South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences
ISSN: (Online) 2222-3436, (Print) 1015-8812

Digital marketing influences on student preference: Evidence from Nelson Mandela University

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Dates:
Received: 05 Aug. 2025
Accepted: 29 Apr. 2026
Published: 16 Sept. 2026

How to cite this article:
Luhanga, G., Deliwe, A.P. & Ngxukumeshe, T., 2026, 'Digital marketing influences on student preference: Evidence from Nelson Mandela University', *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences* 29(1), a6468. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajems.v29i1.6468

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Background: Marketing has evolved from barter-based trade in early societies to the structured marketplace of the Industrial Revolution, where mass production necessitated targeted strategies. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have adapted by incorporating online marketing to attract and retain students in an increasingly competitive environment.

Aim: This article examines the influence of online marketing strategies: social media marketing (SMM), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), email marketing, search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) on student preference for HEIs.

Setting: The research concentrated on Nelson Mandela students and understanding how digital marketing influences students' preference of university.

Method: A positivist research paradigm and quantitative research method were followed. A cross-sectional survey was conducted, targeting first-time entering students at Nelson Mandela University. A total of 448 valid responses were collected and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

Results: The results indicate that all five online marketing strategies significantly influence student preferences. Social media marketing and SEO emerged as the most influential variables, enhancing student engagement and institutional visibility. Electronic word-of-mouth was particularly impactful in trust-building, while SEM and email marketing played supplementary roles in decision-making.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that search engine optimisation (SEO) and social media marketing (SMM) are the most influential online marketing strategies affecting students' university preferences, while electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), email marketing and search engine marketing (SEM) have lesser but significant effects. The study highlights the importance of sustainable, student-centred digital marketing strategies that prioritise organic visibility, authentic engagement and credibility over short-term paid advertising. However, the findings are limited by the concentration of respondents within one faculty, indicating the need for future research involving more diverse samples and emerging platforms such as TikTok, LinkedIn and AI-driven marketing tools.

Contribution: These findings offer universities practical insights on how to tailor their digital marketing efforts by focusing on the most effective strategies, such as prioritising social media platforms or leveraging eWOM to build trust among prospective students.

Keywords: email marketing; eWOM; online marketing; search engine marketing; search engine optimisation; social media marketing; student preference; South Africa and higher education.

Introduction

Marketing has evolved from barter-based trade in early societies to the structured marketplace of the industrial revolution, where mass production necessitated targeted strategies (Uyan 2017). The emergence of mass media newspapers, radio and television further transformed marketing by enabling broader reach and engagement. NEW: Condensed historical overview removes broad industrial revolution detail and focuses on digital marketing evolution in higher education institutions (HEIs). The late 20th century saw another shift with the advent of the internet, offering global access and innovative digital marketing strategies (Gillpatrick 2019). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated this digital transformation, pushing businesses

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and institutions to integrate online marketing into their core strategies (Ercolano 2020). Higher education institutions have adapted by incorporating online marketing to attract and retain students in an increasingly competitive environment (Pawar 2024). Online marketing, also known as digital marketing, leverages digital communication channels, including social media (SM), email and search engines, to engage prospective students (Karakus et al. 2026). Higher education institutions operate within a commercial landscape where students function as consumers, making enrolment decisions based on available online information (Khan 2025). Marketing managers at HEIs must recognise that prospective students today are more informed, articulate and have access to flexible, affordable degree options (Mogaji 2019). The higher education sector has seen an increase in marketing materials, including advertisements and SM campaigns (Kisiolek, Karry & Halkiv 2021). A study by Paladan (2018) highlights the growing use of digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube in university marketing. Website design and user experience have also become critical in shaping student perceptions. Universities must adopt innovative, student-centred strategies to remain competitive (Kusumawati 2019). Online marketing offers a cost-effective alternative for universities seeking to attract students while managing financial constraints (Paladan 2018). The transition from traditional to online marketing is necessary to address increased competition and evolving student expectations. Higher education institutions, like businesses, must implement strategies that cater to student aspirations to enhance satisfaction and enrolment rates. Prospective students consider various factors when choosing a university, including academic reputation, programme offerings, financial considerations and institutional branding (Echchabi & Al-Hajri 2018). While some prefer on-campus learning, others opt for online programmes due to their flexibility (Valtonen et al. 2021). Digital marketing strategies such as SM engagement, search engine optimisation (SEO), content marketing, email campaigns and virtual campus tours play a crucial role in attracting and informing students (Makrydakis 2021). By effectively leveraging these digital tools, universities can increase visibility, engage with prospective students and communicate their unique value propositions, ultimately driving enrolment (Stephenson, Heckert & Yerger 2015). Africa, and South Africa in particular, is still underrepresented in empirical research on HEI online marketing tactics, despite global advances in digital marketing in higher education. Digital marketing has not yet been fully incorporated into institutional initiatives at many of the region's colleges, and it is unclear which techniques have the greatest impact on student choices (Khan 2025). The proportional effects of SM, email marketing, SEO, search engine marketing (SEM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on student enrolment decisions in African contexts are not well-documented. This study makes a contribution by presenting empirical data from South Africa regarding the impact of various online marketing tactics on student preferences, contrasting their relative efficacy and providing useful advice for academic institutions looking to improve enrolment and recruitment through focused digital marketing campaigns. The term 'student preference' in this study refers to prospective students' positive assessment of and propensity to choose a specific university based on views of institutional value and online marketing contacts (Li et al. 2025). It includes both behavioural intents (probability of participation) and attitudinal components (favourability and perception).

