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The role of branding in the choice of a university of technology: A study among first years students in Kwazulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT

Brand choice has historically played an important role in a wide range of industries, particularly in the private sector, where billions of Rands are invested to entice potential customers. Taking this into consideration, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of brand awareness and brand image on first-year student selection of a University of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal. The objectives of the study were to establish and identify the brand preference and image attributes that entice first-year students' selection of a University of Technology (UoT). The study also examined the biographic variables of those students. To accomplish these objectives, an exploratory study using a quantitative research approach was conducted, in which questionnaires were administered to 500 first-year students at the selected Universities of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal. The study revealed that topics such as investments in brand awareness and brand image, safety and security, the caliber of staff, delays in academic programmes, student-lecturer relationships, and service delivery were identified as factors that influenced the participants' selection and willingness to recommend their institutions to potential students. Thus, the study recommends that UoTs should pay more attention to branding strategies as an agenda to ensuring institutional profitability and viability, relationship management, and human resource. Finally, the findings of this study are limited to KwaZulu-Natal and should not be extrapolated outside this region.

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Introduction

Many people believe that higher education is the major avenue for improving the lives of previously under-represented communities (Dennin, Schultz, Feig, Finkelstein, Greenhoot, Hildreth & Miller, 2017). Nonetheless, higher education institutions are competing for students while confronting several expectations on how to adapt to a fast-changing world (Roy, 2016). Furthermore, rising university competition has been demonstrated to generate a more market-like environment, forcing these institutions to constantly reinvent themselves to remain relevant to the targeted students (Wiese, 2008). As competition for these students grows, institutions (both public and private) are creating and implementing new recruitment strategies, marketing, and branding strategies to enhance financial investment and enrollment, which will aid in the process of student retention (Becker, Cummins, Davis, Freeman, Hall & Ananthanarayanan, 2017).

Universities, as well as public and private corporations and/or organizations, invest heavily in brand awareness and brand image to sustain and expand their operations (Radicchi, 2014). Such investments frequently return substantial profits for these institutions, whether in terms of financial development, notoriety, and/or service quality, as well as the capacity to appeal to a specific demographic, i.e. students. However, this has not been shown in the case of a number of South African universities, which spend billions of Rands on brand image and brand awareness initiatives each year (Fay & Zavattaro, 2016). According to pragmatic

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interpretations, the amount of money spent by most higher education institutions on brand awareness and brand image has not always resulted in the desired outcome (Chapleo, 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study tries to understand why students choose different institutions and how this has become a top concern for universities. As a result, institutions in South Africa and around the world opted to diversify their marketing strategies. Between 1990 and 2000, it was discovered that social media, among other platforms, played a significant effect in the decisions made by millennials, particularly when it came to the selection of a university (Duffett, 2017). As a result, universities have attempted to reinvent themselves by increasing their visibility on social media and other prominent digital platforms (Gunduz & Pembecioglu, 2017).

Therefore, the study aims to investigate the comparative attributes of brand awareness and brand image that influence the enrolment of first-year students in selected Universities of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal. Given that this research falls under the purview of marketing, it is critical to employ this viewpoint to throw light on the activities of the department of higher education (DHET). Given the breadth of marketing, a brief background relevant to this topic will be presented, as will a closer look at one of its components, branding.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

History of Universities of Technology

The South African public tertiary education sector has followed specific ways, which can be viewed as monotonous, in enticing students to apply to their respective institutions (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Until the 1990s, attracting the correct number of students, or the right mix of students, was not a priority, because state funding was frequently granted with insignificant reporting requirements other than academic success, implying a continuous stream of income to fund operations (Council on Higher Education, 2016). This, however, has shifted in recent years. This transition has prompted universities of technology to take a more proactive stance and to practically manage which students are accepted to their particular schools, a tendency that has been observed globally. Owing to competitive constraints, universities must become more proactive in their marketing efforts. As a result, many institutions have already turned to corporate concepts to run their operations and recruit their "customers" (i.e. the students) (Kusumawati, 2013).

