

**A marketing perspective on the value of the social network site (SNS)  
relationship between selected South African Higher Education Institutions (HEI)  
and 'Digital Native' prospective students.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The landscape for Higher Education offers prospective students extensive choice when it comes to furthering their education and this competition makes it essential for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to market themselves via multiple platforms, including online. The use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) as a marketing platform has become increasingly necessary to engage the Digital Native prospective student. The value of engaging this sector of the prospective student market can be significant as a large portion of the young generation seeking to further their education fall within the Digital Native generational group, and also utilise SNSs such as Facebook and/or Twitter. This study focused on the South African context of SNS marketing communication and the opportunities to build relationships with the Digital Native market, especially in understanding the value for HEIs to recruit prospective students via their SNS page. Ten different HEI SNS pages were selected for analysis, both public and private across a wide geographical spread in South Africa. Both thematic and reception analyses were conducted to understand the recurring patterns and user responses to the marketing content. While the majority of the data was qualitative, there were also quantitative data considered to understand which HEI posts and what types of subjects attract high or low user engagement. The findings reveal that for an HEI to build meaningful and continuous relationships with their market and to gain the recruitment value from it, commitment and investment of time and resources are required due to the demanding nature of SNS marketing. It is important for HEIs to understand the advantages and disadvantages of the platform and then decide on their strategy, design their post content and have skilled staff to execute and manage it in order to effectively engage prospective student users on the page. A suggestion for further research in this field would be through access to the HEI's applicant databases to track the success rate of SNS marketing communication to actual recruitment results. The nature of SNSs is that they change, as would users' demands and needs, therefore these platforms should be continuously researched and analysed to optimise on any new marketing opportunities that emerge.

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**KEY OF ACRONYMS:**

HEI: Higher Education Institution

SNS: Social Network Site

eWOM: Electronic (as in online) Word-of-Mouth

AFDA: AFDA is not used as an acronym for anything specific - it is just the same of the institution

DUT: Durban University of Technology

CTI: CTI is not used as an acronym for anything specific - it is just the same of the institution

IHS: International Hotel School

UCT: University of Cape Town

UJ: University of Johannesburg

UKZN: University of KwaZulu Natal

UNISA: University of South Africa

**KEYWORDS:**

Higher Education Institution, Marketing, Social Network Site, Relationship, Digital Natives, South Africa



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There is increasing competition amongst Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for the enrolment of students. The availability and variety of courses to choose from after secondary schooling is plentiful within South Africa, in both the public and private tertiary education sectors. This choice factor for prospective students has forced HEIs to consider multi-faceted marketing strategies to effectively influence the choices of their prospective student target market in order to favourably present the HEI to their target market. The prospective student target market would vary slightly per HEI, in terms of whether they are public or private, whether they offer specific courses and the entry requirements. However, target markets do overlap especially based on the types of courses on offer and they compete with other HEIs offering similar types of courses.

Williamson (2006) notes various changes occurring in the Australian post-secondary (tertiary) education sector, and specifically for public HEIs, such as increasing competition from private, global and online education providers, decline in government funds, mounting student expectations for convenient service, online accessibility, communication and new technology and systems. Williamson further continues to stress the point that HEI's need to be able to respond to change and implement strategies to anticipate and/or adapt accordingly if they are to maintain reputation and sustainability (2006). To do so and implement a diverse yet effective marketing strategy, the HEI would need to dedicate more resources towards marketing to engage their prospective student target market; professional representatives from HEIs in a USA study agreed that marketing is of high importance for the future of the HEI (McGrath, 2002).

At a time when the idea of social network site (SNS) marketing was still somewhat new in South Africa, Facebook and Twitter users were dominated by mostly individuals and less of companies or brands, a study was done on prospective students' preferred methods of obtaining information from various HEI's they were considering. Wiese, Jordaan and van Heerdan (2009a) found that

the majority of their student sample preferred obtaining information directly such as through campus visits, open days, university publications and the HEI's direct website. Similarly this research aligned with the marketing interests of public HEIs (universities) that are well established, have long-standing reputations appealing to students' parents and teachers, who can be considered primary influencers on the prospective students' choice of HEI. However, there are a multitude of private HEIs offering the same and more options in qualifications and styles of tertiary education to teach specialised skills in demand with the advancements in technology and growth and branching out of industries. With so many HEIs and course options available in South Africa, internationally and online, prospective students are flooded with possibilities and have the power to choose. For example, private institution Boston City Campus, Business College and Media House has over 40 campuses nationwide and offers courses in accounting, business, health and sports, hospitality and tourism, information technology, human resources, legal courses, lifestyle, marketing and advertising, media and personal development (Boston, 2016). CTI Education group, another private institution, offers some similar courses in commerce ie business, information technology and law (CTI, 2016). The University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) which is a public institution, offers courses engineering, agriculture, chemistry and physics, life sciences, mathematics, health sciences, religion, philosophy, arts, social sciences, applied human sciences, education, business, law and accounting (UKZN, 2016). The University of Johannesburg (UJ) is another public institution and their offer is quite similar with more course options available in design, architecture, the humanities (languages), health sciences and management (UJ, 2016). One of the strategies HEIs could use to influence such choices in their target market of prospective students is to apply various marketing strategies to engage all sectors of their market via different platforms.

Some of the marketing techniques as mentioned by Wiese (*et al.*) (2009a) included presentations at high schools, HEI publications, the HEI website, campus open days, other campus events, alumni, parents, high school teachers, word-of-mouth, radio advertising, TV advertising and print advertising. However, the

capabilities of the Internet have evolved and grown significantly which, other than the HEI website, offers further opportunities for online marketing that are not mentioned, and yet the technological tools continue to improve offering more sophisticated possibilities of interaction, accessibility and specialisation. Social network sites are the communication and collaboration means for people to network online. These tools not only affect individual users' behaviour, but also how companies are run and choose to market themselves to engage the online sectors of their market. Educators are also investigating and exploring ideas of integrating social media into the educational environment (Tuten & Marks, 2012) and there are even opinions that a HEI's survival depends on engaging prospective students through SNSs and new communication tools (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Such engagement creates value from the marketing efforts made. Value in the context of this study will be related to the concepts of importance and usefulness of SNS content through popularity, engagement and interaction on the post. Such SNS engagement indicates the prospective students may deem the HEI as important, useful or worthy of their time, which links to Linn's (2010) definition of value of judging whether it is worth their time, money and or resources to engage.

SNSs can be defined in many ways based on the different uses it has, but in general terms they are online services where users can create, share and participate in a variety of content (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Michels, Kabadayi, Gruber, Loureiro & Solnet, 2013). There are many possibilities in the uses of SNSs, which can be individual self-expression, a platform for having an identity, communication, sources of information, gaming, marketing and advertising of a brand or company as a page administrator or SNS account manager. While each of these purposes can be elaborated further in how different users find different uses for SNS platforms, and certainly how they have and will continue to evolve with the growth of technology, the title SNS itself epitomises all purposes. An SNS is a website where users can congregate to socialise and network with other users in different ways or they could be referred to as networked publics converging online to socialise (boyd, 2011). (The spelling of boyd in lower case is intentional for correlation between all his published works and where he is referenced here

throughout this dissertation). While much of the content generated via SNSs is publically visible, there are also private features, which users can manipulate and adapt according to the users' preferences, and their decisions on what content being posted is to be publically shared. This also creates a community and network of users building connections through the HEI SNS page.

In a study in the USA (Barnes & Lescault, 2011), Facebook was the most common SNS used by university students, then Twitter, followed by blogging and podcasting. While there is plentiful research on SNS use in the USA, it will differ worldwide based on culture and technological infrastructure and that richer people use SNSs differently to poorer people (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). However, while existent, there seems to be a lack of extensive research on SNS use in South Africa compared to the scale of the USA research, most of which was found to be quantitative. One reason for this could be due to the timing and accessibility of the technological infrastructure in the countries, where research from first world countries would likely differ from the outcomes of research from third world countries as well as their comparable population sizes. There are numerous challenges that have emerged for South African HEI students using SNSs as integrated platforms for learning in their courses, one of these include limited Internet access by disadvantaged students (Ivala & Gachago, 2012).

In 2011, it was determined that 67% of South Africans between the age of 16-24 have used the Internet which was the highest Internet-using age group listed in the study (Basis Research Ltd, 2011). Furthermore, it was also found that of the 750 million total users on Facebook, there are 4.1 million in South Africa (Klaus, 2011), and by 2014 there were 11,8 million of which 8,8 million access the platform via their mobile phones in South Africa (Goldstuck, 2014). Twitter has over 200 million users worldwide (Johnson, 2013) with 6,6 million users in South Africa (Goldstuck, 2014). These user numbers alone give insight into the potential reach and opportunities there are to engage the online sector of a target market, particularly prospective students. There is a trend in many of the social media studies where numerous topics pertain to the social media and digital

communication technology patterns, behaviour and integration possibilities amongst prospective students, students and recent graduates of universities or within curriculums (Baker & White, 2010, Barnes & Lescault, 2011, Baro, Ebiagbe & Godfrey, 2013, Bolton *et al.*, 2013, Bosch, 2009, Broekman, Enslin & Pendlebury, 2002, Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013, Ferdig, Coutts, Dipietro, Lok & Davis, 2007, Ivala & Gachago, 2012, Peluchette & Karl, 2008, Tuten & Marks, 2012). This demonstrates the important role that SNSs have for those entering into, within or even have exited higher education, which speaks to a significant generation of youth.

The current group of young adults that have emerged and are still emerging over the next few years, occupy technical skills and understanding, as well as other added characteristics of being entitled, demanding and have expectations to have their needs immediately met (Bolton *et al.*, 2013, Cabral, 2011, Prensky, 2001). This for example may be evident through any possible posts or comments from SNS users that indicate their request for feedback instantaneously or an immediate solution on the subject they could have posted about or question they might ask. These broad and somewhat sweeping definitions of these generations have been given many titles including 'Millennials', 'Generation Y', 'Net Generation' and 'Digital Natives'. While they have many commonalities, there are also some differences.

The Millennial generation is defined as a cohort of young adults born from 1982 onwards and by their exposure to technology have had a significant influence on achieving more from a young age than previous generations had, from publishing on new media as well as having significant influence over others in their cohort in relation to consumer traits (Strauss & Howe, 2000). Generation Y could start with an observation of the members growing up with a computing device within the home or at school, which results in them having mastered computer use to fulfil many purposes including communication and could therefore also be referred to as 'Digital Natives'. Their relationship with information through technology is that they know where to find it, will actively

contribute to it, share and consume SNS content (Bolton *et al.*, 2013). The Net Generation, whose title revolves around the generation's essential relationship with the Internet, is, in comparison, described as needing freedom of choice, the ability to personalise their belongings, collaborating best through conversation and having high expectations of integrity and innovation (Jones, Rumanau, Cross & Healing, 2010). The Net Generation was also defined to be born from the mid-1970's until the early 2000's (Tapscott, 2009). The common thread in all of these definitions is their relationship with technology and their necessity to be connected and online, along with an overlapping age window where they all fall within which would makes the generational association appropriate. The Digital Native title seems most appropriate when referring to the generational cohort as being 'native' to the language of digital technology, as in computers, gaming, the Internet, instant messaging and how SNSs have become a pivotal platform of importance for them (Prensky, 2001). The purpose of defining these terms for the generational groups is to understand the specific market being dealt with for this study and based on their characteristics, what SNS content engages them best.

With HEIs implementing a marketing strategy via SNS platforms, they would effectively have their prospective student target market opting to engage with the HEI via the SNS page as a measure of the potential success of the marketing and recruitment efforts. This behaviour from the Digital Native prospective student is an extension of their relationship with technology and ability to engage with others through digital language (as in online communication and content). As the general age group of the generation fall within a large portion of the prospective student target market age group, who are finishing, or have in recent years finished secondary schooling, who then pursue a higher education. However not every online user in this age group may be able to qualify for or afford higher education, nor may they be interested in pursuing it. Similarly even if they are interested in attaining a higher education above their secondary schooling, they may not necessarily seek to find this information via a public SNS type platform, but rather through another direct or more private connection, as in the HEI website, prospectus, Open Days or an appointment to visit the campus

individually. Similarly, while SNS usage may be by a significantly large sector of youth, they may not choose to engage with work or study-related matters on SNSs. The users opting to engage on the SNS platform are therefore a generalisation of a group of youth by their act of choosing to engage and interact online in the public view on an HEI SNS page.