Purpose of the study

This article explores the influence of online marketing strategies on student preference, providing insights to improve higher education marketing in South Africa. The primary objective is to investigate how five online marketing strategies, social media marketing (SMM), eWOM, email marketing, SEO and SEM affect South African university preferences among students. The secondary objectives include:

- To determine which internet marketing tactics most accurately forecast students' preferences.
- To investigate how different demographics perceive the efficacy of internet marketing.
- To give HEIs practical advice on how to maximise digital marketing tactics for hiring.

Literature review

The role of online marketing in higher education

The shift to digital marketing has revolutionised student recruitment, enabling institutions to engage with prospective students through diverse online platforms (Baltezarevic 2023). Higher Education Institutions increasingly rely on digital channels to create brand awareness, promote programmes and facilitate student interactions. Online marketing strategies such as SMM, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), email marketing, SEO and SEM have emerged as key tools for influencing student preference for universities (Singh et al. 2021).

Current digital marketing practices among South African higher education institutions

Higher education institutions in South Africa have embraced digital marketing tactics; according to recent studies, the degree and complexity of implementation differ greatly among institutions. Although universities frequently use SM platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn to interact with potential students, there are significant differences in the consistency of content strategy, posting frequency and engagement tactics (Khan 2025; Kisiolek et al. 2021). Although not all institutions use organised SEO methods, SEO practices are increasingly recognised as crucial for enhancing institutional visibility. While some institutions rely on a rudimentary web presence without purposeful optimisation, others maintain well-optimised websites with clear navigation and keyword targeting (Swart & Schutte 2024). Similarly, there is inconsistent use of SEM, especially paid advertising on sites like Google Ads. Due to financial limitations, certain institutions rely mostly on organic reach,

whereas resource-rich institutions are more likely to participate in paid search marketing (Mogaji 2019). Student evaluations and testimonials are examples of eWOM, which is frequently present but not always strategically managed. Some colleges take a passive stance, reducing the potential impact of peer influence on prospective students, while others actively promote and curate student-generated content (Wahab, Aqif & Bint-e-shehzad 2024). Although email marketing remains a popular strategy, its effectiveness varies with the level of segmentation and personalisation. Instead of using data-driven, focused communication tactics, many organisations continue to rely on generic bulk email campaigns (Khabo-Mmekoa 2023). In general, the available research indicates that South African HEIs do not consistently embrace or implement digital marketing tactics. This variation implies that despite widespread recognition of the significance of digital marketing, institutions differ in their strategic maturity, integration and effectiveness. This disparity highlights the need for empirical research, such as the current study, to assess these methods' impact on student preferences and their relative efficacy across different institutional contexts.

Theoretical approach to online marketing and theoretical framework of consumer preferences

This study frames the impact of internet marketing tactics on student choices using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen 1991). According to TPB, attitudes, subjective standards and perceived behavioural control all have an impact on behavioural intentions. Digital marketing techniques including SMM, eWOM, SEO, SEM and email marketing are anticipated to have an impact on students' views about universities, perceptions through peer and social networks and enrolment intentions in the context of higher education.

Previous research on online marketing strategies used by HEIs has revealed a dynamic landscape shaped by the rising significance of digital platforms and the evolving expectations of prospective students. Studies have highlighted the prevalence of numerous online marketing strategies used by HEIs, including SMM, content marketing, search engine optimisation, email marketing and personalised online experiences. In order to target students and improve brand exposure, universities are using innovative strategies like SM marketing platforms, eWOM, email marketing, SEO and SEM (Baltezarevic 2023).