Mergers of higher education institutions can be considered as part of South Africa's post-apartheid transition. Mergers gave birth to the UoTs, a designation given to South Africa's erstwhile Technikons. The mergers aimed to reform Technikon curricula, which previously solely prepared students for advanced career training and concentrated on teaching students how to use knowledge rather than learning it (Cooke, 2001). The Technikon curriculum was experiential and vocational in nature, with study programmes aimed to generate graduates who can quickly use their talents in the actual world of work (Maserumule, 2005). It is hoped that the transition to UoTs will promote applied research with a focus on social good and social progress, as well as the development, diffusion, and commercialization of technologies relevant to the national imperative (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2019). In conclusion, Ebewo & Sirayi (2018) believe that South Africa's higher education system has developed beyond its fragmented, blinkered, elite, and irregular apartheid heritage in recent years. However, much of the apartheid legacy remains, and considerable work needs to be done in the higher education sector. The construction of UoTs and the rebranding of newly established institutions are all part of the current landscape in higher education.

In KwaZulu-Natal, two mergers unfolded, and as a result, in 2002, the ML Sultan and Technikon Natal merged to form an institution known as the Durban Institute of Technology (DIT), the first merger to occur in Africa; known as Africa's technological powerhouse. Later in 2006, this entity was rebranded as the Durban University of Technology (DUT). This shift was part of the country's higher education department's need to improve student academic achievements and match worldwide benchmarks to attract top-quality students. More specifically, to develop the expertise of the leading academics in the country (DUT, 2019). Another change was that of Mangosuthu Technikon, which was created in 1974, was rebranded and renamed Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) in November 2007, which continued to offer technical disciplines and did remarkably well in the mining and agriculture industries. Later, new disciplines were added as part of the University of Toronto's endeavor to attract a diverse range of staff and students while still offering a variety of degrees (MUT, 2019).

Branding and Brand knowledge

Branding has a vast and varied history that is beyond the scope of this paper. To summarize, the concept of branding dates back to 1500 BC, when people used a hot iron to imprint markings on their animals to identify them (Alcott, Giampietro, Mayumi & Polimeni, 2012). Business enterprises have used branding as a means of establishing company identity, and it is viewed as a source of competitive advantage. The brand is the company's insignificant possessions that serve as an influential difference for the organization and its customers (Kim, Jin-Sun & Kim, 2008). According to Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2012), a brand is a distinct notion or perception that a product conveys in the eyes of a potential consumer, and it must thus provide value fulfillment. Corporate branding has been regarded as a method for resolving a company's plethora of difficulties. Corporate branding is a strong tool, and a well-executed corporate branding strategy may greatly benefit the entire company. According to Ajike, Kabouh & Ogbuanu (2015),

the focus on the company's values and culture in corporate branding literature has resulted in firms becoming unduly preoccupied with their own identity and losing the ability to be responsive to change.

From both the user and manufacturing marketplaces, product labeling (branding) is mutual. However, there has been little research on the branding of facilities and offerings, notably in higher education. However, in today's increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment, academies must consider branding as a solution to the drastically limited market. According to Mourad, Ennew & Kortam (2010), academies require branding as a beneficial tool for distinguishing themselves. Furthermore, this will provide students with assurance in product selection as well as deliver on the promise of the institution's amenities (Tsai, Lo & Cheung, 2013). Other motivations for branding for government tertiary institutions include improving their appearance and status in light of public funding, attracting superior students and workforce in the face of competition from well-subsidized private institutions, and communicating a logic of institutional pride.