While many of the generational terms and definitions for this group have been simplified to have global and non-specific country or cultural references, the South African cohort arguably have differences based on the socio-economic and cultural background that affected the larger scale of the youth. Similarly, the aspect that the generation grew up with the technology may be irrelevant to large sectors of the South African population. Yet with the growth of cellphone technology and the integration of technology into schooling systems, they may have learnt about technology in different and diverse ways than as is assumed in the previous definitions; therefore in this study it was difficult to measure when individual user skill and method of access would have in any way contributed to the findings. Therefore a term to define the South African generation with similar but not the same characteristics, may need to be investigated. The following are considered appropriate for the South African market: the Digital Native (Prensky, 2001) or more recently the Afrillennial (Student Village, 2015).

A term to define the diverse population of South African youth who constantly utilise technology daily, may not differ immensely from the Digital Native definition. Similarly a user may be a Digital Native by definition, but not be an effective part of a user-audience that marketers try engage, or an SNS user may not be automatically be assumed to be a Digital Native. Given the freedom of choice, South African HEIs need to consider innovative ways to engage the prospective student in ways that allow them to continue to feel they have the power of choice, particularly because they do so now more than ever through the use of technology and access to information. There may also be prospective student Digital Natives who read and follow an HEI SNS page but do not actively engage in the content through any likes or comments, yet they do view it. Despite

the possibilities and technicalities of SNSs and given that the nature of an SNS being a social platform using digital technology to connect users, SNS marketing goals should seek to engage users. Therefore HEI marketing directed towards prospective students, should design their marketing strategies and what content to post on SNSs based on their target market of prospective students that they wish to engage via the digital technology platform, and not just any user (outside their target market) who may respond to their content.

There is debate around the whether the Digital Native terminology is appropriate in a South African context based on the justification that they are only a small elite group of students that could technically fall within the Digital Native category (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010). The availability of cellphone technology has enabled a huge market to access online platforms, and this therefore, questions whether the availability of cellphone technology meets the criteria and requirements of Digital Native definitions. A youth marketing agency, Student Village (2015) published a report on the South African Millennial market and coined the term 'Afrillennials' as a more suited description. Student Village go on to describe Afrillennials as a generation who want flexibility, thrive on constant feedback and engagement, seek instant gratification, generally embrace of cultural diversity through collaboration and they also have a huge fear of failing (2015). These characteristics are visible in the Digital Native definitions for the sector of a prospective student user market.

There is a multitude of HEIs in South Africa, from public to private, offering varieties of specialisations, fields, facilities and courses each with different entry requirements and costs. Similarly, each will have their own capacities for the minimum amount of students they need in order to sustain the HEI and a maximum limit where they can facilitate the courses without shortage of space and sufficient access to resources. The selection of SNS pages identified for this study included a variety of HEIs without any specific similarities, other than the fact that they were established South African-based HEIs. The selected HEIs were spread across the country with some pages representative of multiple campuses nationally. This wide geographic representation, along with non-specific



HEI criteria could give insight into the broader South African landscape of SNS marketing for HEIs. Between 2007 and 2011, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) noted that the number of public HEIs has been maintained at 23. In 2007, there were 84 registered private institutions with 25 provisionally registered, giving a total 109 private institutions. This statistic in 2011 saw 83 registered private institutions and 32 provisionally registered, leaving a total of 115 and indicating overall growth over the four-year gap and increased competition within the market. Further growth is noted by the CHE in over-enrolment numbers from 2007 with 761 090 enrolments to 2011 with 938 200 enrolments overall at public HEIs. Both years indicate that 81 to 83% of enrolments are with the undergraduate or primary degrees (CHE, 2013). As there are both public institutions that cater an education to a substantial portion of the student market, there are also a significant amount of private institutions that also contribute to a considerable share of the student market. For a more realistic consideration of the South African Higher Education market, both public and private HEIs will be included in this study of equal numbers.

In light of the continuous evolution of digital technology and social platforms such as SNSs, it is likely that this field needs to be continuously researched and analysed in order to understand developments and possibilities of using the platform for creating networks, sharing information and other means. This could enable HEI marketers to rethink their strategies and implement new or revised plans to engage the Digital Native prospective students. This study is focused on investigating the SNS relationship between prospective students and HEIs who host a page on an SNS platform such as Facebook or Twitter. Just as any company would aim to build a good reputation and rapport with their clients, HEIs building a positive marketing relationship with their prospective students, with the hope of getting them invested into the culture and opportunities in the HEI, is important.

Positive feedback and interaction on marketing and advertising could be an indication that the marketing or advertising strategy is working. In the case of SNS marketing via a HEI pages, depending on the quantity and quality, the responses to HEI content and the user interactions on the SNS page or about the HEI can be a

clear indicator of success when prospective students respond favourably to a marketing strategy. Ultimately, it will depend on the HEI marketing strategy, because if it is directed towards Digital Native prospective students then there are improved possibilities that the strategy will aid the recruitment of the targeted prospective student market to apply and register at the HEI. Gauging the quantity and quality of Digital Native prospective student feedback on the page will be key to determining what type of content posted by the HEI was effective in engaging prospective students. Further analysis of the user posts on the HEI page, or independent of the page but mentioning the HEI, would also provide insight into the demands of the Digital Native market that is being attracted to engage on the HEI page.

This research study was conducted using a thematic analysis of the SNS content on and about selected HEIs in the public domain, namely on Facebook and/or Twitter and the current relationship they have with the Digital Native prospective student market. The private and public HEIs are geographically spread around South Africa to gather a contextual scope of the social media marketing and communication landscape directly with or indirectly about the selected South African HEIs.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To themes in the value of the marketing communication on selected South African HEI social network site pages that are directed to prospective students (active digital-native users) on Facebook and Twitter.
2. To identify the value of the communication through the nature of the active users (Digital Natives) responding to content generated by the HEI about the education they offer through a reception analysis.
3. To identify themes in the value of communication from a user, independent of the content generated by the HEI.
4. To determine the advantages and disadvantages of the relationship between the HEI and prospective students on social network sites in a South African higher education context.

### **Research Questions**

1. Is the overall communication generated by the 10 HEIs in this study on SNSs valuable based on the content of the posts and the quantity and quality of responses they get?
2. How does the rate of response from the 10 HEI SNS pages focussed on for this study affect how a prospective student may increase or loose their value or interest in the selected HEI? What does this indicate about the potential of the prospective students deciding to apply and enrol at the institution, as a result of the communication on the SNS?
3. What of Hall's positions is projected in the SNS communication from prospective students in response to any HEI communication, but to or about the HEI? Predominantly on Facebook. (Hall: preferred, negotiated, oppositional, and aberrant).
4. What are the marketing advantages and disadvantages of the relationship between the HEI and prospective students on SNSs in a South African higher education context?

## **Chapter 2: Literature review.**

The current era of digital transformation is one where ‘command and control’ centralization is giving way (often unwillingly) to ‘self-organized’ networked complexity, in which new ideas, public thought, entertainment platforms, information archives, and human identity itself are produced by innumerable ‘agents’ in a dynamic process that demands our analytic attention (Hartley 2012: p. 15).

### **The South African Higher Education landscape**

Great transformation within the South African higher education landscape has occurred since democracy was achieved in 1994, and so has the emergence and sustenance of demographic representation and social inclusion within student bodies within HEIs (Arbee, 2012). This growth is evident through the quantity and variety of higher education opportunities and options available to prospective students. Approximately 12 to 15 years ago (*c.* 2000-2004), the education landscape saw a further shift where public tertiary institutions were merged to form new institutions, such as the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville joining to form the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Bonnema & van der Waldt, 2008). South African institutions, such as universities and many other new and old public and private institutions, are now competing in a much larger national market across a diverse demographic. Some are also recognising the need to market themselves on an international level for further reach to a greater market beyond the South African border (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Most higher education is possible through an economic exchange between students and HEIs, enabling a potential to reward students over a lifetime through career opportunities and other means given that certain entry requirements are met, whether public or private. Competition in the increasing HEI market leads to a risk of low recruitment numbers to sustain the HEI unless the institution uses marketing activities and promotional tools. Ideas of marketing strategy implementation can challenge and question morals and ethics between the arenas of business and education amongst scholars, however it is undeniable that today’s market has driven

higher education to embrace consumerism and technology, and implement strategic planning in order to recruit students (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Due to the need for active implementation of marketing strategies, McGrath discussed the importance of resources for HEI marketing efforts to be strategically re-considered, as his study revealed the impression of HEIs being under-funded, and that marketing outputs were ineffective with younger markets who make up most of an HEI's prospective student population (McGrath, 2002). In order to effectively communicate with prospective students, it is important that HEIs understand how to reach them specifically and effectively (Wiese *et al.*, 2009b).

### **Higher Education marketing strategies**

Given the changes occurring from digital growth, organisations are forced to re-evaluate their strategies of engaging with their market. HEIs have needed to consider adopting both formal and informal integrative activities within their marketing strategies for efforts to be effective in influencing prospective students to enrol and therefore run a sustainable institution. Evaluation of outcomes from the marketing activities will also assist departments to confirm the effectiveness of such outputs in attracting prospective students to their HEI (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009).

Between goods and services, higher education falls under the service category and Ballantyne and Varey (2006) argue that marketing services, as opposed to goods, are very different when developing effective strategies necessary for successful student recruitment. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) agree that higher education is a service and the nature of marketing a service is that it is 'people based' and therefore highlights the importance of customer relationships. National and international expansion and diversity within this specific service sector has resulted in greater choices offered for prospective students to cater to their diverse and ever-changing social and technical needs (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Research on HEI choice by Watts (1972) concluded that students were influenced not necessarily by the HEI's offer of congruence with their own goals, but by the extent to which they perceived they would be unable to accept the dominant norms of the institution. To change this, marketing strategies have to be centred around generating value and meaningfulness for the targeted prospective students (Watts, 1972). Many young people considering studying further but are unsure of which route to pursue and

therefore which course to select may take psychometric and aptitude tests in order to guide them to the relevant industry and to any HEI that offered such a course. When it comes to prospective students making their career and HEI choice, it is a much bigger confluence of components influencing an individual character than just an assignment of a characteristics or a personality type determined by generic psychometric tests alone (Govier, 2003, Maree & Beck, 2004). Identifying these influencing components can guide one to devise an effective marketing strategy to reach the prospective student market and contribute towards recruitment.

### **The Higher Education prospective student market**

Understanding what area prospective students consider when selecting an HEI is extremely important, and Watts (1972) highlights some factors that may influence a prospective student when selecting an HEI. This list could affect the motivation behind why and how marketing strategies would be applied. These include:

- Goals and whether the HEI can serve that goal: academic, liberal education, social or technical.
- Physical characteristics: location, age, capacity, and accessibility to resources.
- Structural factors: ratio of men to women, range of disciplines offered, social organization, calendar.
- Instructional pattern: course content and structure, teaching methods, examinations.
- Staff: qualifications of teaching staff, relationship of staff to students.
- Extracurricular activities and student services: residence, social facilities, health and advisory services.
- Dominant norms existing with this HEI structures and how that may influence their decision of the above factors.

A tertiary education market (i.e. prospective students) could be characterised in three segments: international, mature and high school leavers, determined by geographic, age and education level factors (Soutar & Turner, 2002). A large portion of the accessible prospective student market is completing secondary education and/or are in the position for choosing their next step in developing their career path through

undertaking further learning such as the above three mentioned segments (Bonnema & van der Waldt, 2008). In a marketing strategy, there needs to be multiple streams to appeal to the different tiers of higher education target markets to address prospective student needs in more accurate and appropriate ways. As Maringe and Gibbs suggest, there should be a continuous process of identifying market needs as time goes by and growth of technology and other factors influence changes in target markets (2009). The changes in the education landscape also include acknowledgment of students interacting and collaborating rather than a classroom of passive students in a teacher-centred environment (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009, Tapscott, 2009).

With the increasingly complex trends and challenges in attracting and retaining students, Lubbe and Petzer (2013) found that prospective students from high socio-economic backgrounds were still most influenced by brochures or their parents. Prospective students from poorer backgrounds, mostly residing in townships were primarily found to seek information from social and media sources, rather than querying directly with the HEI. The mid-range market between the two favoured the HEI marketer-controlled website or online source. Lubbe and Petzer (2013) further argued that it is recommended for marketers to segment their targeted prospective students accordingly and design specific strategies to meet each segment's needs. Regardless of the sources each sector may resort to, the HEI should be able to ensure to generate value through their marketing strategies that they choose to implement in order to effectively engage their market.