Social media marketing

Social media marketing is defined as the process of driving traffic to or drawing attention to a website using SM platforms (Bhebe 2023). Numerous SM platforms have made it possible for companies to interact with large audiences about their products and services, as well as to explore new marketing opportunities, given the vast scope of the market (Singh et al. 2021). Social media is utilised in several ways, including, among others, blogs, microblogs (Twitter), social networks (LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram) and media sharing sites (YouTube and Snapchat). Companies may feature their pages on SM platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn to interact with their followers and market their goods and services, which boosts sales and brand recognition in return (Ahmad & Guerrero 2020). The online material could go 'viral' as people may be compelled to repost it on SM (Camilleri 2021). Such online user-generated material and word-of-mouth advertising are typically considered by potential customers as reliable sources. Social media platforms have evolved into essential tools for universities to connect with both current and potential students, facilitating brand awareness, community engagement and information dissemination (Julian et al. 2023). Research highlights the significance of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn in this engagement process, showcasing their role in enhancing student enrolment and programme awareness (Hansjee 2021). Social media marketing plays a significant role in influencing student preferences for universities. Social media sites like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook offer avenues for sharing updates, educational materials, events on campus and success stories (Chaudhari & Bhornya 2022). Students are increasingly utilising SM to explore universities and make enrolment decisions. According to Turner (2017), 60% of students have liked or followed a college they are considering, and 63% of students use SM to explore universities they are interested in. One study found that 78% of students joined a social network exclusively for admitted students, and 92% of respondents used Facebook one or more times daily, demonstrating the significance of media in the college decision-making process (DiAna 2014). Another study examined the impact of SMM on student enrolment in Kenyan private universities, concluding that these institutions used SMM platforms to influence student enrolment, and that there was a positive effect on the use of the platforms (Kimani & Obwatho 2020). Positive attitudes towards a behaviour raise the possibility of intention development, according to the TPB (Ajzen 1991). Social media marketing differs from eWOM; in that, it is not peer-generated communication but rather institution-generated content. According to TPB's normative belief component, eWOM influences students' subjective norms and perceived social influence. Electronic word-of-mouth indicates the effect of peers and social groups, which can significantly influence university perceptions and enrolment intentions, in contrast to SMM, which is started by institutions. When students assess peer opinions before making educational decisions, eWOM has been shown to increase credibility and trust (Rabah et al. 2024).

Subsequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> **H1:** There is a significant relationship between social media marketing and students' preference for a university.

Electronic word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as customer feedback that comes from sources that are deemed to be unaffected by commercial considerations regarding a certain good, service or company (Huete-Alcocer 2017). Word-of-mouth is widely

perceived as one of the most important variables influencing consumer behaviour (Daugherty & Hoffman 2014). The development of online technologies resulted in the emergence of the latest form of word-of-mouth communication known as eWOM. Electronic word-of-mouth refers to the dynamic and evolving process of information sharing between prospective, present or past consumers about a good, service, brand or company, which is accessible to multitudes of individuals and organisations across the internet (Ismagilova et al. 2020). Consumers believe that eWOM communications are more trustworthy than traditional media (Ismagilova et al. 2020). Consumers typically trust the opinion of other consumers more than that of sellers. This is because they consider opinions from reliable sources to be devoid of any personal bias or benefit. According to recent studies, 93% of consumers stated that online reviews, which are a type of eWOM communication, had a substantial influence on their choice to make a purchase (Tata, Prashar & Gupta 2020). Research has shown that eWOM has a significant impact on consumers' decision-making when it comes to selecting or purchasing products, including choosing a university (Harahap et al. 2017). Previous research examining how university online marketing affects students' loyalty found that eWOM moderates the link between online marketing and student loyalty, while intention to enrol works as a mediator in that relationship (Wahab et al. 2024). This implies that eWOM can enhance the effectiveness of universities' marketing efforts in attracting and retaining students.

Subsequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> **H2:** There is a significant relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and students' preference for a university.

