Navigating the Marketing Landscape: Strategies for Promoting Private Higher Education Institutions in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Private institutions in South Africa's higher education sector need effective marketing strategies to attract and retain students amidst competition. This article provides marketing strategies for Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa to navigate a competitive landscape. The objective of the research is to determine the effective media and marketing activities for PHEIs to target a larger market share. The study involved 23 semi-structured interviews with students enrolled at three PHEIs in South Africa. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns from transcribed interviews. Codes were created for each theme, and similar topics were clustered. Microsoft Word and Excel were used for data interpretation and visualisation. ATLAS.ti 22, a CAQDAS software, was employed for further analysis and interpretation. The study suggests that PHEIs in South Africa should prioritise their online presence, websites, and participation in high schools and career fairs to target a larger market share. Marketers should create and adapt their marketing strategies to include various communication channels and methods. Positive word-of-mouth interactions also play a significant role in the marketing efforts of PHEIs, so marketers should focus on developing strategies that generate such interactions.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviour, Marketing Activities, Media Activities, PHEI
JEL Classification: M3

1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa's current competitive business environment, PHEIs face the challenge of attracting and retaining students. With the market rapidly changing and developing, effective marketing strategies are crucial to differentiate themselves from competitors, build brand awareness, and increase enrolment. This article aims to provide insights and guidance on successful marketing approaches specifically tailored for PHEIs in South Africa using various influences of consumer behaviour as the basis.

South Africa's education sector has seen significant growth in recent years, with an increasing number of students seeking quality education and diverse learning opportunities. Private higher education institutions have emerged as key players in meeting this demand, offering specialised programs, flexible study options, and personalised support services. Private higher education providers fulfil a pivotal role in the country as there is a growing need for higher education in South Africa. However, these Private Higher Education Institutions face numerous challenges in a harsh current economic climate, highlighting this study's contributions. With growth comes intensified competition as both public and private institutions vie for the attention of prospective students. Private institutions must navigate a complex marketing landscape to reach and engage their target audience effectively. Developing a comprehensive marketing strategy is essential for establishing a strong brand presence, enhancing reputation, and ultimately driving student enrolment.

By November 2022, there were 93 registered private higher education institutions in South Africa (DHET, 2022:107-108). 752 003 full-time candidates enrolled to write the National Senior

Certificate examination, which is the final year of secondary school, and 580 555 full-time candidates attained this NSC qualification. A total of 278 814 candidates achieved admission to Bachelor studies, 193 357 achieved admission to Diploma studies and 108 159 achieved access to Higher Certificate studies in 2022 (DBE, 2022). From the figures noted, there is a market for PHEIs because public universities cannot accommodate these numbers of students. Therefore, this study addressed the identified gap and introduced marketing strategies that marketers and management can use within the PHEI industry in South Africa to navigate a complex and competitive landscape. The research objective of this article is to determine which media and marketing activities must be used in the marketing strategies of PHEIs to target a larger market share.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer behaviour is a field of study that always changes and evolves in nature (Babin and Harris, 2018:20). Therefore, numerous definitions of consumer behaviour are available throughout the literature. According to Mothersbaugh et al. (2020:6), consumer behaviour is defined as "the study of individuals, groups, or organisations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society."

Mothersbaugh et al. (2020:25) categorised the influences of consumer behaviour as internal and external influences. Many of the internal and external influences identified by these authors are supported by others, such as Babin et al. (2017:24), in the consumer value framework (CVF), which is a consumer behaviour theory that entails various factors that influence any consumption-related behaviour and ultimately determine the value associated with consumption. Other scholars identified the same influences but classified them under different categories. For example, in the Engel, Blackwell and Miniard model (also referred to as the EBM model) of consumer behaviour, the influences are classified as environmental and individual (Engel et al., 1995:154). Fahy and Jobber (2015:66) classified the influences as personal and social.

According to Kerin and Hartley (2017:130), the model of consumer behaviour includes psychological and sociocultural situational influences that influence the consumer purchase decision process. Kotler et al. (2022a:180) added their model, with the various influences on a buyer classified as cultural, social, personal and psychological influences. According to Solomon et al. (2022:200), the various influences on the decision-making process can be classified as internal or external influences. Still, external influences can be classified as situational or social.

Although there are various categorisations for the influences of consumer behaviour, several consumer behaviour models over the years highlight media, marketing activities and or communication specifically as important influences of consumer behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010:22; Babin et al., 2017:24; Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2019:345; Mothersbaugh et al., 2020:25).