### **Understanding the term 'Value' within a marketing perspective**

Linn (2010) defined the discipline of marketing as that of various activities that are united in their aim of enhancing the potential for sales of goods and services, otherwise known as the 'product'. He motivates that the common denominator of marketing concepts and reasoning is value, which is why any transaction may take place based on the buyer's judgement of the product. Value is based on a buyer's judgement deeming the something as important, useful or worthy of their money, time and/or resources. Linn (2010) criticises McCarthy's (1960) widely used 'marketing mix' 4P model (Product, Place, Promotion, Price) as flawed and over-simplified where elements need to be more flexible in relation to one another and to the desired market (2010). Examples provided in these theories, however, often relate to

marketing for retail business, yet many institutions in higher education follow similar principles in order to be economically sustainable which means that these principles are applicable in both retail and education. Value in the context of this study will be related to the importance and usefulness of utilising the SNS platform effectively to contribute towards successful student recruitment efforts. The value of HEI marketing on a SNS platform in this study would then increase when posts, interactions and feedback from prospective students are higher and have continuity in activity. Such SNS engagement indicates the prospective students deem the HEI as important, useful or worthy of their time and resources which links to Linn's (2010) definition of value.

Maringe and Gibbs (2009) argue that a marketing activity should be seen as a transaction whereby meaning is exchanged, however, it is often emphasised more as a deconstructed value with monetary and material association. As a result of this, HEIs constantly battle to develop an effective marketing strategy to de-commoditise their courses in an increasingly competitive field. Concepts within marketing strategies must regard the rewards of social and economic capital and move away from promoting immediacy, self-indulgence and financial gain through concealing or persuading an altered perception about the benefits of higher education. Marketing should be driven towards development of people's ideas through fundamental change, and thus conveying true value to their lives. However as with the nature of a consumerist society, a customer of a product or service will tend to compare value with competing institutions, therefore value can be increased through added benefits or reduced risk factors as perceived by a prospective student. Furthermore, with the general higher average earnings and lowered unemployment risks, higher education graduates have greater chances to work and earn significantly more than those who do not complete higher education, which can generate lifetime value for an individual who has studied at a tertiary level. (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009)

### **Uses and gratifications of SNSs**

Recognising the value within social network sites' (SNSs) marketing content, if based on the uses-and-gratification paradigm (Blumler & Katz, 1974), where a user seeks out a media source that best fulfils their own needs and interests. According to Whiting and Williams (2013), their ten uses and gratifications found for using SNSs include socialisation, seeking information, passing time, entertainment, relaxation,



communicatory tool, convenience, self-expression, sharing information and surveillance of others on the SNS platform. These areas would influence how a user may view and or utilise the content and allow them to interpret what the content represents to them individually. Ideally for a HEI marketer, all stakeholders of the HEI should be able to recognise an aspect of use of gratification from online content and/or interactions with a rich social context (du Plessis, 2010). This study will focus on recognising value through themes within SNS content.

### **Digital platforms for marketing**

Technology has made the world more accessible through communication tools, gaming and social network sites and this continues to change and evolve (Ferdig *et al.*, 2007); these technological advances are, therefore, no longer alarming to society, but are expected (Cabral, 2011). Digital technology's affordances include a platform for interaction, connecting an individual, simultaneously or separately with multiple audiences for self-expression and identity negotiation (Papacharissi, 2011). Online interactive methods can be judged only in the way society actually uses them. With real time online engagement, technology empowers individuals to re-write the rules of creating and making use of new media (Giroux, 2011). This expanded scope inspires huge potential for marketers who take initiative to utilise digital technologies.

Hartley (2012) discusses that with the expansion of digital and interactive media, a dialogic model of communication has emerged whereby consumers are users and, even more-so, co-creators instead of passive receivers or readers; this has been found in the education context as well (Hartley, 2012, Maringe & Gibbs, 2009, Tapscott, 2009). Understanding this is essential to tap into today's markets with access to technology, because platforms such as SNSs can enable such a dialogue between HEIs and prospective students. Themes of meaning, power, identity and humanity in the sense of technology, as well as globalisation, are evident in digital media. The Internet is an immense archive that is not necessarily accurate or certain, yet it is a common public perception that nearly any information can be found via Google, which means that a mass of information is easily accessible (Hartley, 2012). The term 'audience' no longer encapsulates the full viewership of media participants, but rather the term 'user' is more appropriate due to the participatory nature of new media (Livingstone, 2009). In this way, there is transition from mass (marketing,

education, communication, media etc.) to individual, with a need to acknowledge how an individual has their own way of learning, engaging and absorbing information which may not be the same as the next individual (Tapscott, 2009). Du Plessis (2010) notes an effective marketing tool is via word-of-mouth (WOM), which cannot always be controlled by companies but it is effective in the sharing information between trusted sources of individuals. Electronic WOM, which du Plessis (2010) refers to as eWOM, opens up the possibility to influence markets via online platforms. By a prospective student user engaging in dialogue with a HEI or on their page (publically), this becomes an indirect form of eWOM because that dialogue would appear not only to the followers of the HEI SNS page but also to the SNS friends/connections of that user who engaged on the HEI page. A direct form of eWOM would be for one user to post either individually (a Facebook status update or a tweet on Twitter) to another user about the HEI without a formally linked mention of the HEI SNS page within the message.

### **Participatory culture**

The idea of the transformation of media and how content creators are presented with an array of online communication tools that have emerged, offering new means for media to spread. Consequences include the spreading potential of communication by users (customers/clients) about their experience and/or attitude towards the company/brand generating or representing content, both negative and positive. Given the potential of 'spread-ability', users, brands and companies should be inspired to learn from and listen to their markets to adapt to the logic of spreadable media and a model of circulation (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). The architecture of social network technology is based around principles of convergence and circulation, enabling multiple connections to overlap between ranges of social domains (Papacharissi, 2011). When it comes to marketing on SNSs, continuous interaction lies at the heart, therefore communication, whether planned or spontaneous, should be encouraged within online communities to allow the potential for eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) to gain ground (du Plessis, 2010). Consumers of brands should continuously be urged by brands and their corporations to follow SNSs and change from an audience member to a participant with entertaining, educative, interesting and informative content to promote interactivity and relationships (Akar & Topcu, 2011). Communication can be defined as a process by which meaning is generated through

production, exchange or sharing, and consumption is mostly a social practice which involves more than just an individual consumer or user (Fornas, Becker, Bjurstrom & Ganetz, 2007). Digital communication could can great value to this process in terms of time (quicker) and the opportunity to utilise audio, visual and/or interactive content for improvement engagement of an online user. Digital technology such as a SNS platform offers newer and more immediate ways for communication and activities such pursuing specialist interests, compared with more traditional and otherwise offline methods (Buckingham, 2006).

Rosen argues that the ‘people formerly known as the audience’ are made up of the public who are real and able to participate, rather than only being able to engage passively and predictably as the content was designed for; this influences how marketing practitioners may consider communicating to their online audience of users (2012). Livingstone’s research gives clear evidence how media are playing increasingly important roles in youth’s daily lives and extending their influence into education, career prospects, and the way the youth participate in public or private environments (2009).

‘Participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 1992) refers to the production and social interactions within communities that serve their collective interests. In the context of online social platforms, online users may be more welcoming to engage with and/or share content that has come from an online friend, while an advertisement may be more intrusive coming from a company or brand. Therefore as participating users, they determine what gets valued based on their own choices, interests, investments, plans, and actions (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013). This participation can be in the form of SNS page followers, posts by users to their page and comments, ‘likes’, ‘favourites’, ‘shares’ or ‘retweets’ on posts. Such forms of new media enable a mix of both mass and interpersonal channels to be sampled, discussed and shared with a more immediate time frame with other users, compared to traditional media (Walther, Carr, Choi, Deandrea, Kim, Tong, van der Heide, 2011). Andrejevic (2011) notes how online social activities have the capacity to produce value through production within the networks of sociability, communication and preferential taste of the users. Jenkins (*et al.*) (2013) similarly examine a hybrid model of circulation whereby material has the ability to be shared by participatory means and over and within many cultures. He

names this model 'Spreadable Media' as mentioned earlier, and affirms how companies may base online success on web traffic. Therefore, in identifying marketing value in SNS content, it is possible to consider its value in its 'spreadability' through volumes of traffic, however high web traffic is not necessarily indicative of engagement exclusively with the preferred target market, although it may extend to reach their market amongst the quantity of traffic that occurs (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013). However, in marketing efforts, this traffic should ideally be engaging the actual target market.

### **Digital Natives and characteristics of similar generations**

For an SNS page to attract interaction and continuity online, it is required of the users to be technologically driven and savvy. Bennet (2012) defines a 'Digital Native' as an individual who has grown up immersed in digital technology, and is technologically adept and interested by virtue of exposure to technology. Strauss and Howe (2000) define the Digital Native generation as being based on age, particularly those born from 1982 onwards. This first cohort emerged as young adults into the new millennium where some of their work was being published before new media or significant digital technologies began, and they have a significant influence on consumer traits as a young market, even more so in South Africa. Prior to Strauss and Howe's (2000) definition, Tapscott (2009) and Cabral (2011) defined this generation as the 'Net Generation' or otherwise known as Millennials or Generation Y, also based on age, but born between the mid-1970s and early 2000s, with the ability to embrace interactive media and digital technologies fairly quickly and naturally. Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) argue that the term Digital Natives refer to an elite group within the South African population and not a large generation determined in numbers and by age but based on socio-political history and economic background with access to technological resources. They refer to those that may match the age group of the digitally literate generation (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010), but have not grown up surrounded and exposed to technological advancements as 'digital strangers', existing on the other side of, what Bennet (2012) calls, the 'digital divide'. Boyd (2012) discusses the *always-on* lifestyle as owning and utilising a technological device/s as a means of being connected to their online networks continuously. He clarifies that people that are *always-on* digitally are better defined as Digital Natives, based on technological accessibility, literacy and economic capital, rather than as a

generation, which relies on age as a determinate (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013, boyd, 2012). *Always-on* implies continuous accessibility and connectivity to technology and digital online platforms such as SNSs (boyd, 2012). Maringe and Gibbs agree that not all prospective students have the same access or preferences in the use of communication platforms and so not all prospective students will make use of SNSs or can be considered a Digital Native, hence a need to consider a mix within the marketing strategy to appeal to various target market segments. Understanding information about the market segments including lifestyle, generation, demographic, socio-economic and behavioural can help to develop strategies to appeal to the characteristics that define them (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Therefore an *always-on* Digital Native could be defined better as someone with access to data and technology and who participates and co-creates an eco-system in which people can stay loosely linked.

Tapscott (2009) suggests numerous characteristics and morals that this generation can be associated with, namely they require freedom of choice; they need to customise their belongings; they want collaboration and engage better in conversation not lectures; they are quick to scrutinise organisations; they are insistent on integrity; they are fun in all areas of life is necessary, and they have a desire for speed, and innovation is a standard and expected; they also grow up with computers as an essential part of life; and they effortlessly taking continuous technology advances in their stride. Because of this, they are transforming markets and marketing by seeking richer experiences and influencing each other as well as different generations in novel ways. Traditional media are ineffectual with them, because they want to share information, be continuously connected to colleagues, friends and family, which they can do via technology and SNSs (Tapscott, 2009). Similarly Bosch (2009) notes that Digital Natives may be resistant to traditional means of teaching and learning systems in educational environments which forces education institutions to reconsider how they engage with their prospective and current students of this generation (Bosch, 2009).

With the Digital Native demand on ways to interact, (Hartley, 2012) states that messaging is innately within the human species as a way to find meaning, power and identity by self-representation in a digital world; this point has also been further

discussed with reference to the fact that it is in human nature to share stories and exchange messages (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013, Walther *et al.*, 2011). It is just the nature of the messaging and communication that evolves through time. Dialogical interaction on digital platforms is open-ended, it allows prompt feedback and for participants to disagree or engage, and becomes an inherent relational exercise which creates value by humanising the brand of whatever is being marketed (Kwon & Sung, 2013). In this way, marketers facilitate relationships and co-create the experience of the service in order to create a sense of value with potential customers, or in higher education, prospective students by inviting them to engage in conversation (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006, Kwon & Sung, 2013).

### **Creating value for the Digital Native generation**

The act of value creation through digital communication can exclude people within a diverse demographic and living standard measurement, of which not all may have the technological competence or digital literacy due to lack of exposure or limited accessibility, which reinforces the term ‘digital divide’ (Bennett, 2012). This refers to the difference that may occur between Digital Natives and those with lower socio-economic standing based on geographic isolation and unemployment, without access to facilities and support in order to generate a need for use of digital technologies (Mashile & Pretorius, 2003).

Hartley (2012) describes the digitally literate audience more as active participants in the media in which it engages, rather than a passive receiver of media communication; in this case active participant would initiate their own actions, while previous media communication systems only allowed for receivers’ behavioural reactions. This change in audience dynamic is considered a result of technological invention. As with this invention, humanity goes about seeking individual identity within it, which has resulted in the emergence of social networks as a way to connect with more of the human species (Hartley, 2012). Generation Y, or Digital Natives, within the similar characteristic of being *always-on*, make up the largest percentage of SNS users and have the belief that the constant access to the flow of information is an essential aspect of life (Cabral, 2011). If the *always-on* teenagers can be considered in the same vein, Baker and White (2010) find that they are more easily influenced by their own perceptions of what their peers seem to be doing rather than anything a role

model or caregiver thinks they should be doing (Baker & White, 2010), which links to their need to be connected to one another and more influenced by WOM, particularly eWOM from their peers.