Email marketing

Email marketing in its simplest form is described as an email sent to a client list that typically includes a sales pitch and call to action, such as an offer for a university advertising programme (Velelo & Matenda 2023). According to Sabbagh (2021), email marketing is becoming more widely acknowledged as an effective online marketing approach. It is known to be a cost-effective yet successful tool for businesses to connect with and engage their target market, enhance brand recognition, stimulate sales and cultivate customer loyalty. Due to the cost-effectiveness of email marketing, companies can reach a multitude of individuals instantly and consistently, with minimal investment (Sabbagh 2021). Labausa, Pinca and Cruda (2023) argue that the best way to connect with students is through email marketing, a form of direct marketing. In the digital landscape, email marketing remains a potent tool for South African universities to interact directly with both current and prospective students (Khabo-Mmekoa 2023). As universities dedicate increasing attention and resources to SM efforts, email marketing provides a counterbalance that can effectively reach and engage key stakeholders. Research suggests that email marketing can significantly influence consumer buying behaviour, including in the higher education context (Yashas & Krishnan 2023). As university applicants increasingly view SM as a crucial source of information, institutions can leverage email campaigns to supplement their digital outreach efforts and forge stronger connections with current and prospective students. Email marketing has been found to be an effective tool in influencing students' preference of university. According to Angulo-Ruiz, Pergelova and Cheben (2016), email marketing personalisation strategies including behaviour-triggered emails, customised messaging and email list segmentation have been demonstrated to boost consumer engagement and create tailored experiences. Email marketing is straightforward and adaptable thanks to segmentation and dynamic content, in contrast to SMM and eWOM. According to research, personalised email marketing, which makes use of customised messages and behavioural triggers, boosts open and click-through rates, engagement and can build trust and good behavioural intentions towards the sender (Jayanna & Mayya 2025).

Subsequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

> **H3:** There is a significant relationship between email marketing and students' preference for a university.

Search engine optimisation

In today's highly competitive digital landscape, having a strong SEO strategy is essential for companies of all sizes and industries. Search engine optimisation is a process that involves enhancing the visibility and ranking of a website in search engine results pages (SERPs) (Iqbar et al. 2022). A site will experience an increase in traffic from search engines if it appears more frequently in search results. Consumers usually look at the top three pages of search results or the first page of results; therefore, it is undeniable how important it is to rank well in a SERP for specific keywords. Search engine optimisation plays a vital role in the online marketing strategies of South African universities (Velelo & Matenda 2023). One of the most important factors affecting students' choice of institutions is search engine optimisation. Search engine optimisation strategies may boost an institution's online presence, reputation as a brand and student recruiting efforts through content optimisation for search engines (Baltezarevic 2023). In the competitive landscape of higher education in South Africa, where universities need to differentiate themselves to attract potential students, effective SEO strategies are essential for standing out and reaching the target market (Swart & Schutte 2024). A study investigating the impact of SEO on the business performance of a private university in Sarajevo reveals that SEO can significantly improve a university's online visibility and attract more potential students (Poturak, Keco & Tutnic 2022). Research indicates that SEO plays a significant role in attracting potential students by improving search engine rankings and ensuring universities are easily discoverable by prospective students (Iddris 2018). By making pertinent information more easily accessible and boosting confidence in information search and comparison, SEO helps students feel more in control of their behaviour. According to consumer decision-making models, choice certainty is strengthened when reliable information is easily accessible (Kotler 2020).

Subsequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: There is a significant relationship between search engine optimisation and students' preference for a university.

Search engine marketing

As a result of increased activity on web-based search engines, companies are spending a significant amount of their online marketing budget on SEM to connect with potential customers who are searching for products online. According to Sen (2015), SEM is an approach for companies to promote themselves through paid advertisements that appear on search engine results pages. Sen (2015) cites keywords, meta-tags, backlinks and content as the key metrics for SEM. A university's website plays a big role in influencing students' decisions to enrol in and settle on a university (Jan & Ammari 2016). According to Saichaie and Morphew (2014), institutional websites continue to be the most popular source of information for prospective students, with up to 84% of prospective students reporting that they use them to research universities.

Subsequently, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H5: There is a significant relationship between search engine marketing and students' preference for a university.

Higher education, like other service industries, is characterised by intangibility, inseparability, perishability and volatility. Increased globalisation and internationalisation have expanded students' options, making decision-making more complex (Rembielak, Rashid & Parlinska 2020). Consumer preferences in higher education are influenced by socioeconomic, marketing and non-marketing factors, all shaping students' enrolment choices.

Socioeconomic factors

Peer and reference group influence

Students' choices are influenced by peer groups, family and online communities, shaping perceptions of institutions (Groenewald 2019). Social influence manifests through word-of-mouth recommendations, peer pressure and social norms (Narayan, Rao & Saunders 2011). Students frequently base academic decisions on peer comparisons and conformity, as well as their reference groups.