Marketing is defined by Kotler et al. (2022a:31) as "the process by which companies create value for customers and society, resulting in strong customer relationships that capture value from the customers in return while creating value for society." According to Kotler et al. (2022b:517), marketing communication is "how firms attempt to inform, persuade, and remind consumers, either directly or indirectly, about the products and brands they sell." According to Hoyer et al. (2021:243), a marketing source is "the activating agent/medium/channel/platform that delivers the information and influence; for example, advertising, personal selling." Marketing sources, therefore, have the role of "influence through the mass media" because mass media sources can reach large consumer audiences, which shows their importance.

Companies must also allocate their marketing communication budget effectively over various communication modes, including advertising, online and social media, mobile communication, direct marketing, events and experiences, word of mouth, publicity and public relations, personal selling, and packaging. A company's integrated marketing activities can thus be evaluated in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency with which they "affect brand awareness and create, maintain, or strengthen brand associations and image" (Kotler et al., 2022b:526-527).

The number of different media channels used in a strategy or campaign influences its effectiveness (Clow and Baack, 2018:217). For example, when a company launches a campaign or a new plan or strategy and features advertisements in two media types, such as television and magazines, it will generate a greater effective reach than a campaign in only one medium, such as magazines. Some media companies have designed computer models to optimise reach and frequency, which are programs based on the probability theory, to help marketers effectively allocate advertising resources. According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019:203), media exposure effects "measure how many consumers were exposed to the message and their characteristics". Therefore, it is often used by broadcasters, publishers, and owners of websites to determine the size of their audiences.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

A qualitative research design in the form of semi-structured interviews was employed. One of the reasons for choosing a qualitative research design was the description of qualitative research by Saunders et al. (2019:179) as "a study that studies a participants' meanings to develop a conceptual framework and theoretical contribution." It also utilised an exploratory research design and followed a social constructivism paradigm. Most exploratory research designs provide qualitative data to a researcher, not quantitative, as they focus on developing a deeper understanding of a construct (Quinlan et al., 2015:127).

The target population of this study included students enrolled in three PHEIs, and a non-probability snowball sampling technique was used to draw the sample of 23 respondents until data saturation had been reached per institution. The PHEIs from which students were interviewed were Centurion Academy, Stadio and Akademia. No sampling frame was used since the Protection of Personal

Information Act 4 of 2013 does not permit PHEIs in South Africa to disclose the personal information of their enrolled students. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the primary data, and the interviews were each conducted on a one-on-one basis. The participants were approached via email (a personal invitation letter) or online. After all the interviews, the researcher used computer programs to transcribe them.

After all the interviews were transcribed and checked, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify broad themes and patterns. For every theme, categories and codes were created. The steps included the researcher identifying similar topics and clustering them together. The researcher distinguished major, unique and/ or previously excluded topics from these clusters. The researcher then abbreviated the clusters, returned to the original texts, and annotated where the themes had been identified. The clustered topics were converted into categories using descriptive wording. Related topics were grouped. Each transcript document was analysed in the same manner. For the next step, the researcher used diagrams (in Microsoft Word) and tables (in Microsoft Excel) as quantification elements to help interpret and display the data. Afterwards, the researcher used these programs to discuss the frequencies of every code mentioned. After the coding and frequency identification, the researcher visualised the data using ATLAS.ti 22, which leads to developing interpretations. ATLAS.ti 22 is a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis software (CAQDAS), supporting the qualitative data analysis process. Conclusions were drawn from the information.

Because coding is an essential part of the qualitative data analysis process, the following themes, categories and codes in the table below were generated to analyse the high volume of data. Similar topics were clustered together, and from these clusters, the researcher distinguished major, unique and/or previously excluded topics. The researcher then abbreviated the clusters, returned to the original texts, and annotated where the themes had been identified. The clustered topics were converted into categories using descriptive wording. Related topics were grouped. After the data was converted into themes, categories, and sub-categories, the researcher started interpreting it. Each transcript document was analysed in the same manner.

The theme of media and marketing activities had two categories: the form of media and marketing activities that they have seen or experienced in their lives and the type of influence they have experienced from the media or marketing activities, as illustrated by Figure 1. The first category was the form of media that influenced them, together with other marketing activities that attracted or influenced the participants. Table 1 shows the media and marketing activities theme, categories and codes.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study grouped media and marketing activities for discussion purposes, although these two factors can also be considered separately. Almost half of the participants said the media positively affected PHEIs and influenced their decisions. No participants said that the media showed positivity towards public institutions.