Brand knowledge is also an important factor in student decision-making. To begin, students must examine the brand before making their decision on a postsecondary institution. Increasing brand awareness increases the likelihood that the brand will be included in the consideration set (Lock, 2016). According to the theory, brand knowledge consists of a brand node in which consumers recall how the various relationships are connected. According to Elsharnouby (2016), the relevant possibilities that exist between brand knowledge and consumer reaction are brand cognisance (by brand memory and acknowledgement) and the courtesy, power, and exclusivity of brand meanings in consumer memory. Figure 1 shows one example of this.

Figure 1: Brand knowledge model; *Source:* Shimp & Andrews (2013).

Branding of Institutions of Higher Learning

Branding is an irrational tool, a persona, or a character that Institutions of Higher Learning use to validate conformity in their surroundings (Meyer & Rowan, 2015). Universities opt to brand as a result of increased rivalry among higher education institutions on a national and international scale. These circumstances have encouraged universities to implement market-oriented techniques to differentiate their services from those of competitors to attract as many students as possible (Butt & Rehman, 2010).

Higher education institutions are noted for their diversity of ethics, freedom, intense debate, and variances in academic subjects, but branding requires partially established morals and distinct identity (Taylor & Tyler, 2012). This raises the question of whether overall academic standards might find a place in branding practices. Furthermore, it begs the question of whether such methods are based on the ethnic heritage that primarily accepts the tertiary institution as a systematic entity. The freedom to investigate, independence, assurance, and the choice to convey knowledge and study are among considerations that potential students may ask themselves before making a decision. Thus, branding has the power to boost the established honor of educational institutions.

It should be emphasized that tertiary institutions are trademarks, and while they are relatively similar, they do have structures that distinguish them from one another. These constructions are notable for their contribution, distinct character, and benefits (Chapleo, 2015). As a result, in this more competitive environment, a brand becomes a key motivator in the selection of a higher institution (Budd, 2017). Since the 1980s, corporate branding of postsecondary institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States has grown in importance as competition for students, professors, and staff members have increased (Mupemhi, 2013). As a result, the application of marketing principles and ideas that have previously been used in the commercial arena is spreading to a growing number of institutions around the world. Furthermore, research undertaken in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom demonstrates that image, funding, company, and integration are the primary sources of competitive advantage in tertiary institution corporate branding (Wiese, 2008).

Selection of HEIs in South Africa

With an ever-increasing number of educational options, prospective students look for colleges that will provide them with one-of-a-kind instructive knowledge that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, students often choose an educational program that will prepare them for a bright career and provide them with a wealthy job. A variety of factors have a significant role in determining whether to attend a public or private higher institution. The same is true when deciding whether to attend a traditional university, a university of technology, or a college. A decision concerning higher education can be deemed high involvement because it involves critical concerns such as future employment, acquaintances, and life fulfillment. However, there are significant downsides, such as a high risk of disappointment, such as the likelihood of not finding employment. As the potential first-year student often has little prior knowledge of the tertiary setting, he or she will rely heavily on an external search for information. As a result, HEIs must understand which communication networks are trustworthy and which will be referred to during such an external search.

Joseph & Joseph (1998) noted in the Selection of HEIs in South Africa that service excellence, the importance of education, and degree (content and structure) are the most important criteria, even though there are beneficial institutional features. According to Rocca, Washburn & Spring (2004), an influential individual in a learner's tertiary institution's decision-making process can include classmates, parentages, caretakers, other families, past students, instructors, and therapists. Furthermore, Rocca et al. (2004) maintained that parentages or caregivers have an impact on a learner's postsecondary institution decision. Furthermore, Schuster, Constantino & Klein (1989) found parentages or caregivers to be influential in tertiary institution selection. In contrast, Cartmell & Robertson (2011) claimed that compared to a decade before their study, peers are more powerful than parents or caregivers. The authors further discovered that learners' peers had a greater influence when choosing a university. Other people of influence mentioned in the research included learners' families, educators in a certain discipline, and learners who attended a prospective institution (Washburn, Garton & Vaughn, 2002). Academic standing, the cost of amenities, the size of lectures, learner status, fees, financial aid or subsidy accessibility, the diversity of majors, and the location of the institution all had an impact (Vennela, 2017).