Economic influence

Economic conditions such as tuition fees, financial aid availability and career prospects are key determinants in students' educational preferences (Maverick 2022). During economic downturns, students prioritise cost-effective education and financial aid options (Hampson et al. 2021). Tuition fees, along with expected return on investment (ROI), significantly impact enrolment decisions.

Purchasing power influence

Students' financial resources, including family income, savings and scholarships, determine their choice of institutions (Mugambi & Obuba 2021). Family income is a significant determinant, with wealthier students enrolling in more prestigious institutions (Ilgan et al. 2018). Limited financial resources restrict options, shaping students' perceived affordability and institutional value.

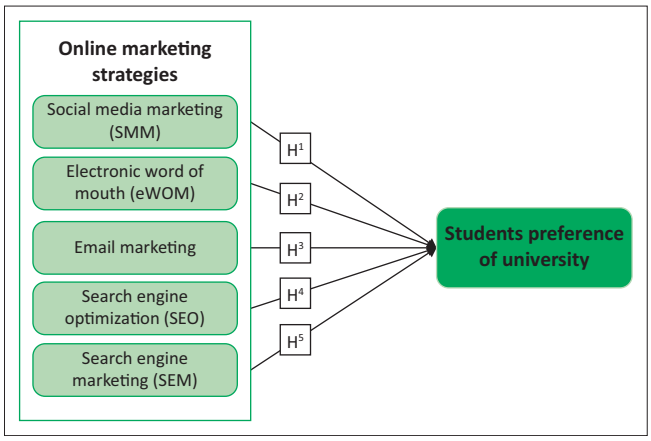

FIGURE 1: Hypothesised model.

Social media influence

Social media significantly impacts students' perceptions of institutions, enrolment decisions and engagement strategies (Sindhuja, Panda & Krishna 2023). Universities use user-generated content, virtual tours and peer testimonials to enhance credibility (Jones 2023).

Marketing influences

Marketing campaigns shape students' awareness and engagement (Kusa, Zauskova & Cabyova 2021). Universities use digital advertising, influencer partnerships and content marketing to strengthen institutional branding (Mohideen et al. 2021). Brand equity, determined by students' perceptions of quality and reliability, is crucial for universities to maintain a superior position.

Individual preferences

Students' individual preferences, shaped by career aspirations, cultural background and academic interests, impact university selection. Key factors include faculty reputation, institutional culture and perceived academic quality (Ramya & Ali 2016). Research highlights that students' perceptions of institutional quality directly affect satisfaction and enrolment. Furthermore, institutional reputation and cultural alignment play critical roles in shaping preferences (Qazi et al. 2021). This study focuses on the direct effects of internet marketing methods on student preferences, even though socioeconomic, peer and economic factors also have an impact. Although they are not operationalised as variables in the model, the other aspects are regarded as environmental impacts. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model which forms the basis for this article. This model consists of five independent variables (SMM, email marketing, eWOM, search engine optimisation and SEM) and one dependent variable (preference for university). The constructed model below aims to test the relationship between the preference for the university and the online marketing strategies discussed.

Each online marketing strategy in the proposed model is conceptually connected to elements of consumer decision-making processes and the TPB (Ajzen 1991). It is anticipated that SM and email marketing would affect students' attitudes and create positive opinions of educational institutions. Based on the theoretical model, the following hypotheses were tested to achieve the objectives of this study:

H1: There is a significant relationship between social media marketing and students' preference for a university.

H2: There is a significant relationship between electronic word-of-mouth and students' preference for a university.

H3: There is a significant relationship between email marketing and students' preference for a university.

H4: There is a significant relationship between search engine optimisation and students' preference for a university.

H5: There is a significant relationship between search engine marketing and students' preference for a university.

Methods

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design guided by a positivist paradigm, appropriate for measuring relationships between predefined constructs. The aim was to assess the influence of five online marketing strategies: SMM, eWOM, email marketing, SEO and SEM on student preference for university. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool. The target population comprised first-time entering students aged 18–65 at Nelson Mandela University. A non-probability convenience sampling approach was applied due to accessibility constraints and the large size of the population. First-time students were recruited using convenience sampling. We recognise that the generalizability of this method is limited. Despite ethical approval, the prior defence of 'accessibility constraints' clearly refers to limited access to personal student contact information because of data privacy laws. Probability sampling should be used in future research to guarantee a more representative sample. Institutional data protection policies limited access to the complete enrolment list, despite the target demographic being explicitly stated (first-time incoming students). In order to ensure clarity on the sample procedure, this limitation is specifically acknowledged. A total of 448 valid responses were collected, exceeding the minimum sample size recommended for multiple regression analysis with five predictors. Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire developed on Google Forms. The instrument was designed based on established scales and previous literature and consisted of six sections measuring: student preference (dependent variable), SMM, eWOM, email marketing, SEO and SEM (independent variables). Each item was measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire also included demographic questions. This study's measurement scales are derived from well-known tools. The student preference scale assesses behavioural intents (probability of enrolment) as well as attitudinal elements (favourability and perception). The corresponding institutional or peer-driven influence is measured by each marketing strategy scale.