Table 1: Media and marketing activities theme, categories and codes

Theme	Category	Code
Media and marketing activities	Form	Radio
		Television
		Social media
		News features
		Internet
		Emails
		Billboards
		Brochures
		School career fair
		Open day of PHEI
		Other
	Type of influence	Positive towards PHEI's in the media
		Positive towards public institutions in the media
		No influence- Positive towards PHEI's in the media
		No influence- Positive towards Public institutions in the media
		No influence

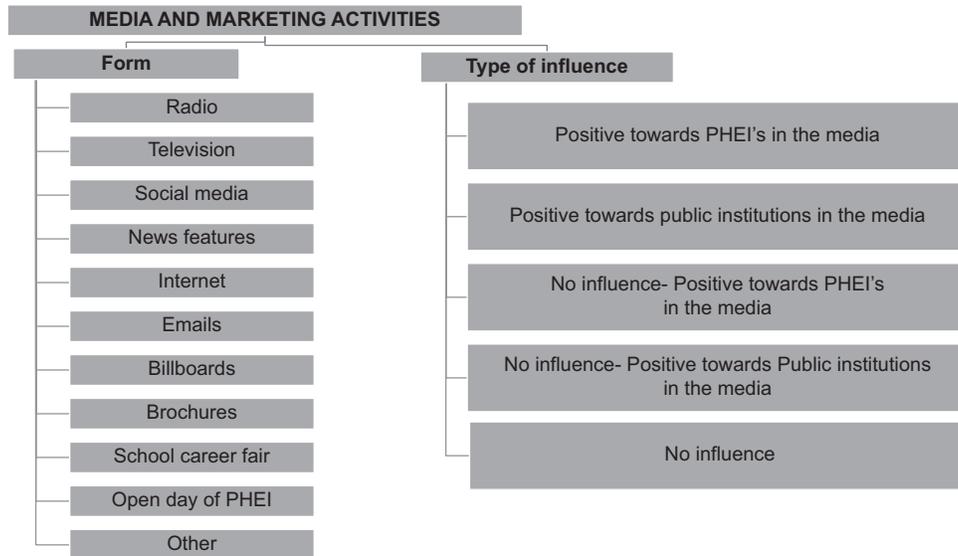Source: Researcher's depiction (2022)

This indicates that because the media showed positivity towards PHEIs, participants were influenced positively, which could have led to their decision to study at a PHEI. Lastly, almost a third of the participants said that neither the media nor any marketing activities influenced their decision to study at a PHEI. This shows that many potential customers/students do not consider the media or marketing activities when choosing a PHEI, which can be linked to their personal preferences. Figure 2 illustrates these results.

The media forms that influenced the participants' decisions the most were social media, the school career fairs, radio, and the internet, including searches on the institution's website. This can be directly linked to when participants stated that the sources that influenced their memory, knowledge and learning (other internal influences of consumer behaviour) were also the school career fairs and internet searches. Because of this, PHEIs must focus on their websites, online presence, and visits to high schools and school career fairs. Figure 3 illustrates these results.

There was a distinct link between the forms of media and marketing activities and the memory, knowledge and learning sources. The importance of these media and marketing activities and memory, knowledge and learning are thus highlighted. Because these media and marketing activities reached the participants, they have memory and knowledge and have previously learned about PHEIs. Therefore, media and marketing activities are factors influencing consumer behaviour directly.

Communication was highlighted through the theme of media and marketing activities, as participants explained that through certain communication channels or initiatives such as emails, etc., the PHEI they are currently studying sent them communication even before they registered there. This also indicated the importance of communication as a contributing factor. Word-of-mouth can also be considered a very important contributing factor to media and marketing activities as it is inevitably linked to these factors.
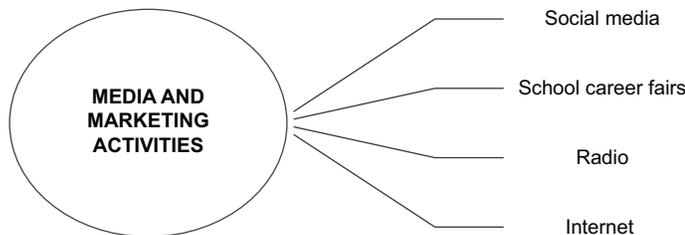
Figure 1: Mapping of media and marketing activities

Source: Researcher's depiction (2022)

Figure 2: Media and marketing activities influence
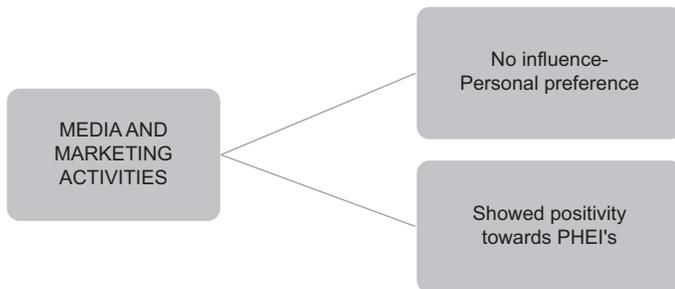
Source: Researcher's depiction (2022)

Figure 3: Media and marketing areas of focus

Source: Researcher's depiction (2022)

All the contributing factors were identified as only contributing factors and not direct influences, as they were encouraging an influence without directly reflecting a cause of behaviour change.