Mudhovozi & Chireshe (2012) discovered monetary incentives including grants, acceptable job chances, and potential revenue to be the second most impactful factor in first-year student admissions. Furthermore, Rothstein (2011) discovered that learner assistance propositions have an immediate and direct influence on whether learners register. These factors also influenced whether or not students had enough money to stay enrolled. Academic standing is one of the most influential institutional criteria in influencing learner university selection (Herren, Carmell & Robertson, 2011). This is further supported by Washburn, Garton & Vaughn (2002), who determined that academic status is the most powerful institutional feature for learners to consider when making a decision. Aside from monetary incentives and academic standing, pricing, location, and a foundation for occupation are also powerful institutional features. Furthermore, the university's decisions to communicate with students were deemed to have a substantial impact.

Research and Methodology

The study was both explanatory and quantitative in nature. An explanatory study was conducted to have a better understanding of the research problem. The study population consisted of students from universities of technology in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. The table below depicts the total number of first-year students enrolled at both DUT and MUT. These numbers were used to estimate the number of students who will be available to complete the questionnaires. **Table 1 depicts** more information about the population, target population, and sample size.

Table 1: Population, target population, and sample size

Population	Target population	Population of first-year students	Sample size
UoTs in KZN	-	9 800	500
DUT	First-year students - Durban	6 000	300
MUT	First-year students	3800	200

Source: DUT and MUT websites, enrolment figures 2018

Sample sizes greater than 30 and fewer than 500, according to Sekaran & Bougie (2019), are adequate for most studies. Owing to the numerous variables to be examined, this study has a population of 9800 and a sample of 500 people. A study with 9000 to 10000 participants should have a sample size of 368 to 370 people (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019), but because the researcher allowed for non-response due to the nature of the sample, it was deemed that a sample size of 500 would be sufficient. The non-probability sampling technique and quota sampling were used in the study, which picks a sample of respondents with the same proportions of qualities as the entire population, but not in an ad hoc manner. As a result, the study focused on first-year students from the two universities mentioned, who were chosen based on race and gender in an equal number.

This study used a survey technique, with self-administered questionnaires serving as the data gathering instruments. The current study used a 'self-delivery' technique by the researcher to first-year students during the First Years' Orientation and Registration periods, with the assistance of trained field workers to the participants of the study. This strategy was chosen because it frequently enhances response rate; also, the researcher was able to clarify questions that respondents did not fully understand to decide which questions needed rephrasing and/or were to be eliminated from the study. The questionnaires were gathered immediately after each respondent completed them. This method lowers the danger of losing copies of questionnaires or receiving non-responses (Bowling, 2005).

The researcher followed a five-step procedure for the data analysis, as suggested by Vosloo (2014). These are:

- i. Validation and Editing (Quality control);
- ii. Coding;
- iii. Data Entry;
- iv. Machine Cleaning Data; and
- v. Tabulation and Statistical Analysis.

Results And Discussion

Table 2: Gender distribution by UoT

			University of Technology		Total
			DUT	MUT	
Gender	Male	Count	113	96	210
		% within UoT	38.6%	47.1%	42.2%
	Female	Count	178	108	286
		% within UoT	60.8%	52.9%	57.4%
Total	Count		293	204	498
	% within Gender		58.8%	41.0%	100.0%
	% within UoT		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total		58.8%	41.0%	100.0%

Fisher Exact test = 0.086

Table 2 depicts the gender distribution of responders based on their individual UoT. The Fisher exact tests failed to find any significant gender differences based on the respondents' university ($P > 0.05$). Results from the Durban University of Technology (DUT) respondents revealed that females (60.8%) outnumbered males (38.6%). A similar pattern was observed among Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) respondents, with females outnumbering males (52.9%) to (47.1%). When compared to MUT responses, DUT students (58.8%) make up a larger proportion of the total (41.0%). This demonstrates uniformity in terms of the estimated population size in both institutes. It should be noted that a small percentage of DUT respondents (0.2%) declined to declare their gender.