To ensure content validity, the instrument was developed with reference to existing studies (Baltezarevic 2023) and reviewed by subject matter experts. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to assess construct validity, and all factor loadings exceeded the 0.6 threshold. Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs scoring above 0.7, confirming reliability. Given the exploratory character of the study and sample limitations, EFA was carried out even though confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) would have been perfect for confirming the pre-defined scales. Construct validity was validated by this method. Confirmatory factor analysis should be used in future studies with bigger, more representative sample sizes. The online survey link was disseminated via university email channels and during in-person class sessions. Participation was voluntary, and ethical clearance was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were first cleaned and coded to address missing values and ensure consistency across all variables. Data analysis was conducted using Statistica. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations and frequency distributions, were computed to provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents and responses across each construct.

Inferential statistical techniques were applied to examine relationships among the key variables:

- Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength and direction of bivariate associations between each online marketing strategy and student preference. This analysis was useful for identifying significant linear relationships prior to further modelling.
- A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the predictive power of the five independent variables (SMM, eWOM, email marketing, SEO and SEM) on the dependent variable (student preference). This method was chosen to determine both the individual and combined effects of the predictors while controlling for multicollinearity.
- Independent samples t-tests were used to assess potential differences in perceptions of online marketing strategies based on gender. This allowed for analysis of whether male and female students rated the effectiveness of strategies such as SEO or SEM differently.

All tests were conducted using a significance level of $p < 0.05$, meaning relationships or group differences were considered statistically significant if the probability of error was less than 5%.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from Nelson Mandela University Research Ethics Committee on 24 July 2024 (No: 0922). All procedures adhered to institutional research ethics guidelines, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and data privacy. Respondents were presented with an informed consent form at the beginning of

the online questionnaire, which clearly explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No personal identifiers were collected, and all responses were anonymous. The data were securely stored and used solely for academic research purposes.

Results

The study sample consisted of 448 valid responses from first-time entering students. The demographic analysis, as presented in Table 4, revealed that the sample comprised predominantly females (62%) and young respondents aged 18–24 years (97.5%), with smaller proportions in the 25–30 age group (2%), followed by the smallest proportions of respondents (0.2%) in the 31–40 and 41–50 age groups, respectively. Most participants identified as African (93.8%), with minorities including Coloured (4.4%), white (0.9%), Indian (0.5%), and (0.5%) belonging to an unspecified category. The majority of participants identified as African (93.8%), followed by Coloured (4.4%), White (0.9%), Indian (0.5%), and unspecified (0.5%) categories. Regarding study status, most participants were full-time students (98.9%), while 0.9% were part-time students and 0.2% did not specify their study status part-time and 0.2% unspecified. Respondents were primarily affiliated with the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences (96.9%), with 2.9% in the Faculty of Humanities and 0.2% in the Faculty of Education. Regarding qualifications, 87.1% held a Grade 12 certificate, 5.8% a bachelor's degree, 5.1% a national diploma or certificate, 0.7% postgraduate qualifications and 1.3% reported holding other qualifications. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, ensuring internal consistency across all online marketing strategies. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate that all constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold ($\alpha > 0.7$).

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine relationships between online marketing strategies and student preferences. Results, summarised in Table 2, reveal positive associations, particularly between SEO and student preference ($r = 0.554$) and SMM ($r = 0.477$).

A multiple regression model was applied to assess the impact of each marketing strategy on student preference. The model results, displayed in Table 3, indicate that SEO ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$) and SMM ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) had the most significant influence.

The ratings of digital marketing tactics by male and female students were compared using a t-test. Compared to female respondents ($M = 3.85$), male respondents ($M = 4.12$) gave higher scores. The analysis's reference group was women, as shown by the negative *t*-values; the sign has no bearing on how group differences are interpreted.