### **SNSs: the marketing potential**

A definition of a social network site (SNS) is an online service that can include the following features: individual profile construction, select users with whom a connection is shared and the ability to browse content from the users they are connected with (boyd & Ellison, 2008, Ferdig *et al.*, 2007).

SNSs have escalated in popularity among teenagers and increased collaboration between networked users, not surprisingly, has attracted increasing attention of academic scholars, industry researchers, educational institutions and business corporations to spend time and/or money on them for potential enhancement of market relationships and growth (Baker & White, 2010, Bosch, 2009, boyd & Ellison, 2008, Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011, Fenwick, 2014). Different SNSs cater for different audiences of users based on common language, demographics, interests or based on affordances on specific SNSs, such as blogging, photo/video-share, mobile access and other specific collaboration or communication tools (boyd & Ellison, 2008, Ferdig *et al.*, 2007). SNSs are also an online platform for users to share their opinions, information, experiences or content with other online users including friends or family, which subsequently enables users to contribute to a trail of content (du Plessis, 2010, Fenwick, 2014). There is potential for indirect profitability for companies and brands by allowing content to be circulated but also re-mixed by users and then re-circulated within their online networks. (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013).

SNSs can be considered platforms where everyone can publish and read, which stretches the social and geographical borders of mass media (Hartley, 2012) and, because of the traces it leaves online, there are unprecedented opportunities available for researchers (boyd & Ellison, 2008). It affords opportunity for community and specific market reach, thus allowing interaction (Baro *et al.*, 2013). The challenge is in engaging the full attention of your specific market either directly or indirectly. Some warn against the use of SNSs as a marketing tool for higher education in an argument about of ethics and professionalism (Fenwick, 2014),

however, to ignore the potential uses and benefits for adapting to emerging means of engaging a market could be to an HEI's detriment.

Sharing the institution's vision with stakeholders in a public domain, and encouraging dialogue with them to influence the reputation of the institution is a way of developing trust in a market, thus building relationships and inspiring commitment to them (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). One platform to do so on could be on SNSs as it is in the public domain and can reach the online Digital Native market. SNSs are interactive online media and exist as channels for connections and information, which, for an individual user, forms the basis for public expressions as a way of revealing an individual or collective identity (Gilpin, 2011); users also only construct accurate representations of themselves to varying degrees which can affect market research depending on the nature of the it (boyd & Ellison, 2008). All public interaction on SNSs, whether with another user or about offline events, contributes to building a professional identity amongst practitioners and within online networks. These relations on a public platform are highly visible to their online network and through search engine rankings, but as with online accessibility, not all posts, interactions and information may be accurate reflections of legitimate expertise or correct information in a professional sense or otherwise (Gilpin, 2011).

Livingstone identifies how different media can include the following activities: writing, playing, reading, viewing, listening, communicating, using, consuming or owning (2009). All of these activities are possible directly on SNSs or lead to the activity from SNSs, which expands the scope in how marketing practitioners can reach a group/s of users. With all the activities available, it is not surprising as boyd and Ellison notes that SNSs have become deeply imbedded in users' lives considering that it enables individuals to connect to one another (boyd & Ellison, 2008)

### **Understanding Facebook and Twitter**

Facebook and Twitter are two popular SNSs and were both launched officially in 2006, Twitter a few months after Facebook (Kwon & Sung, 2013). The South African landscape of SNS usage is a key influential factor that will give this research purpose. On Facebook for example, an HEI that is a large stakeholder in tertiary



education industry with many campuses nationwide, namely Boston City Campus and Business College, is listed as one of the top ten liked pages in the *Society* category alongside various political figures and organisations with a total of 97 562 local South African fans according to the Internet World Stats website about Africa Africa (2014). Boston's actual marketing strategy along with the other 9 selected HEI's, are explored within the data from their SNS pages and analysis thereof within this study. However considering Boston has over 40 campuses around South Africa and over 20 000 students per year (Boston, 2016). At the end of 2012, South Africa had just fewer than 6.3 million Facebook Subscribers total according to the Social Bakers website (2014). According to the online SA Info Reporter, Twitter in South Africa saw a 20-fold increase in users between 2010 and 2011 with the 2011 figure at 1.1 million users (2011). The Digital Native market is evident in these numbers as they continue growing at a rapid rate.

Miller (2011) divides Facebook into three dominant activities: communication, gaming and personal expression through cultivating one's profile, thus facilitating and expanding social networking. It further enables users to conduct formal or informal research on the platform, either of other individual users or even brands, products or services that have a presence through a public page but are run by individual users. Facebook may not exist as a totality of the user's lives but exists more as a complement to offline activities and consequentially enables initial communication or research to occur from any distance (Miller, 2011). Facebook further facilitates particular groups or types of connections between users in a way that can generate social capital and form networks made up of users (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield & Vitak, 2011). Facebook, as well as other SNSs, afford high levels of surveillance (unless prohibited by privacy settings), where users can view and engage with one another's posts, profile data or even their listed personal information (Bosch, 2009). In a study of Facebook use among students at UCT, the following three categories from users were noted: they have a profile but do not actively use Facebook on a daily basis; they log on to Facebook daily but do not participate; and active users who regularly post/upload/download, participate and/or use several applications on the site (Bosch, 2009).

Twitter's popularity was driven by the efficiency of facilitating conversation, resource sharing and coordination through micro-blogging since it launched in 2007 (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013). Many practitioners have since seen this platform facilitate the extension of the scope of public relations efforts to active SNS users. Adaptation of strategy is required to keep up with the continuous flow of users on Twitter and how it encourages patterns through topics and 'trends', which refer to the popular themes being mentioned repeatedly by users on Twitter. By participating on Twitter or other public discussion technologies, active users expose themselves voluntarily to peer, client, potential client or other observation (Gilpin, 2011). Twitter users have slightly more freedom to individually interact with brands and companies but this communication may not reach both networks of Twitter subscribers (better known as followers). On the other hand, users on Twitter can just follow a brand rather than view what other followers say about the brand. These benefits help build and uphold consumer relationships by engaging in conversations on this platform (Kwon & Sung, 2013).

Most SNSs are populated by somewhat anonymous connections (Walther *et al.*, 2011), such as YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram etc. Facebook allows users to select their connections by means of sending a Friend Request or accepting/declining a Friend Request. Facebook users thus occupy more limited spaces, by having to interact with approved Friends and within groups or pages (Kwon & Sung, 2013).

### **Networked publics**

SNSs have also been referred to as 'networked publics' by boyd (2011) (deliberately styled by boyd as lower case) where users congregate to see and be seen. The affordances of such publics are not controlling over their users in terms of behaviour, however the environment by nature shapes the way in which users may participate. This environment involves user profiles, friends/connections, options to share publically and a continuous stream of data, which is active networking. Most platforms for these online publics allow for public and semi-public interactions, which boyd suggests is a user's performance of social connection before a broader audience (boyd, 2011). SNSs are an escalating trend, which allows for a wide range of

users to be attracted to expanded marketing tools of SNSs and online media compared to traditional and physical print media (Akar & Topcu, 2011).

### **Benefits of digital dialogue between individuals and organisations**

Various factors of new media (such as SNSs) increase the opportunities for brand-consumer interaction and further reach at a lower cost. These SNSs include free membership and user interaction by individuals (consumers) and organisations (brands or companies), which can be of benefit to marketing practices. These include the ease of distribution and re-distribution by both a brand and the online consumers, without any publishing costs and with greater possibility of visibility in the public domain. This includes the option to ‘share’ content on Facebook or ‘retweet’ content on Twitter by other users. SNSs have an immediate reach and can also be a platform of real-time consumer feedback or reviews to understand the needs of the consumer market. The online consumers are also an open database, of which the specific SNSs users can willingly interact with or view information about a brand (Hennig-Thurau, Malthouse, Frieger, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy & Skiera, 2010). Four affordances of networked publics or SNSs are that online expressions are searchable, replicable, recordable, and can be spread through technology by default. These affordances can be considered in both positive and negative respects to marketing, based on the dynamics of how and when the content may be viewed or engaged with and, therefore, intended audience is critical to context. The challenges with such affordances are that, due to the many producer-users and expansion of SNSs and online media, engaging a target market becomes less easy where attention is limited and content is limitless. Furthermore, with the options to replicate or re-produce content, originality and authenticity becomes complicated and more difficult to achieve (boyd, 2011). Beyond these challenges, there is potential for positive outcomes to be gained from SNS marketing, including broader reach and interaction with diverse audiences, which go beyond the limits of space, time and excessive material resources (Ellison *et al.*, 2011).

### **Challenges of access to technology**

On bigger geographic and population scales, there are also challenges with utilisation of SNSs and digital technologies in Africa, specifically in a study involving South Africa and Nigeria HEI libraries, including lack of computers or access to

stable Internet, or support or education facilities (Baro *et al.*, 2013); these may result in prospective students falling behind in the rapid growth of digital technology. As previously mentioned, this is a 'digital divide' where the gap is based on access to digital technologies, both in a physical sense but also in the skill to effectively make use of them (Bennett, 2012).

### **Previous SNS studies**

In a study in the Netherlands (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011) about HEI marketing, SNSs ranked at the bottom of the list in prospective student preferences for information sources about their study and university choices. Before ruling out the potential to use SNSs for marketing, this study concludes that this low influential importance of SNSs could be due to a lack of relevant content at the time of the study. Furthermore, recommendations from family, friends and acquaintances are ranked as a major influence and if their recommendations could be considered as WOM, then if such recommendations are communicated via SNSs, then this could suggest a successful influence of SNSs through eWOM (du Plessis, 2010). According to Akar & Topcu (2011) however, when income levels increase in users, their attitudes towards SNSs positively increase. It is therefore suggested that HEI marketers need to remain proactive in their approach to SNSs with active and regular engagement to understand behavioural developments in the student market (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Adapting to and keeping up with SNS changes and user behaviours in order to enhance their experience can have a ripple effect for shared content, brand strengthening and user collaboration, thus cultivating the chances of greater returns on marketing's investments in time, strategy and generating constant communication (Cromity, 2012). In a study at a Norwegian HEI (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013), a Facebook recruitment campaign was prepared where applicants for a specific course were invited to join a group on the SNS in the field of interest related to the course. Through various activities and Q&A that were facilitated, value creation occurred through dialogic relations between the applicant and the HEI as well as among the applicants themselves. Those who opted to interact on the group revealed a higher conversion rate to enrolment than those who did not.

This research focused on the South African context of SNS marketing for HEIs. Much of the previous research found, had mostly been focused on developed countries and

the themes and trends of SNS usage within their population groups. However, other similar South African based research considered the effect of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) within South Africa (Broekman *et al.*, 2002) and more recently on the effects of Facebook advertising on the SA Millennial generation group (Duffett, 2015). Broekman *et al.* (2002) acknowledged that technological advancements for South Africa seemed to have an overall low priority for widespread citizen learning and access. With the movement in higher education to create greater access through online learning, it was argued that this would still disadvantage the already disadvantaged groups. This point validates that marketing and engagement with prospective students via SNS platforms may exclude prospective student market sectors that either choose not to engage with brands and businesses on social media or that have very limited or no access to technology and access to information. Therefore HEI SNS pages should not be the only platform where an HEI posts important announcements and information; there should be other platforms and ways to distribute the necessary information that a prospective student may need. Marketing and technological based strategies that have worked in developed countries should not automatically be adopted within South African contexts; differentiated strategies would need to be designed and tested to suit and engage the full potential of the higher education market. While there is overall limited research in this field for South Africa, this indicates the potential scope for continuous and extensive research in the area.

While Facebook advertising was not specifically included in the scope of this study, (2015) had found that Millennials who update their statuses and profiles more frequently supported more positive SNS behaviours amongst other Millennial users connected to them, which meant that greater activity on the SNS would have an increased probability of engaging with other elements on the SNS such as advertising and even gaming. The investigation also revealed that amongst the Millennial group engaging with Facebook advertising, black and coloured ethnic groups exhibited higher levels of intention-to-purchase than the white ethnic group who overall exhibited lower levels of advertising engagement. Furthermore Duffet (2015) found that Millennials who spent less time logged on to Facebook in one session would be less likely to see and engage with advertising or marketing content on Facebook. It was further advised that companies on SNSs should regularly change and add

variations to their advertising or marketing content to prevent the Millennial market they intend to engage, from becoming bored with the content and therefore disengaging. (Duffet, 2015)

While the methodology to be used for this dissertation research is explored and discussed in greater depth in the next chapter, what has been found in the majority of literature pertaining to marketing and specifically for HEIs is that they adapt quantitative methods of research with numeric statistics based on sample groups. Qualitative research methods will be adopted for this specific study in order to explore the conceptual themes to do with value in an SNS marketing relationship.

