 and a p-value of 0.00. A noteworthy t-value of 23.08 and a p-value of 0.00 suggest that content marketing had a high mean rate ( $m = 3.99$ ). With a t-value of 14.11, a p-value of 0.02 and a substantial



mean of 3.87, email marketing performed well. The mean score for brand awareness was 3.79, and the t-value was 21.59 with a 0.04 p-value. Ultimately, a mean of 3.03 with a t-value of 13.47 and a p-value of 0.05 was found for search engine optimisation. The findings suggest that digital marketing is crucial for private higher education institutions' marketing initiatives.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study have both theoretical and empirical implications for private HEIs in South Africa. Firstly, the results of the study established a statistically significant relationship between search engine optimisation and brand awareness. Since search engine optimisation helps internet users search for information to satisfy their needs, the management of private higher education institutions should use it to direct more traffic to the website from members of the targeted audience (Zilincan, 2015; Raju, 2019). The results suggest that management of private higher education institutions should optimise a website's technical configuration, content relevance, and link popularity so its pages become easily findable, more relevant, and popular towards user search queries, and consequently, search engines rank them better to enhance brand awareness (Mandal & Sajjad, 2020).

Based on the results, a statistically significant relationship was found between content marketing and brand awareness, as strategic content marketing has a proven track record of assisting companies in improving brand awareness (Team, 2023). The results support Mandal and Sajjad's (2020) claim that content marketing plays a crucial role in building brand awareness. Therefore, the study suggests that content marketing must not be overlooked but rather should be used by private higher education institutions management to assist in communicating effective brand information to attract and capture consumers to keep engaging with the brand (Ahmad, Musa, & Harun, 2016).

Email marketing also established a statistically significant relationship with brand awareness, indicating that brand information and messages sent to consumers create and reinforce brand awareness (Karen and Zia, 2022; Makrides et al., 2020; Yasmin et al., 2015). The results aligned with Mandal and Sajjad's (2020), who concluded that brand awareness can be influenced by good and effective email marketing. The results suggest that email marketing must be employed by the management of private HEIs as a strategy to send brand information and messages in the form of weekly newsletters, promotional emails, and

special deals to consumers to improve brand awareness and build strong relationships with consumers. Additionally, management must use email marketing with their alumni to motivate and influence their decision to pursue further studies. For example, from bachelor's to honours and master's degrees.

The results of the study revealed the strong importance of social media to private higher education institutions brand awareness, indicating that strategic use and management of social media will improve and enhance private higher education institutions brand awareness (Chierici et al., 2019; Ganesha and Ganapati, 2019). The results support studies by Martin et al. (2022), Pegoraro et al. (2017), and Febriyantoro (2021) that show that effective and efficient use of social media influences brand awareness. The results suggest that management of private higher education institutions must employ and continuously use social media marketing as a strategy to promote their brands, share information and brand updates, and even launch new programmes, projects, etc. by way of creating brand awareness and strong relationships with current and potential students.

Brand awareness plays a mediating role between digital marketing strategies and students' decision-making. The results indicate that students will recognise and recall a HEI brand by seeing its symbol, logo, information, or anything that links to such a brand on all digital platforms to influence their decision-making. The results support Karen and Zia's (2023) findings that the level of awareness of private higher education institutions brands plays a crucial role in influencing students decision-making regarding enrollment. The results aligned with Shahid et al. (2017) and Tali and Nautiyal (2022), who found that brand building and strong brand awareness play a significant role in shaping consumer decision-making towards a brand. The study, therefore, suggests that the management of private higher education institutions in South Africa must provide adequate and required brand information through digital media to enhance brand awareness, which has greater chances of influencing students' decision-making.

The overall direct influence of digital marketing strategy on students' decision-making was evaluated, and the results indicate that digital marketing overall (SEOs, CM, EM, and SMM) influences students' decision-making. The results indicate that the adoption of digital marketing strategies will be essential when it comes to students' decision-making (Gard et al., 2020; Kusumawati, 2019). The results confirm

Baltezarevic (2023), Al-Azzam and Al-Mizeed (2021), and Dhote, Jog, Gavade, and Shrivastava's (2015) conclusions that concluded that digital marketing strategies influence students purchasing decisions regarding the choice of higher education institutions. The results further supported that students are influenced by digital marketing, as the majority of prospective students use the internet to search for programme information from several higher education institutions to influence their decision-making (Harbi and Ali, 2022). Therefore, the study suggests that private higher education institutions I management must engage potential students via digital marketing strategies, as they will help influence students' enrollment decision-making, as most potential students engage more with digital marketing strategies to seek information about private higher education institutions before choosing their preferred choice.

The study has contributed to theory. The study theoretical contribution to the broad knowledge of digital marketing and students' decision-making by extending the theory of the persuasive knowledge model by stating that digital marketing strategies positively influence students' decision-making through brand awareness in private higher education institutions. This implies that creating messages and expose students through digital marketing can cause them to have a change attitude and think differently (Chen and Cheng, 2019; Kirmani and Campbell, 2008; Friestad and Wright, 1994) regarding the private higher education institution

### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

The advancement of digital marketing in assisting businesses in achieving their business goals cannot be considered a mere coincidence (Dash, Kiefer, and Paul, 2021). This implies that the role of digital marketing in assisting companies to interact with consumers on a global scale and solve companies' marketing problems is not accidental. Hentzen, Hoffmann, and Dolan (2023) asserted that consumers who are unaware of a brand fail to search for information due to a lack of awareness of such a brand. Hence, the study argued that, drawing from the results, it is evident that digital marketing strategies impact positively on potential students' enrollment decision-making in private higher education institutions, where brand awareness plays a crucial role in achieving that.

### **IX. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has several limitations. First, the sample of the study was taken from only five

private higher education institutions in South Africa and may limit the generalisation of its results to a broader population. The second limitation is that the scope of the study is restricted to South Africa. Further studies must be extended beyond South Africa. Additionally, future research must also be extended to public higher education institutions.

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