Discussion

The correlation matrix revealed statistically significant positive relationships between all five online marketing strategies. These results affirm that online marketing strategies are meaningfully associated with students' university choices. This conclusion is consistent with Ismagilova et al. (2020) who emphasise the role of online interactions in influencing consumer behaviour. The significant correlation between SMM and student preference aligns with Singh et al. (2021), who argue that direct engagement via platforms like Instagram or Facebook enables institutions to establish brand trust and awareness. Similarly, the positive relationship between SEO and student preference

TABLE 3: Regression analysis results.

Predictor	β coefficient	SE	*t*	*p*-value
Social media marketing	0.29	0.05	5.21	< 0.01
eWOM	0.18	0.06	3.67	< 0.05
Email marketing	0.14	0.07	2.98	< 0.05
SEO	0.35	0.04	6.32	< 0.01
SEM	0.22	0.06	4.15	< 0.05

SE, standard error; eWOM, electronic word-of-mouth; SEO, search engine optimisation; SEM, search engine marketing.

Note: The reference group for the *t*-test is female; negative *t*-values indicate direction relative to the reference group.

TABLE 1: Reliability analysis.

Construct	Cronbach's alpha
Social media marketing	0.845
eWOM	0.802
Email marketing	0.788
SEO	0.821
SEM	0.795

eWOM, electronic word-of-mouth; SEO, search engine optimisation; SEM, search engine marketing.

TABLE 4: *t*-test results for gender differences.

Variable	Male mean	Female mean	*t*	*p*-value
Social media marketing	4.12	3.85	-3.21	< 0.01
eWOM	3.76	3.69	-1.12	0.26
Email marketing	3.58	3.49	-1.78	0.08
SEO	4.24	3.97	-4.31	< 0.01
SEM	4.05	3.70	-5.12	< 0.001

eWOM, electronic word-of-mouth; SEO, search engine optimisation; SEM, search engine marketing.

TABLE 2: Correlation matrix.

Construct	Student preferences	SEO	eWOM	Social media marketing	Email marketing	SEM
Student preferences	1	-	-	-	-	-
SEO	0.554**	1	-	-	-	-
eWOM	0.447**	0.442**	1	-	-	-
Social media marketing	0.477**	0.406**	0.380**	1	-	-
email marketing	0.474**	0.447**	0.308**	0.386**	1	-
SEM	0.521**	0.586**	0.427**	0.511**	0.412**	1

eWOM, electronic word-of-mouth; SEO, search engine optimisation; SEM, search engine marketing.

**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

supports findings by Iqbar et al. (2022), who underline the role of discoverability in students' research processes during university selection. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive power of each online marketing strategy on student preference. The model was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming that the independent variables jointly influence the dependent variable. The model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in student preference, demonstrating the practical relevance of digital marketing in higher education. Social media marketing had the strongest positive influence on student preference ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), validating H1. This supports Baltezarevic (2023), who highlights SMM as an essential driver of engagement among Gen Z. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube and Instagram allow universities to create authentic and relatable narratives that align with students' values. The interactive nature of these platforms also facilitates two-way communication, which has been linked to increased student trust and commitment. Search engine optimisation was the second most significant predictor ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), validating H4. These results correspond with findings from Makrydakis (2021), suggesting that optimised content increases university visibility during students' online search process. The positive influence of SEO reinforces the importance of discoverability and information accessibility when students compare institutions. Electronic word-of-mouth demonstrated a moderate positive impact on student preference ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$), validating H2. This aligns with Tata et al. (2020), who posits that peer recommendations have higher credibility among prospective students compared to institutional messaging. User-generated content, student testimonials and online reviews enhance institutional reputation and trustworthiness. Although SEM showed a positive association ($\beta = 0.14$), it was the least impactful among the five predictors, though still statistically significant, thus validating H5. This suggests that while paid advertisements can increase awareness, students may view them with some scepticism, especially compared to organic results or peer-driven content. Email marketing was found to be a significant, though relatively weaker predictor ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H3. This outcome suggests that while email campaigns may play a role in influencing student decisions, their effectiveness depends on personalisation and relevance. This echoes Sabbagh (2021), who emphasised that impersonal mass emails are less effective in Generation Z-targeted marketing. The independent samples *t*-test assessed gender-based differences in perceptions of online marketing strategies. Notably, males reported significantly higher ratings for SEO and SEM compared to females. This suggests a gendered difference in information search behaviour, with males potentially placing greater emphasis on search functionalities and paid advertisements. These findings resonate with Valtonen et al. (2021), who noted that male students tend to be more analytical in their university research process, valuing structured search strategies and ranking data. In contrast, females may rely more on interpersonal communication and social cues, potentially making eWOM or SMM more influential for this group. The *t*-test did not reveal significant gender differences in perceptions of SMM, eWOM or email marketing, implying a convergence of digital preferences across these strategies. This aligns with Paladan (2018), who reported a narrowing gender gap in online engagement behaviour among university applicants. By analysing the impact of each online marketing technique on student preference and evaluating potential gender variations in perceptions of these strategies, our findings directly meet the study's secondary objectives. Overall, the findings confirm prior literature advocating for digital marketing in higher education recruitment (Kusumawati 2019). The significant influence of SMM and SEO reinforces their role as primary tools for influencing prospective student perceptions. These strategies directly impact both the awareness and evaluation stages of the student decision-making process. Furthermore, this study adds to the growing body of literature stressing the importance of multi-channel strategies. The significant regression results across all five marketing strategies support Stephenson et al. (2015), who argue that integrated digital campaigns yield stronger outcomes than isolated efforts.