### **SNS interaction and activity**

When efforts are made to encourage and maintain frequent interaction on SNSs with teenagers or Digital Natives by companies, brands or service providers, it can increase teenagers' perceptions of choice to engage via SNS communications. Similarly if HEI marketers can inspire the Digital Native market to understand that they (the prospective student) have a choice of when, how and why they may choose to utilise and engage on SNSs, empowers a perception that they are not controlled by the marketers of companies and organisations that are urging their frequent SNS use (Baker & White, 2010). This means that there is a perceived sense of individuality and freedom of choice for users, as opposed to intrusive advertising which research around Digital Natives indicate that they would not respond to. Further indications of successful SNS communication include use of personal pronouns and imperative verbs that imply a human element to the brands as they engage with users as an acknowledged reciprocated relationship (Kwon & Sung, 2013). Creating value-in-use through interactive marketing communication enables the process of exchange whereby propositions of development and practical use of the service offer potential for sustainable improvement for the targeted customer (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006).

Influences on student perceptions of value of an HEI include personnel and management; this is because of their short-term focus on the process of their upcoming (prospective) or current studies, rather than the potential of the long-term outcomes in enrolling and completing the course (Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota, 2010).

HEI's are recognising more and more the potential for using SNSs as a tool to reach and attract prospective students. Compared to traditional marketing communication channels, SNSs can play an added role in an HEI's marketing strategy (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). In the context of the research conducted for this dissertation, this potential refers to the relationship built with the prospective student on SNSs about the HEI and the education service/s they offer. While there seems to be available research on SNSs, marketing techniques for tertiary education and on career choices for the emerging youth, there is limited empirical research on their relationship and how SNSs have progressed in usage in South Africa as a valuable interactive marketing platform. This study will therefore focus on Digital Natives as the active participating audience on the interactive digital technology platform of SNSs.

### **The responsibility of utilising digital marketing**

Constant developments and upgrades need to be kept up with and while much of the digital technology and SNS research seems to be from developed countries, it is important to explore how South Africa's markets may respond to the SNS marketing strategies and whether the supposed controversy around ethics in marketing an HEI is relevant in a developing country or at all.

With these changes, and considering future generational markets after the Digital Natives, research needs to be regularly conducted to understand up-to-date trends in the market for successful engagement via technology. Similarly the nature and affordances of SNSs are constantly evolving and expanding, and if marketing practitioners are to successfully execute and engage a market online, they need to ensure their SNS content and strategy aligns with current trends in a specific market.

## **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

### **Marketing communication**

Marketing communication is an act of authoring and publishing to an intended reader or audience in order to promote a product or service. Such narratives must have structure, be engaging, evoke frames of reference, serve multiple audiences and the information must be plausible relating to the product or service being marketed. Further guidelines, specifically for multimedia writing, include making various decisions prior to creating content, such as deciding on the desired audience and identify the overall intended effect that the marketing communication should have on audiences along with a strategy to achieve and reinforce this. Writers and designers for multimedia should also develop opportunities for user interaction to cultivate a sense of inclusion in the written work or media content (for example: image; photo; video; and game) and enhance their experience with the narrative and content. Then with the interaction that occurs, a decision should be made about constraining responses that are irrelevant or offensive to the multimedia content (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) The areas and content generating responses that were recognised when the reception analysis was conducted added depth to the thematic analysis of the HEI's encoded content (i.e. its marketing communication in an SNS post) and the user prospective students' decoding response to the content.

Wyld (2010) suggests that marketing in the 'real world' has its limitations in terms of physical reach and appeal, whereas a virtual world, accessible online, presents unparalleled opportunities without or with less physical limitations of distance, time and money constraints for businesses or organisations. He further notes that the opportunities of engagement on virtual/online platforms offers added opportunity in gathering market and customer feedback or opinions, along with product/brand testing and new ways of advertising. This would all depend on the online platform being utilised and specifically which SNS and what its affordances are in terms of settings, data gathering options, access to users and so on, which may have additional costs attached in order access more detailed information for a marketer. Sheth and Uslay (2007) agree that the Internet and automation in technologies afford marketers many opportunities to customise one-on-one interaction



over a wide reach. Competitors in business can quickly be observed by one another and specific information is expected to be immediately accessible by online consumers, and they can choose to interact with one another or respond to content quicker. This means that multiple stakeholders have the potential and power to contribute to and/or participate with any brand, product, service or business online. It is often found, however, that there is one dominant stakeholder working as an agent to influence how the value-creation system may unfold online which would, in most cases preferably, be the main company or brand marketing themselves to ensure for positive outcomes of value creation.

### **Opportunities to engage the Digital Native market**

The co-creation aspect contributes to the need for Digital Natives to feel they have power of choice to share, contribute and co-create value which can have both positive and negative implications. As they are active along with other users on SNSs on the same pages or connected via other uses, so they form networked publics (boyd, 2011). The ways in which users may interact and co-create via SNSs in this research revealed thematic responses that were classified as positive, negative, neutral or irrelevant types. Those with similar types of responses or based on Hall's (1980) positions, would see the communication through the SNS networks of other users and pages they are directly linked with, and then converge in the public space to converse over similar topic from similar positions.

### **Key aspects of inquiry**

- The use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) as a marketing platform.
- Exploration of the SNS relationship between a user and a service provider, namely a prospective student and a HEI.
- Interpreting the value of the SNS marketing content and communication directly between them or occasionally users mentioning the HEI in a post through the use of a hash tag, as an indication of potential success in student recruitment efforts.

### **The interpretation of value**

Within these aspects of inquiry, various themes can be assumed in interpreting value in the SNS communication occurring around marketing. By value, this is based on Linn's (2010) principles of importance, worthiness and usefulness within the themes. These themes include: language use; content relevance; quantity of response; quality of response. An overall theme relating to SNS marketing strategies is identifying the potential of prospective students following through (or not following through) to enrolment as a result or contributing factor of the communication occurring on SNSs based on the communication they present to or about an HEI. One central factor within all the aspects of inquiry of this study is to identify the value in using SNSs as a marketing platform – this value is not based on monetary figures, but rather market values or enrolment numbers of students as a result of the SNS marketing initiatives. The focus of this study concurs with Sheth and Uslay (2007) who argue that there is a move from an exclusive exchange (buyers and sellers of brands/products/services) or a value-in-use (products/services) process towards more ways of creating value. When two individuals or institutions are connected with complementary resources, then value is created and it can benefit multiple stakeholders affected by the connection. They argue that the basis of how society works is through social networks of stakeholders and the practice of marketing has the ability to restructure these networks for effective value creation. In theory this process could be applied to the following example of a situation: user one interacts with or mentions a brand/service/product on SNSs and users two, three and four, who are connected to user one, see and connect with that brand/service/product. This could be a form of SNS word-of-mouth (eWOM) that occurred and could further the value chain by adding information, opinion, referral or other input. This can further gather momentum to spread to more users and affect other stakeholders within or related to the target market such as suppliers, the community or society at large.

### **Thematic analysis**

The benefits of using thematic analysis in research are its flexibility and potential to deal with complex sets of data and to reveal rich and detailed results. It is a method to identify, analyse and report on the themes (or patterns) through simple organisation and sufficient description. Thematic analysis can be argued to be the basis of most methods of analyses and is widely accessible to multiple forms of

research, however it does not, for example, demand the technological or theoretical knowledge as grounded theory does (Braun & Clark, 2006). For a systematic start in approaching the thematic analysis of the data, creation of categories and a coding scheme by means of transcription allows for data to be organised simply and effectively. Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) note that while transcription of data is regularly used in the methodological process of conducting research, they find that little reflection of its role has been acknowledged. Transcribing data is both an interpretive and constructive exercise and the overall motivation in using it has moved away from using one standardised set of transcription rules and conventions as the nature of the data demand different ways of arrangement. The original data record itself is representational of an interactive event but this, at the same time, can refer to the recording of an event into writing, in order to form the data, which can allow the researcher to avoid mistaking the written data as the event. Because of the necessity of clarity and detail in the transcription process, examination of the transcribed data is an act of interpretation, which affects the process of determining the themes and conducting the analysis. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggest deducing concepts from the theory and applying it to the data in the process of coding or transcribing. Themes can involve demographic categories or other labels such as an institution's connotative 'pre-coded' topics based on the theoretical framework. A theme in the data represents a pattern within the marketing communication or responses on SNSs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process also provides input into recognising what strategy the HEI may have adopted in its SNS marketing communication and to determine, by the amount and type of responses whether their strategy may have been effectively planned or impromptu as well as if it is appropriate to the SNS platform (Wiese *et al.*, 2009b).

### **Constructionism**

Constructionism refers to the role of individuals actively using representative resources in objectifying, circulating and deciphering their environments. Meaningfulness is then generated when individuals engage and interact based on what they may perceive as useful (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This can relate to interactions on social media when either an institution or prospective student reciprocates communication with the other, if deemed useful or provides them with meaning and value. Braun and Clarke (2006) similarly report that a thematic analysis with a

constructionist method will consider events, realities and meanings that occur due to a range of dialogues and communication exchanges happening within society. Another method for a thematic analysis can be the essentialist method. This involves coverage on the experiences, meanings and reality of participants. The middleman of the two methods within a thematic analysis is referred to as a 'contextualist' method. This bridges the two in that it considers individuals' ways of making meaning of their experiences but within the social and material context of their reality.

### **Reception analysis**

Reception Analysis is closely related to Stuart Hall's (1980) model of Encoding-Decoding. Though in several texts it is reinforced as a model applicable to the televisual medium, technology has evolved now to include televisual with textual and others i.e. multimedia. In the case of this study, what would strictly be an audience in the televisual sense can be seen as a user in the social media sense. Audiences for television, particularly around the time the model was developed, would have had to be aware of the research taking place and the position they take in response to televisual content they view. Today SNSs have many public access affordances, all varied of course, depending on privacy settings per user. Much of the content however, especially when interacting on a publically accessible page such as an HEI page, can allow the researcher to observe the user-audience positions without the user having to be an active and consenting participant in the research. Nosko, Wood and Molema (2010) found evidence of trends that some individual users are disclosing sensitive, personal and potentially defaming information, while others are very discreet in selecting the information they reveal on SNSs such as on Facebook. This choice factor for users also can affect their SNS profile name, their profile picture and the possibility to have multiple accounts or profiles on Facebook. This would make it challenging to consistently identify different users in terms of demographic or capacity in which they may interact on an SNS. True identity can be even more difficult to detect on Twitter for the same reasons, but also the nature of Twitter lets the user create their Twitter name (also known as handle) not necessarily according to name and surname. When signing up with Facebook, the process asks for your name and surname for your account, which is then used as your profile name and is visible on the SNS. However, it was then considered whether user profiling and true identity is an essential component to consider in the context of this SNS research

study. This study observed the communication content on HEI SNS pages with interacting users, and was not conducted as case studies on individual SNS users; individual identity was then not deemed important as the communication itself could give an indication of whether a user was a prospective student, current student or other to an HEI by the nature of their enquiry or communication. The communication on an SNS page was within public view, unless it had strict privacy settings, which meant it would not have been accessible for the study without gaining permission and this was not the case with the ten HEI SNS pages. The idea that participants within sociotechnical systems such as SNSs consciously agree to participate in research around such online platforms is contestable, however their choice to make use and engage in the space in public view makes the data that they generate available for research. This can lead to debates of perceived power in SNS relations and interactions, however such has become the nature of the way many online social platforms have been designed. Thus it is the user's individual decision to actively participate on the public platform and, by doing so, likely generate data that would be used to conduct research (Stein, 2013).

### **Access to technology**

Livingstone argues that in today's world the average home (globally) contains a convergence of media from television sets, computers, cellphones and radio, all (or many) facilitated by the Internet or digital frequency. Those watching and/or listening to content as an audience do so on these platforms, can and do actually engage in far more capacities than as a passive or submissive audience. There are diverse ways in which to engage with, and be active on, multiple media simultaneously, including downloading, playing, surfing, searching or chatting. Therefore she argues, that 'users' would be a more appropriate term because of the multi-tasking type capacity to engage with multiple media at the same time (Livingstone, 2009) However the comparable average home in South Africa may be arguably different to the global average, and may not yet have access to all of the above. Despite this, this study analyses the communication by those that do have access to an SNS platform to assess the South African content. Those that may not have access to SNSs would by default of this study topic be excluded from the data if they are unable to access SNSs and the HEI SNS pages. The data captured was all largely based on subjects relevant and/or directly towards prospective students where available, as relevant to the topic

of this study. Due to the nature and possibilities of interaction on SNS pages the term 'user' of SNSs was adopted in this research considering the many ways for users to engage on SNSs including chatting, watching, commenting, listening, reading, tweeting (Twitter), liking (Facebook), searching and so on.