Table 3: Age group by UoT

Age group			University of Technology		Total
			DUT	MUT	
Age	Below 18	Count	36	5	41
		% within UoT	12.2%	2.5%	8.2%
	18-21	Count	207	145	352
		% within UoT	69.9%	71.1%	70.4%
	22-25	Count	41	48	89
		% within UoT	13.9%	23.5%	17.8%
	Above 25	Count	9	6	15
		% within UoT	3.0%	2.9%	3.0%
	Total	Count	296	204	500
		% within UoT	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total		59.2%	40.8%	100.0%

Fisher Exact test = 0.000

Table 3 shows the respondents' age groups according to UoTs. The Fisher exact tests, as indicated by the degree of significance, reveal that the age group of the respondents differs significantly ($P < 0.05$). For example, it can be seen that respondents between the ages of 18 and 21 make up the majority for both the DUT (69.9%) and the MUT (71.1%). Predictably, respondents over the age of 25 had the lowest representation for DUT (3.0%) and MUT (2.9%). The low presence of respondents above the age of 25 may be

linked to the South African education system, in which learners complete matric and enter higher education institutions between the ages of 18 and 19. This could also explain the domination of the 18–21 age group among respondents at both UoTs examined.

Table 4: Ethnicity by university

			University of Technology		Total
			DUT	MUT	
Ethnic Back-ground	African	Count	274	202	476
		% within UoT	92.6%	99.0%	95.2%
	Coloured	Count	10	1	11
		% within UoT	3.4%	0.5%	2.2%
	Indian	Count	11	0	11
		% within UoT	3.7%	0.0%	2.2%
	White	Count	1	1	2
		% within UoT	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%
Total		Count	296	204	500
		% within university	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	59.2%	40.8%	100.0%

Fisher Exact test = 0.001

Table 4 presents the respondents' ethnicity. The Fisher exact tests indicate that there is a highly significant difference between the major ethnic groups ($P < 0.05$). African students (92.6%) were the majority among DUT respondents, while White students had the lowest percentage (0.3%). Similarly, to MUT, African students make up the vast majority (99.0%), while Indian students are non-existent. This suggests that the two institutions are well-known and preferred by the African students as opposed to the other ethnic groups.

Table 5: Respondents' faculty of study by UoT

	Programme		University of Technology		Total
			DUT	MUT	
Faculty	Accounting and Informatics	Count	149	1	150
		% within UoT	50.3%	0.5%	30.0%
	Applied Sciences	Count	19	0	19
		% within UoT	6.4%	0.0%	3.8%
	Arts and Design	Count	13	0	13
		% within UoT	4.4%	0.0%	2.6%
	Engineering	Count	13	58	71
		% within UoT	4.4%	28.4%	14.2%
	Health Sciences	Count	12	0	12
		% within UoT	4.1%	0.0%	2.4%
	Management Sciences	Count	87	48	135
		% within UoT	29.4%	23.5%	27.0%
	Natural Sciences	Count	0	97	97
		% within UoT	0.0%	47.5%	19.4%
	Total	Count	296	204	500
		% within UoT	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	59.2%	40.8%	100.0%

Chi-Square test = 0.000

The respondents' faculty for each respective UoT is shown in Table 5. The Chi-Square test reveals a very high significant difference in the representative faculties ($P < 0.05$). For the DUT respondents, students from the Accounting and Informatics faculty were more (50.3%); followed by Management Sciences (29.4%). MUT, by contrast, had more respondents from the Natural Sciences (47.5%), followed by the Engineering faculty (28.4%).