Conclusion

This article provides empirical evidence on the role of online marketing strategies in influencing student preference for universities. The findings indicate that SEO and SMM are the most influential strategies, reinforcing the importance of organic search visibility and digital engagement. Meanwhile, eWOM, email marketing and SEM contribute significantly but to a lesser extent. These results align with existing literature, highlighting the growing reliance of students on peer recommendations, interactive digital experiences and content-driven engagement. Despite the positive impact of SEO and SMM, this article underscores the limitations of short-term paid advertising strategies. While SEM and email marketing provide immediate exposure, they lack the long-term relationship-building capacity observed in organic digital marketing approaches. The results suggest that institutions must shift towards sustainable, student-centred engagement strategies to maintain long-term recruitment success (Stefko, Fedorko & Bacik 2015). From a practical standpoint, universities must develop integrated digital marketing strategies that prioritise SEO-driven content, SM engagement and eWOM credibility management. Institutions that fail to do so risk losing competitive advantage in an increasingly digital recruitment landscape. Moreover, marketing managers should balance organic and paid strategies, ensuring that student engagement, authenticity and institutional reputation remain central to their approach (Mogaji 2019). These findings offer critical insights into higher education marketing strategies, particularly in competitive digital environments. Institutions aiming to enhance their online presence should invest in SEO optimisation, data-driven content marketing and authentic student engagement tactics. Such an approach will not only improve visibility, but also foster long-term trust and student satisfaction (Kisiolek et al. 2021). The fact that 96.9% of respondents were from the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences is a significant study constraint. This focus restricts

how broadly the results can be applied to students in other faculties. To improve the representativeness and application of the findings, future studies should strive to incorporate a more varied sample from various faculties and institutions. While this article provides a strong foundation, there are areas that warrant further investigation. Firstly, future research should explore the role of emerging digital platforms such as TikTok, LinkedIn and AI-driven marketing tools in shaping student preferences.

As SM consumption patterns evolve, understanding which platforms and content types yield the highest engagement will be crucial for university marketing efforts. Secondly, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how online marketing strategies influence student retention and long-term brand loyalty. While this article captures a snapshot of student preferences, further research could examine how engagement with online marketing impacts students' actual enrolment decisions and satisfaction post-admission. Finally, qualitative studies should complement quantitative research to explore the psychological and behavioural factors driving student preferences. While this article highlights broad trends, understanding the motivations, perceptions and emotional triggers behind students' decision-making could enable universities to develop more refined, targeted marketing strategies. In line with the secondary objectives, this study revealed gender-based disparities in perceptions, identified the digital marketing tactics that most significantly affect student preferences and provided useful insights for targeted university marketing. By integrating these future research directions, universities can continue refining their digital marketing approaches, ensuring data-driven, student-centric strategies that align with the evolving digital landscape.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on Grace Luhanga's Master's dissertation titled 'The influence of online marketing strategies on student preference of university: The case of Nelson Mandela University' towards the degree of Masters in Commerce (Business Management) in the Business Management Department at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, in 2025. This dissertation was supervised by Prof. Ayanda Deliwe and Dr Tandiswa Ngxukumeshe. Portions of the data, analysis, and discussion have been revised, updated, and adapted for publication as a journal article. The original thesis is publicly available at: https://dspacecris-nc1.mandela.ac.za/entities/thesis/0f3477df-4228-4891-a88b-9a0a6882d55c. The authors affirm that this article complies with ethical standards for secondary publication, and appropriate acknowledgement has been made of the original work.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Grace Luhanga: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Ayanda P. Deliwe: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Tandiswa Ngxukumeshe: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Ayanda P. Deliwe, upon reasonable request.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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