### **The Digital Native**

Jones *et al.* (2010) confirm that Digital Natives are within the population of university entrants and that students actively use technology, whether socially, seeking information about courses or financial support, in fulfilling academic outcomes of their course and otherwise. Therefore the SNS users connected to the HEI page is not guaranteed to be 100 % of the HEI's prospective students and therefore SNSs are only one set of activities in a marketing strategy as a whole. Similarly all the users connected to the HEI page may not be prospective students, as there may also be others who have an interest in the HEI, but not out of interest to study there. These may include current students, graduates, alumni and so on. However using SNSs as a marketing platform is still important in terms of utilisation as it may be used as a page of research or reference for a prospective student without necessarily interacting with or communicating to the HEI on this platform. Hence the referral to the Digital Native prospective student embodying the adequate skill of utilising SNSs, and seeking to find out general and/or specific information about the HEI and the courses on offer.

While there are many different 'types' of SNS users, the Digital Native can be identified by their nature of demand for information and connectivity anywhere or anytime. The information they access must be structured or linkable to the next appropriate source of information (Williamson, 2006). These characteristics can arguably be identified with any age group comfortable in a digital space, however Digital Natives could perhaps be considered to escalate these characteristics in that they consider it essential to have constant access and connectivity. When the SNS data content was analysed, these characteristics were considered in analysing users and the nature of their communication. Some tertiary educators are exploring ways to engage their majority Digital Native students by incorporating social-media technology into their teaching environments. However, in a study in the USA, it was discovered that, at the time, the preferred uses of SNSs were for personal interests

amongst tertiary education students (Tuten & Marks, 2012). Marketing on SNSs occurs more as a bridge between personal use and intellectual engagement, where users can choose what or who they want to interact with or what information they are seeking, based on their interests.

### **Data from media content**

Lindlof & Taylor (2011) raise two concerns around conducting data collection through new media and participation observation. The first is the multimedia devices with which the data can be recorded, including how the technology may construct the event that it appears to record or the effect on the participant in sharing information. The second implication involves the conduct of participant observation in online environments, which have endless facets on multiple platforms. Therefore a participant's communication on one online platform may mean something completely different if used on another online platform. As a result both backgrounds and contexts of the SNS platforms must be considered. Such concerns can be addressed with focus on the context of specific SNSs chosen for the study to assess the communication occurring on the SNS, rather than trying to link users on multiple SNSs.

The context of this study focuses on the communication occurring between HEI SNS pages and users, preferably prospective students for the analysis of the marketing relationship and techniques used on each specific SNS. While the follow-through of Digital Native prospective students' (users) actual application and enrolment for the HEI's education service is not to be included in this study, it is acknowledged that SNSs have become a key marketing mechanism for accessing information and interacting with online consumers such as prospective students for HEIs or customers and clients for any other business.

### **Thematic analysis**

The thematic analysis allows for rich description over the entire data set indicating the themes and nature of a marketing communication platform, thus providing a closely accurate reflection of all the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the thematic analysis approach has the ability to provide insight on HEI SNS marketing strategies and how to develop future strategies to effectively fulfil

marketing objectives to a digitally inclined sector of their target market, particularly as Digital Natives/Generation Y are known to be Internet savvy. SNSs also afford a tribal feel of community amongst users by being able to share and interact with one another through content, posted opinions, experiences and photographic or video media (Nga and Yien, 2013).

In an American study on the positive or negative emotions expressed in MySpace comments, it was found that positive comments were frequent in the giving and receiving between users; negative emotion in comments, were much rarer (Thelwall, Wilkinson & Uppal, 2010). This may have positive or negative effects on the publicity of the HEI but the benefits and possibilities of marketing via SNSs can be beneficial if optimised on. While the social media and communication technology use has grown in South Africa in recent years, with it has come an allowance to speak and share freely without the enforcement of accurate spelling and grammar rules. This aspect of the research may have required interpretation and where needed, translation if communication was in another language.

### **Keeping up with technology**

Due to the continuous changes and developments in technology and media communication, this research study explores the value in the SNS marketing for HEIs, valid for the time that the data is collected and analysed. Future advancements in the landscape of online media communication and particularly social media, may affect the validity of how an HEI may approach communicating and generating content for online media, as well as how their user market may receive and interpret it. Due to the limited research of these online platforms in South Africa while specifically relating to HEIs, this study is necessary in understanding the existing users that make use of these platforms and how an HEI might recognise and interact with a prospective student about the education service they provide.



## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **Qualitative research**

Qualitative research is always evolving, centred on changes within environments within which it is used. It is often used in media and technology studies where meaning and practices in media, telecommunication and computing are the focus, including the increasingly popular interactive and digital multimedia technologies (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The central method of research in this study was qualitative, however due to the nature of the Social Network Sites analysed, some numerical statistics from the data contributed to the analysis. The research study adopted a qualitative approach as an overarching view to the selected HEI and its data to understand how the advantages and disadvantages affect the value of HEI SNS marketing within the geographical context. Some of the quantitative data that emerged from transcription was used to contribute to the core design of the study, which was a thematic analysis and conducted on content on the online SNS platforms of Facebook and Twitter during the specific period of collection, over five months captured at the end of each month through screen shots. The transcription process was organising the content from the screen shot content into excel to extract the data accurately. The quantitative data is relevant for the popularity of SNS content; understanding the subject of the post and why it attracting volumes of feedback from users. A reception analysis was conducted on a specific portion of the data where marketing communication content was generated by the HEI and the user (prospective student) responded directly to the content.

### **Research aim**

The aim of this research was to explore the value of SNS marketing for HEIs through finding ways in which the Digital Native prospective student engages with the HEI on the SNS platform in a preferred way. A SNS platform offers a HEI the opportunity to build a relationship with the prospective students who seek information online and have a platform to post their queries or receive new updated information when announcements are made. The content that the HEI posts could allow a prospective student to understand and get a taste of the culture, ethos and campus life the HEI can offer.

### **Unobtrusive observation**

Similar to Bosch's (2009) methodology, a means of 'lurking' was employed on the HEI SNS pages to observe and capture the occurring communication to gain understanding of the online relationship between HEIs and prospective students in the public domain of SNSs. This as an unobtrusive method for the researcher to examine data from an archival source (or sources) for public use. The data was collected by means of capturing an image of the online activity using a screenshot, and the data was later transcribed into Excel. Using other mechanical recording devices such as online filtering programmes of all SNS page content would not disregard the issue of selective observation, but would simply delay some decision-making about the data until the transcription stage (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999).

### **Thematic analysis**

A thematic analysis was adopted as an analytic tool for the qualitative data of this research and included some quantitative results to identify emerging themes. A thematic analysis of qualitative material is a sophisticated means of analysis with well-known research techniques employed in the process. Furthermore, thematic networks then systematised the data through transcription. The following three stages, made up of six steps, were followed to identify overall themes and organise basic themes and how they connect. The three stages and six steps by Attride-Stirling (2001) are as follows:

#### **STAGE A – Reduction or Breakdown of Text**

Step 1: Code Material

Step 2: Identify Themes

Step 3: Construct Thematic Networks

#### **STAGE B – Exploration of Text**

Step 4: Describe and Explore Thematic Networks

Step 5: Summarize Thematic Networks

#### **STAGE C – Integration of Exploration**

Step 6: Interpret Patterns

This guide enables the researcher to unravel the mass of data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In Stage A, the data was transcribed into an Excel document to organise, code and identify the themes within the data as well as structure the networks for clearer interpretation. The transcription is made up of constructed texts because in the screenshots, the SNS content and communication contain the criteria for which themes were decided upon, the position of the users whose communication was captured, along with the researcher's position, additional media within the post and the language, spelling, vocabulary and subject matter used. Furthermore, the process of transcription is a valuable aspect of analysis and allows the understanding and interpretation of results to occur simultaneously (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999).

### **Constructionism**

A constructionist method was adopted for the thematic analysis, as this brings perspective to the data that meaning and experience are produced socially and recycled in that production process rather than considering individual influences and motivations. It considers the socio-cultural contexts of SNSs and the conditions in which the communication and interactions take place (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Encoding/ decoding**

Stuart Hall's (1980) final edition of *Encoding/Decoding* was used to guide the reception analysis aspect in the collection and structuring the data of content generated by the Encoder (HEI) versus content generated by the Decoder (SNS user). Greer (2010) points out that media texts are polysemic which implies multiple meanings are possible, depending on the social and cultural contexts. Though an HEI's ideal marketing aim is to identify the *dominant-hegemonic position* from Hall's *Encoding/Decoding* as an ideal-target consumer engages in the 'preferred meaning' via the Decoder's response content as set out by the Encoder, there are also the *negotiated*, *oppositional* and *aberrant positions*. The latter two positions refer to partial agreement or disagreement on the part of the decoding consumers. This is necessary to understand the value of the marketing efforts of the HEI based on the extent of the efforts they are making. This will be used specifically to identify and analyse from what position prospective student users are responding to HEI content. Dominant-hegemonic would mean they are providing feedback based on the preferred meaning the HEI intended within their marketing strategy.

This *Encoding/Decoding* model has been criticised for assuming that media texts are accordingly encoded from a dominant-hegemonic position to the audience to respond favourable; while this may be problematic with fictional media texts such as drama stories or screenplays, it does not necessarily with social media as it is used for marketing purposes and therefore more factual (Greer, 2010). Some have suggested that this model is applied most appropriately to news media (Moores, 1993). Based on this criticism, HEI's social media content is generated primarily on a reality and therefore, to an extent, is a 'news-based' media with a marketing drive in providing the information on their education service in various ways to their consumers. This does not rule out where an HEI may generate false content in attempt to portray a more effective image on social media. Despite this, this research took an objective and therefore positivistic approach to the content with an understanding that the purpose is to market an HEI and its legitimate education services which effects the perceived value of importance, worthiness or usefulness.

### **Data collection**

Data was collected by means of visiting the selected HEI's Facebook and/or Twitter pages and extracting various posts by capturing a screenshot relating to the HEI brand and the education service offered as well as the responses or communications from consumers as well. These posts were selected based on their relevance to a prospective student market and availability of such content. For record keeping, the posts were captured as screen grabs (screen shot) over five months in the latter half of the year, namely August 2014 until December 2014. Every month's data was captured at the end of the month or within the first week of the following month, to ensure the content was captured 1-35 days of its posting and within the calendar month. During the early part of the year, there is greater direct marketing, with interactive activities aimed at the consumers via high schools and careers events. The latter period is when applications and registrations occur in greater volumes in line with HEI deadlines, and direct marketing interactions in terms of expos and the like are reduced over exam periods compared to the beginning of the year, and so interaction online has a greater likelihood of occurring.

Once the patterns were identified through the analyses, the advantages and disadvantages of this SNS relationship were devised and related back to how these affect the value (a perspective of importance, worthiness and/or usefulness) of an HEI using new-media interactive marketing platforms, specifically Facebook or Twitter.

No informed consent was necessary because Facebook and Twitter are SNSs and only publicly accessible user content was examined, that is no privacy settings were accessed or changed in order to conduct this research. Any content that was used in the study generated by an SNS user was referred to as 'user'. And if required, 'Facebook user 1', for example, was used where individual posts were specifically referred to in the transcription. This protects their privacy and does not affect the need for content to quote or reference.

### **Sources of data**

The following HEI SNS pages were selected for this study as a selection of varied HEIs – five Public HEIs and five Private HEIs, spread geographically all across South Africa. Some of the HEIs have multiple campuses nationwide; other HEIs may have only one or up to two. The criteria per institution was focussed on having a diverse sample of South African HEIs. Four Twitter pages were selected and 6 Facebook pages. The HEI had to have an established a public SNS page to be able to be included in this study for data and analysis and more HEIs had Facebook pages established but no Twitter handle, or some had Twitter but it was not maintained sufficiently to provide enough data for this study.

### **PUBLIC HEIs:**

- University of KwaZulu-Natal Twitter handle: <https://twitter.com/UKZN> (@UKZN) - This is a large university with multiple faculties spread to several campuses around KwaZulu-Natal.
- Durban University of Technology Twitter handle: [https://twitter.com/DUT\\_Tweets](https://twitter.com/DUT_Tweets) (@DUT\_Tweets) - This is a University of Technology based in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal and is the only technology-

based public institution included in this study to diversify the sample list of HEIs.