Table 6: DUT ranking of the important brand awareness attributes

Brand awareness	N	Frequency							Friedman Chi-Square test	P
		Mean	Ranking	Not important at all of little	Important	Moderately important	Very Important	Extremely important		
Family and friends	296	3.48	2	12.8%	14.2%	15.9%	26.4%	30.7%	117.202	0.000
School visits by institution staff	296	2.96	5	26.7%	10.1%	22.0%	23.3%	17.9%		
Institution website	296	3.58	1	14.9%	6.4%	17.6%	27.7%	33.4%		
Campus visits and open days	296	3.03	4	24.0%	13.0%	17.2%	27.0%	18.6%		
Alumni	296	2.70	6	27.7%	16.6%	24.3%	20.9%	10.5%		
High school teacher	296	3.13	3	19.9%	14.9%	20.3%	22.0%	23.0%		

As shown in Table 6, the Friedman Chi-Square test revealed statistically significant differences of more than 0.01 in the perceived ranking of the most essential brand awareness traits by DUT students ($X^2(5) = 117.202$; $P < 0.001$). According to the data, more students consider the institution website (33.4 %), family and friends (30.7 %), and high school teachers (23.0 %) to be extremely essential brand awareness aspects in their choice of UoT. Alumni (27.7 %) and school visits by institutions (26.7 percent) were seen as unimportant in their choice of a UoT. However, more respondents (27.0 %) deemed campus visits to be very significant in their choice of UoT. The Friedman Chi-Square test, based on mean values, identified institutional website (1) as the most important brand awareness feature, followed by family and friends (2). The least essential brand awareness attribute for students' choice of UoT was alumni, which was placed as (6).

Table 7: MUT ranking of the important brand awareness attributes

Brand awareness	N	Frequency							Friedman Chi-Square test	P
		Mean	Ranking	Not important at all	Important	Moderately important	Very Important	Extremely important		
Family and friends	204	3.22	2	16.2%	16.2%	18.1%	28.4%	21.1%	55.602	0.000
School visits by institution staff	204	2.77	6	27.9%	17.2%	17.6%	24.0%	13.2%		
Institution website	204	3.36	1	16.7%	12.7%	15.2%	28.4%	27.0%		
Campus visits and open days	204	2.59	4	27.9%	24.0%	19.6%	17.6%	10.8%		
Alumni	204	2.76	5	27.5%	19.1%	18.6%	19.1%	15.7%		
High school teacher	204	3.08	3	24.0%	12.3%	16.2%	26.5%	21.1%		

Table 7 displays the MUT respondents' ratings of the brand awareness attribute. According to the level of significance, the Friedman Chi-Square test revealed statistically significant variations beyond 0.01 in the MUT students' assessed ranking of the most essential

brand awareness traits ($X^2(5) = 55.602$; $P < 0.001$). According to the data, more students consider the institution's website (28.4%), family and friends (28.4%), and high school teachers (26.5%) to be highly essential brand awareness aspects in their choice of UoT. On the other hand, school visits by the institution (27.9%), campus visits (27.9%), and alumni (27.5%) were viewed as not important at all in their choice of a UoT. Overall, and drawing from the mean values, the Friedman Chi-Square test ranked institutional website (1) as the most important brand awareness attribute, followed by family and friends (2). School visits by the institution staff were ranked (6) as the least important brand awareness attribute for a students' choice of a UoT.

Figure 2: DUT/MUT brand awareness

Figure 2 depicts the source of DUT/MUT brand awareness. For the DUT brand, the majority of respondents (20.6%) cited family and friends as their source of DUT brand awareness, followed by the internet (19.6%), and word-of-mouth (13.2 %). In contrast to the DUT, the majority of respondents (19.6%) selected the internet as the basis of their awareness of the MUT brand, followed by MUT alumni (12.7%), and family and friends (12.3%). Overall, brand awareness via social media was the lowest source for DUT (2.7%) and MUT (1.5%), respectively.