During the interview, participants highlighted the importance of communication in their memory, knowledge, and learning regarding PHEIs. They emphasised that having a clear communication channel or flow of communication between management, stakeholders, lecturers, students, and parents was crucial. Communication was also linked to media and marketing activities. Some participants mentioned that they received communication from the PHEI they are currently studying through certain channels such as emails, even before registering there. This indicated the significance of communication as a contributing factor.

Communication and word-of-mouth play vital roles in consumer behaviour as well. Consumers learn about services and gain knowledge about them through these channels, which are then stored in their memory. Their attitude, perception, and motivation towards a PHEI are influenced by what they hear through these interactions. Participants also mentioned that certain aspects of their personality influenced their choice of PHEI. These characteristics were communicated to them through various channels, and they were acceptable to them due to their personality and personal factors.

In summary, communication and word-of-mouth interactions are essential factors in participants' memory, knowledge, and learning regarding PHEIs. These factors influence how consumers perceive and feel about a particular institution and their motivation to enrol there.

Word-of-mouth can also be considered a very important contributing factor to media and marketing activities as it is inevitably linked to these factors. Communication and word-of-mouth interactions can be linked to an individual's social class and lifestyle because their social class and lifestyle will influence the communication methods that will reach them effectively. Communication can be linked to an individual's reference groups; for example, an individual's reference groups can be seen as a source of word-of-mouth and a direct communication channel.

This confirms the theory of Hoyer et al. (2021:243) that marketing sources have the role of influence through the mass media because mass media sources can reach large consumer audiences, which shows their importance. It also confirms the theory of Clow and Baack (2018:217), which states that the number of different media channels used in a strategy or campaign influences its effectiveness. It also highlights the theory of Kotler et al. (2022b:526-527), when stated that companies must also allocate their marketing communication budget effectively over the various modes of communication, which includes advertising,

online and social media, mobile communication, direct marketing, events and experiences, word of mouth, publicity and public relations, personal selling, and lastly packaging. A company's integrated marketing activities can thus be evaluated in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency with which they "affect brand awareness and create, maintain, or strengthen brand associations and image".

5. ATLAS.ti NETWORK LINKS

In the following section, the links between the various themes, categories and codes, as illustrated through network diagrams, will be highlighted, illustrated and discussed. These links are

Figure 4: Communication ATLAS.ti 22 network link
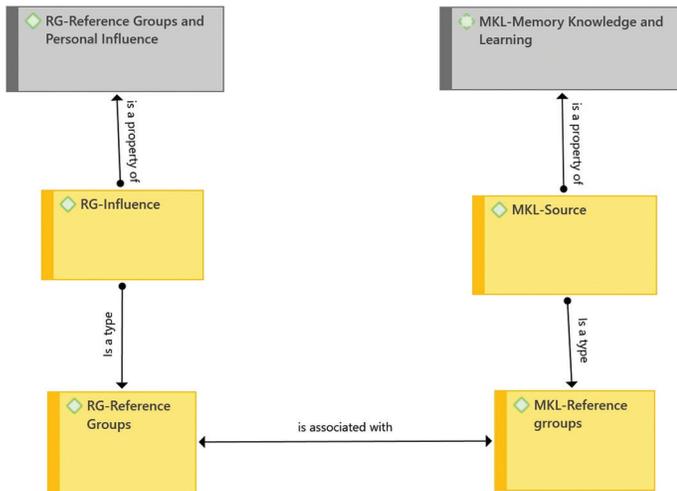
Source: Researcher's depiction (2022)

important as they highlight the specific factors that influence consumer behaviour.

5.1. Communication Link
Communication was a definite characteristic of the nature of the memory, knowledge and learning that participants had during the interview. Some participants explained that they had prior knowledge that PHEIs always have a clear communication channel or flow of communication between management, stakeholders, lecturers, students, parents, etc. Communication was also a code for the theme media and marketing activities. Participants explained that through certain communication channels or initiatives such as emails, the PHEI they are currently studying sent them communication even before registering at the PHEI. This also indicated the importance of communication. The link between *MKL (Memory, Knowledge and Learning)* communication and *MMA (Media, Marketing Activities)* communication was then automatically made by ATLAS.ti 22. Therefore, communication will be a contributing factor suggested by this study. Figure 4 illustrates this.