- University of Johannesburg Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/University.of.Johannesburg> - This is a large university with multiple faculties spread to several campuses around Johannesburg, Gauteng.
- University of Cape Town Facebook Page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/uct.ac.za> - This is a large university with multiple faculties spread to several campuses around Cape Town, Western Cape.
- UNISA – University of South African Twitter Handle:  
<https://twitter.com/unisa> (@unisa) - This is a large university with multiple centres spread to several campuses around South Africa – mostly offered via correspondence.

#### **PRIVATE HEIs:**

- AFDA: The South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance Facebook page representing all SA campuses:  
<https://www.facebook.com/afda.filmschool> - This is a private institution specialising in Entertainment and Media spread to several campuses around South Africa – including Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.
- International Hotel School Facebook page representing all SA campuses:  
<https://www.facebook.com/ihotelschool> - This is a private institution specialising in Hospitality and Tourism spread to several campuses around South Africa – including Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Plettenburg Bay.
- CTI Education Group Facebook page representing all SA campuses:  
<https://www.facebook.com/ctieducationgroup> - This is a private institution offering courses in Hospitality and Tourism, IT, Psychology and Law spread to 13 campuses around South Africa.
- Boston City Campus & Business College Facebook page representing all SA campuses: <https://www.facebook.com/BostonCityCampus> - This is a private institution offering courses in Business, Management, Accounting, Hospitality

and Tourism, IT and legal courses spread across over 40 campuses around South Africa.

- Inscape Education Group Twitter handle representing all SA campuses: <https://twitter.com/inscapeEdu> (@inscapeEdu) - This is a private institution offering courses in design exclusively with 4 campuses in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, South Africa.

### **Step-by-Step Methodology:**

- 1) The data content for the thematic analysis on the HEI pages on Facebook and Twitter social network sites was selected over a progressive period of five months from August 2014 – December 2014. Data was collected as screen shots approximately once every month, mostly towards the end of the month. This is in order to keep an up-to-date record, and the collection process consistent with the recent SNS activity that occurred in the preceding 4-7 weeks.
- 2) These screen shots were logged with their recorded date and time as a screen shot. Based on the content that was generated and available, between one and 15 items (e.g. Facebook posts or Twitter tweets/conversations) were logged per HEI page that related to the brand (HEI) and/or service (Education) offered, whether as a result of HEI-generated content, direct user response to content or independent user communication about the HEI. The amount of posts collected as data depended on availability on the HEI page and thorough searches of the HEI name mentioned in posts within each SNS.
- 3) Once all data was collected after the final collection at the end of December 2014, all the data was transcribed into an Excel document and systematised according to the type of posts.
- 4) The themes occurring in the SNS communication were then identified. This process involved identifying codes, themes, networks and patterns in the SNS communication. The two SNSs (Facebook and Twitter) were logged separately with analysis also occurring separately.

- 5) In the themes relating to a user's direct response to an HEI's post, this particular content was further analysed using the structure of Stuart Hall's *Encoding/Decoding* whereby the Encoder (HEI) and the Decoder (Digital Native prospective student) were identified. In the relationship between the two, the decoders' feedback to the encoder's content was identified as one of four of Hall's position or type within his theory.
  
- 6) Based on the findings of steps four and five, the advantages and disadvantages of the HEI and Digital Native prospective student's SNS relationship was identified along with how the value of this relationship indicated potential for successful recruitment to enrol in the HEI's course/s.



## Chapter 5: Results and Analysis

The data for this research was collected in the form of screenshots and subsequently transcribed onto an Excel document. It was then coded to identify key results with which to conduct a thematic analysis. The codes for SNS content analysis include: 'likes', 'favourites', 'shares', 'retweets', multimedia use, as well as the subject, content and tone of different posts by different users within the analysis. This coded data provided a variety of insights into the patterns and value of the SNS relationship between the selected HEIs and the context of interaction and communication coming from prospective students on HEI SNS pages. Additional analysis occurred with the investigation of individual posts, with consideration being given to the context of subject matter and tone occurring between the HEI and users on the page. While some quantitative data is reported with the results, this was purposeful in order to recognise part of the themes according to popularity and high or low activity in the SNS data. Analysis on the narrative content of individual posts was done to identify themes of an HEI's SNS marketing strategy and the value in the relationship between prospective student users and an HEI.

Image 1.1 – Sample 1 of screen shot in data collection process from UJ Facebook page

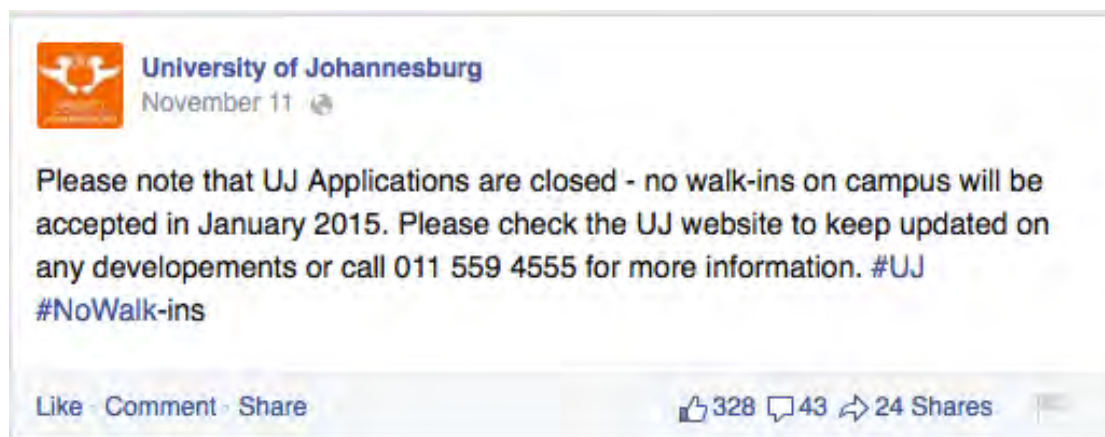
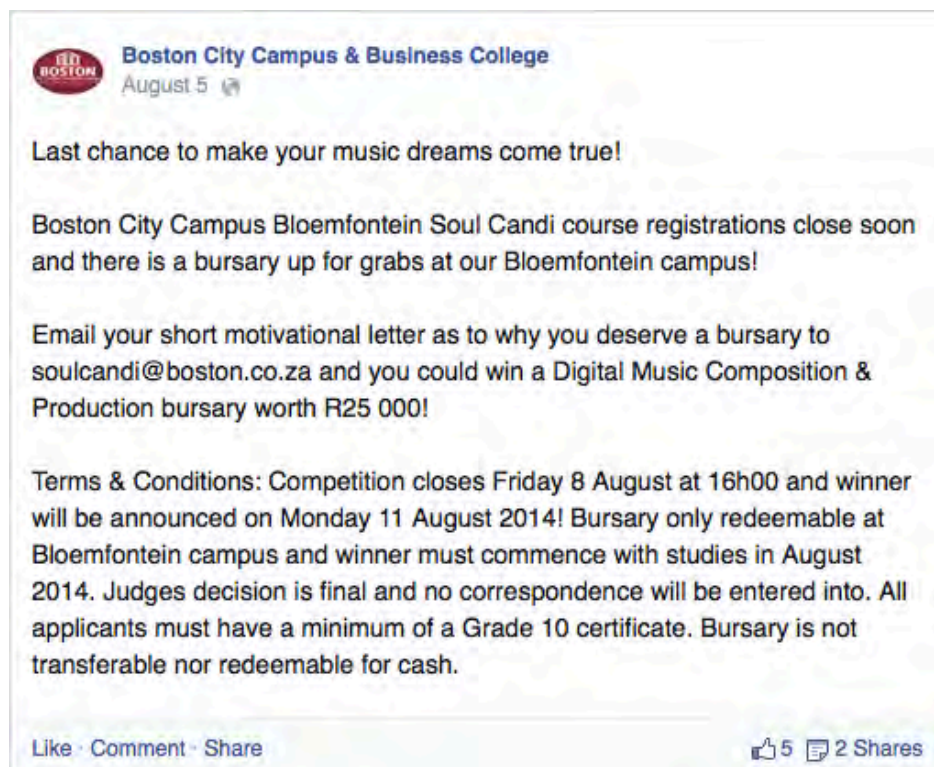


Image 1.2 - Sample 1 of screen shot in data collection process from UNISA Twitter page



Image 1.3 - Sample 3 of screen shot in data collection process from Boston Facebook page



### **Users on HEI SNS pages**

As one of the key aspects of inquiry in this research, the data was analysed in terms of how SNS platforms are being used as marketing platforms. This considers the marketing strategies implemented by the HEI and how SNS users responded to it or used the SNS page. From the HEI's perspective, their page is a platform for SNS users to voluntarily follow them out of interest in the HEI and what they do. The various roles of users identified throughout this research, other than the HEI's page administration, were:

- Prospective students
- Current staff and/or students
- Related industry representatives of the HEI,
- Alumni of the HEI.
- Unidentifiable users.

The unidentifiable users do not fall into any of the previous mentioned roles. This is due to the nature and content of their comments or posts being limited to reveal their prerogative and purpose as to why they were following and interacting on the HEI SNS page. The dominant subject matters dealt with on the page can also reveal the purpose of the page and the potential 'lure' for their followers, as well as the HEI's strategy with the page, depending on what the page administration are mainly posting about, or the subjects of the posts that they responded to, if they responded at all.

The most active users on and/or posting about an HEI page can indicate what purpose the page is fulfilling amongst users on the SNS marketing platform. This includes a handful of cases where users post independently of the HEI page without formally tagging the page administration to view it, however the post is about or related to the HEI. It was observed in the data that the four HEI pages with Twitter pages analysed (Durban University of Technology [DUT]; Inscape Education Group [Inscape]; University of Kwa-Zulu Natal [UKZN]; and University of South African [UNISA]) were all the most active users on their page and overall on Twitter by users mentioning the HEI in a post. This could be due to the nature of Twitter being limiting to the bulk visibility of responses. Similarly, if a user replies to an HEI post, then unless the HEI replies to the user or retweets the post, it would not be visible or

necessarily easily searchable on Twitter, depending on privacy settings of that user. This would bring down the response rate in the data, if such queries or replies from users occurred and were visible publicly on Twitter, but were not responded to. However, of the SNS content and communication collected on the HEI Twitter page or about them, the majority of activity and posts were by the HEI. Overall the quantity of posts and user activity on all HEI pages were higher in numbers on Facebook than on Twitter.

Facebook's accessibility and opportunity for public visibility of most interactions by users on HEI pages is greater than what was visible in the data of the Twitter HEI pages. This may be related to the ease of accessibility to posts and threads, as well as easily viewing or posting on a short or extensive thread of comments made on one post. As with the Twitter data revealing the HEIs as the most active users, the same were true for two Facebook HEI pages including AFDA and CTI. The International Hotel School (IHS) was also one of the most active on their page, but their SNS activity was at an equal ratio to that of prospective students posting on their page or about the IHS. Boston College and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) Facebook pages both had prospective students as the most active users posting on their pages. Interestingly, these two HEIs were the top two of the 10 analysed HEIs with the most followers – see Table 1.1. The University of Cape Town (UCT) Facebook page was the only page where unidentifiable users were the most active on the page.

### **HEI page followers**

The amount of followers on an SNS page are an indication of the size of their SNS user-audience who are interested in the HEI for various reasons. As the page is visible and accessible to users who do not necessarily follow the page, this number is only an indication of the potential reach. The most active users found through the communication content may be representative of the breakdown of user roles within their followers. However these can only be assumptions as there is also a significant portion of followers that may not be active on the HEI page or mention them, yet may still be a prospective student that the subject of the HEI posts could have appealed to. Marketing efforts on SNSs are effective to the size of their user-audience but may, as a bonus, reach any users linked to a user following and interacting on a post from the

HEI page or for any user viewing a page without actually following it. This activity can be visible to that individual user's friends on Facebook but similar interactions are also less visible to followers on Twitter unless it is retweeted or quoted by the user.

Growth or decline in user follower numbers can be caused by multiple factors. One factor may be due to the overall size of the existing user audience and whether they are receiving the information they need and are interested in or not. Overall, all HEI pages gained followers over the full period of collection and every month. See the Table 1.1. indicating the overall growth in followers per HEI Facebook page and Table 1.2 indicating the overall growth in followers per HEI Twitter page:

Table 1.1. Growth of HEI followers per SNS page over collection period - FACEBOOK

<b>HEI (FACEBOOK)</b>	<b>Amount of SNS followers at start of collection</b>	<b>Amount of SNS followers at end of collection</b>	<b>% increase over collection period</b>
AFDA: Facebook Page	9539	10706	12%
Boston: Facebook Page	107727	111532	3,5%
CTI: Facebook Page	11889	13252	11,5%
IHS: Facebook Page	53753	58303	8,5%
UCT: Facebook Page	51488	66129	<b><u>28,5%</u></b>
UJ: Facebook Page	169515	198936	17%

Table 1.2. Growth of HEI followers per SNS page over collection period - TWITTER

<b>HEI (TWITTER)</b>	<b>Amount of SNS followers at start of collection</b>	<b>Amount of SNS followers at end of collection</b>	<b>% increase over collection period</b>
DUT: Twitter Page	2206	2486	13%
Inscape: Twitter Page	669	722	8%
UKZN: Twitter Page	9079	9768	7,5%
UNISA: Twitter Page	32900	35500	8%

The growth in follower numbers can be considered a positive marketing outcome for an HEI page with a deliberate strategy to not only market the HEI via SNSs and but grow their SNS reach. While Inscape did see an overall increase in numbers, there was a decline in followers during December 2014 period. In the November and December months of collection, they had very limited activity or engaging content on their page, the least of all the pages. This result may prove that consistent activity to engage the user audience is important to maintain and grow the followers of an SNS page, increase the market and even uplift the brand of the HEI that it depicts on their SNS page.