Table 7: Reliability assessment for brand awareness

Focus Area	Section B	Subsection	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
8.1-8.6	Brand awareness	Brand awareness	6	0.708
9.1-9.16		DUT/MUT brand	16	0.875
Total			22	0.861

Table 8 displays the Cronbach's Alpha score for each item measuring brand awareness at the selected UoTs. As seen above, the questions on brand awareness have a satisfactory Cronbach alpha value (α 0.708). Similarly, the question about brand knowledge at DUT/MUT had a high score (α 0.875). This shows that the respondents' ratings of these questions were consistent. Overall, the dependability score for the brand awareness questions was found to be higher than the acceptable Cronbach alpha (α 0.861). As a result, it can be concluded that the research instrument for brand awareness is reliable for gathering data for this study.

Figure 3: Familiarity of DUT/MUT brand

Drawing from the above, it can be gathered that both the DUT and MUT respondents expressed mixed feelings about recommending the institution. While some positivity emerged from their views, the respondents from each respective institution noted concerns of violent strikes and the delays in academic and service delivery. Hence, it was expedient to know from their perspective whether the DUT/MUT brand is well-known. As depicted in Figure 4.6, an overwhelming percentage of the DUT (81.4%), and the MUT (80.4%) indicated that the institutions are well-known brands. The reason given for the response was that many students from other provinces and international students study in the institution. More so, the respondents indicated that the fact that the institution is trending in social media suggests that it is well-known.

Despite this, a few 14.9% (DUT) and 11.3% (MUT) respondents indicated negatively regarding the popularity of the brand. Concerning the DUT response, a few of the respondents pointed out that outside of KwaZulu-Natal, the DUT is not a well-known brand. Echoing similar sentiments, another of the respondents stated the following:

- *NO, as many students that attend DUT are from the same province. (DUT respondent)*

However, one of the respondents from the MUT said that there is not enough coverage and awareness in rural areas. While in apparent support of this, another respondent, a student at MUT suggested that the institution should improve its marketing by reaching out to other places. This is reflected in the following statement:

- *No, I do not think so because other provinces know little about MUT. They could improve their marketing and reach out to other places. (MUT respondent)*

According to the analysis and interpretation of these findings, first-year students, like any other client, would go through specific decision-making stages to choose their preferred higher education institution. This decision-making process is frequently influenced or modified by a slew of events. Brand awareness and brand image traits that first-year students considered were important in their institution decision were among the highlighted predictors.

The data also imply that external considerations such as access to financial aid and social demographic concerns are taken into account before students choose universities. According to the report, brand awareness qualities such as the institution's website, family and friend influences, and counseling from high school teachers, among other things, play an essential part in the choosing process for DUT and MUT students. However, brand image qualities like teaching quality, study mode flexibility, and the institution's image, among other things, are thought to be crucial among DUT first-year students. On the contrary, first-year MUT students were primarily interested in factors such as admittance requirements and reputation. MUT students also valued study mode flexibility and future work opportunities.

Conclusions

The report argues for DUT and MUT to make targeted investments in brand awareness efforts and brand image. This advice is given because effective tailor-made investments in brand awareness campaigns and brand image will attract high-caliber students to these institutions of learning, as well as international students from the African continent and beyond. International students will contribute to the survival and viability of these institutions because they pay a significantly greater tuition fee compared to local students (Durban University of Technology Brochure, 2018). Owing to a substantial amount of students from rural populations at DUT and MUT, it is advised that the Corporate Affairs Units at both institutions conduct awareness campaigns in rural high schools. Such awareness campaigns could describe the many courses offered at these schools, as well as generate brand awareness campaigns and create a positive image among school students.

For future research, it is suggested that comparable studies be undertaken with high school students and second to final-year students to see if the conclusions are similar. Similar research may be conducted to determine the parallels and differences between UoTs and traditional universities, and the study might be expanded to include South African students as well as students from other African countries. Further research should look into whether South African HEIs are paying attention to brand awareness and social media usage among their target students.

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