5.2. Media and Marketing Link
There was a distinct link between the forms of *MMA* and *MKL* sources. Figure 5 illustrates this link's network diagram. The importance of these *MMA- Forms* and *MKL-Sources* is thus highlighted by this diagram. Because these media and marketing activities reached the participants, they have memory and knowledge and have previously learned about PHEIs. Therefore, media and marketing activities and memory directly influence consumer behaviour.

5.3. Recommendations
It can be recommended that as media is an external factor that should be considered by PHEIs in South Africa when targeting a

Figure 5: Media and marketing ATLAS.ti 22 network link
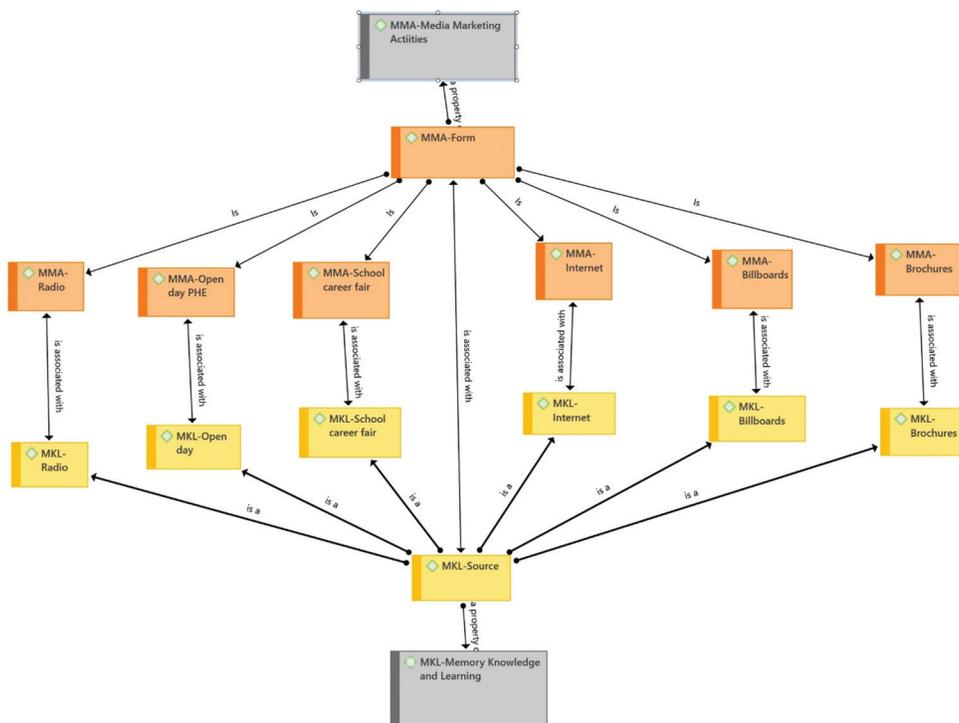
Source: Researcher's depiction (2022)

larger share of the available market, marketers and PHEIs must focus on their media presence and how they are featured in the media. The media forms that influenced the participants' decisions the most were social media, the school career fairs, radio, and the internet, including searches on the institution's website. Therefore, PHEIs must focus on their websites, online presence, and visits to high schools and school career fairs.

It can be recommended that because marketing activities are an external factor that should be considered by PHEIs in South Africa when targeting a larger share of the available market, marketers and PHEIs must focus on their marketing strategies and marketing content as it plays a very important role in reaching potential students. The participants of this study indicated that content from social media, the school career fairs, radio and the internet, including searches on the institution's website, influenced their decision to study at a PHEI. Therefore, PHEIs must focus on their websites, online presence, and high school career fair visits.

It can be recommended that because communication is a contributing factor that should be considered by PHEIs in South Africa when targeting a larger share of the available market, marketers and PHEIs must focus on creating and adapting their marketing strategies by including various communication channels and methods. Marketers must use communication channels and content to reach the target market and inform individuals of the positive attributes of PHEIs.

It can be recommended that because word-of-mouth is a contributing factor that should be considered by PHEIs in South Africa when targeting a larger share of the available market, marketers and PHEIs must focus on creating and adapting their marketing strategies to generate positive word-of-mouth interactions. If the PHEIs can encourage individuals to talk to each other about the positive attributes of PHEIs, they will reach the target market.

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