### **Active users on HEI pages**

If the highest active user role posting to or about an HEI, was the HEI itself, next it was considered how much less prospective students' SNS activities were, as insight into the relationship between HEI and prospective student users. The following Table 1.3 indicates the results in descending order from highest quantitative HEI activity in relation to all users and compared to prospective student user activity in the form of a percentage of all the user roles identified in the data.

Table 1.3.

Percentages of HEI activity to Prospective Student activity in descending order

<b>HEI</b>	<b>SNS</b>	<b>Percentage activity of user roles on page HEI + Prospective Student = Total</b>		
Boston	Facebook	42%	+	54% = <b>96%</b>
AFDA	Facebook	46,5%	+	42% = 88,5%
IHS	Facebook	44%	+	44% = 88%
CTI	Facebook	48%	+	34% = 82%
UJ	Facebook	5%	+	55% = 60%
UKZN	Twitter	55%	+	2% = 57%
UNISA	Twitter	33%	+	22% = 55%
Inscape Education	Twitter	50%	+	3% = 53%
DUT	Twitter	36,5%	+	3% = 39,5%
UCT	Facebook	16%	+	12% = 28%

Boston had the highest overall percentage of activity between prospective students and their page administration, leaving only 4% of activity posted by other user roles. Other HEIs data with high percentages of HEI and prospective student activity were AFDA, IHS and CTI (all of which are private HEIs), on Facebook pages. This may indicate that Facebook may be more effective and therefore valuable marketing platform for HEI's to engage and interact with their prospective student market.

The Twitter HEI pages showed to be four of the five HEI's with the lowest prospective student user activity on (or about) their pages overall. The UCT Facebook page had the lowest overall activity from the page administration and prospective student users combined. As mentioned previously, UCT's most active user role on their page or posting about them were unidentifiable users. This activity was in the form of comments on HEI posts and Facebook reviews as the UCT page administration disabled the setting where users can post individually on the page. A review on Facebook is visible on their Facebook page and it is where a user can select a star rating for the HEI and leave a comment with it, if desired. Interestingly, it was further observed that UCT's page achieved the highest percentage increase in followers over the data collection period. The amount of followers on a page may be influenced by the subject matters dealt with by an HEI in their posts as well as the dominant subject within the posts, queries and comments by SNS users on the HEI page, or about them.

The peak interactions of most popular posts took place in varied month per institutions: see table 1.4:

<b>HEI</b>	<b>MONTH 1: Peak interactions and/or most popular posts</b>	<b>MONTH 2: Peak interactions and/or most popular posts (if different to MONTH 1)</b>
AFDA	November 2014	n/a
BOSTON	August 2014	September 2014
CTI	September 2014	October 2014
DUT	August 2014	September 2014
IHS	September 2014	October 2014

INSCAPE	August 2014	September 2014
UCT	August 2014	December 2014
UJ	December 2014	n/a
UKZN	September 2014	n/a
UNISA	September 2014	December 2014

### **Main subjects within communication on SNS page**

Of all the HEIs, there were two main subjects that were the most popular among all the content posted or commented on by all different users including the HEI's posts. Six of the ten HEIs main subject dealt with were about applications, how to apply, registration, and enrolment for new students and related queries, posts or comments. These HEIs were: AFDA, Boston, CTI, IHS, UJ and UNISA. The only HEI on Twitter with this as the major subject was UNISA. The second most popular subject amongst all the content for the remaining four HEIs was a post about news or an announcement in some way related to the HEI whether to do with history or upcoming developments of the HEI, new courses, an SNS competition, administrative announcements, dates to diarise, achievements by staff, students or alumni and so on. In most cases these were posted by the HEI and the subject then gained overall popularity by comments about the post from users or sometimes in terms of reviews or other announcements about future or current studies at the HEI by an SNS user. These institutions were DUT, Inscape, UKZN (all Twitter pages) and UCT (Facebook). See table 1.5 below as summary:

Table 1.5 – 2 most popular subjects dominating the posts on the SNS pages

<b>2 most popular subjects</b>	<b>Facebook Pages</b>	<b>Twitter Pages</b>
Application and/or Registration related	AFDA Boston CTI IHS UJ	UNISA
News and/or Announcements	UCT	DUT Inscape UKZN



Most of the popular posts across all the pages were generally posted in August and September, however there was no clear trend of a specific month between August and December that all the popular posts were posted in, as these varied between all the HEI pages. Therefore it is more realistic to deduce that factors of content, relevance and timing work together in how the various posts became so popular. Furthermore, the most popular posts did not necessarily correlate with the month that the page gained its most likes, however six out of the 10 HEI's gained their most followers during October 2014 which is generally when many application and registration queries were made on the HEI SNS pages.

In comparison, the most popular subject posted exclusively by the HEI page administration differed for some from the above-mentioned HEI's overall most popular subject. Those HEIs include Inscape (Twitter), UCT and UJ (Facebook). Inscape's overall popular subject was mainly their posts on various news or announcements made, however the subject of their posts was equally shared between news or announcements and inspirational posts such as motivation quotes or posts of encouragement. UCT mainly posted inspirational posts to motivate followers to work hard to achieve dreams and similar sorts of aspirational content. These posts were often paired with an image and a quotation from an iconic figure of success. Like Inscape, UJ also had a shared popularity between two subjects they would post about. The one was applications and registration-related content, which was the same as the most popular subject overall on the page. The shared subject popularly posted by UJ was various news and announcements about deadlines, administration, and new significant staff joining the HEI.

The main subjects that any HEI posts about, provide insight in terms of their strategy in having a dedicated page on an SNS and what purpose that page's administration intends to fulfil. If a subject differs to that which the HEI posts about is the most popular subject overall in the data, then the purpose of the page evolves more towards what the users who are active on the page have an invested interest in. Those HEI pages that engaged with or posted information of greater relevance to prospective students indicate that their page administration's strategy (or part of it) is by putting effort into popularising the subject and boost recruitment efforts via the SNS. However recruitment efforts could be identified in multiple ways; some efforts

are direct and blatant in encouraging prospective students to join their HEI, whereas others can be considered indirect or rather subtle in marketing the achievements, history and brand identity of the HEI. For example every HEI except DUT and UCT have posts listing how to apply, dates of registration, application criteria, deadlines, bursary and support information for new applicants. These posts were generally received by active and prospective student-users with further queries about the application procedure and enrolling at the HEI. Some even commented with a statement about their joy or excitement to enrol at the HEI. See sample Images 1.1 – 1.3 on pages 52-53 as reference.

### **Reception analysis**

In the reception analysis, these users responded in a way that demonstrates they engaged with the preferred meaning of the HEI's post. There were also commenting active users whose comments suggested their role to be otherwise (not prospective students) on the application-related HEI posts but these were in the minority. Similarly there was a minority of users engaging from negotiated, oppositional and aberrant positions on these posts. DUT and UCT were the only HEIs whose posts collectively did not address the subject of applications, registrations and related information directed towards new prospective student-users.

On the AFDA Facebook page, users mostly engaged with the preferred meaning of the HEI's posts. However, there was a handful adopting a negotiated meaning and the contexts were resulting from the users responding with a negotiated meaning, as they had previously not received the accurate information from another user other than the HEI and/or a timeous response to their query. Boston and IHS Facebook pages had similar results in the reception analysis where the small handful of comments implying negotiated or oppositional meaning in the form of a complaint was to do with a delay in prompt service or response either from their campus or on the SNS, but seldom the latter. CTI's Facebook posts attracted varied positions within their user-audience actively commenting on their posts. While a fair number of prospective students communicated on the HEI posts from a preferred position, CTI gained more of a combination of users from all four of Hall's (2010) positions commenting compared to AFDA, IHS and Boston. The oppositional and some negotiated comments revealed a disappointment and dissatisfaction in the overall

service and delivery of curriculum or support to mainly current but also some prospective students. UJ's Facebook page, amongst the traffic of active users commenting on posts or posting to their page, had approximately half of their active users that adopted a preferred position which were mainly in response to their posts to do with applications and registrations. However the rest were mainly negotiated with some oppositional responses similarly voicing frustrations of getting mixed messages, lack of responses and/or support information from the HEI. UJ also had the highest number of users commenting on posts in general from an aberrant position to marketing their own unrelated content.

UCT's posts also showed varied positions about the content they posted. Many that commented from oppositional or negotiated positions were not all against, dissatisfied or querying the HEI, rather, some of the users seemed to be using the platform to share their opinions on the subject of the HEI post content and sometimes engage in a debate amongst other commenting users. Considering the content of their posts, it seemed as though UCT's page administration does not actively engage with users directly other than through their main posts, therefore it was more challenging to truly gauge their active users' positions on the HEI. This is evident mainly by interpreting the actual position of their comments in relation to UCT's posts, which all have had a generalised potential appeal for a wide varied audience of multiple roles. This, instead of posting information directed to smaller and more specific groups of their active users and page followers, waters down the potential of using the platform to market the HEI. Interestingly, UCT's page indicated the highest growth in followers over the collection period which may suggest their following user-audience generally prefer the inspirational and occasional news or announcement posts or follow them as a sense of membership or association whether a prospective student, staff, alumni or otherwise. This theory is not unlikely given the size and prestigious reputation of the HEI (UCT also posted a link about their global ranking to reinforce the same).

DUT and Inscape Twitter pages lacked user comments (or visibility thereof) on all their posts and therefore a reception analysis could not be conducted via their pages. UKZN's Twitter page similarly had a low interaction of users on their posts except for one responding to a post about an HEI-based event streaming live online

which would be categorised as a preferred response in support of the event. This response however was not a prospective student, but was unidentifiable in terms of the role they played in relation to the HEI. The UNISA Twitter page had the most responses to their posts out of all the HEI Twitter pages, which could possibly be because they also have the most followers out of all the HEI Twitter pages. In the reception analysis of UNISA, the users with negotiated and preferred responses to the HEI post were almost equal and overall made up the most of the responses. There were a handful of oppositional responses and only one aberrant. The negotiated responses were mainly application queries concerned with not having received application feedback or online registration and website problems. Similarly to a registration announcement, there were a handful of oppositional responses complaining about UNISA's lack of response on several platforms, not only via their SNS page, or communication about resolving the online registration problems.

While preferred positions were in the majority overall in the Reception Analysis, with responses publicly visible, the oppositional and even some negotiated responses can be damaging to the impression a user may have of the HEI. This damage could escalate a user's impression if it is visible that the HEI is not addressing the matter directly on the page. This analysis further provides insights into the possible weaknesses, not only of how an HEI's SNS page is run, but also areas of the HEI that users require more information or improvements. One of these improvements could be an immediate feedback system that HEI's could benefit from to ensure they continue to engage and appeal to their online SNS user-audience. This means that the HEI ensures to have a reasonably swift and sufficient response on their page to user queries.

Considering how SNSs enable publicly visible feedback to and from a user-audience, this is an opportunity for an HEI to optimise on the benefits of using their page as a marketing platform. For example, they may demonstrate a rapport on the level service delivery and solutions at the HEI outside of the SNS context. Based on these opportunities, a way to gauge how much an HEI chooses to act on these is by considering the response rate to queries or requests on the page. These could be from any user role to the HEI, to another user or even occasionally from the HEI itself requesting a response on a matter raised by a user.

## **Response rates**

AFDA and CTI maintained an exceptionally high response rate on their pages overall where their page administration made up 90-100% all responses on the page to queries. Of all the queries on the page requiring response, 81% of all queries on the AFDA page were responded to and 100% on the CTI page. CTI page administration actually generated more responses to queries than the actual amount of queries that were made. This is because the data revealed that in some cases where another user may have answered, the query and then CTI had responded as well, or where CTI had followed up a query that they had responded to previously in order to check with a user if the matter in their original query had been resolved. Boston and IHS maintained a very similar standard of response rate on their pages with an overall response rate on the page of approximately 75%. Of all the responses to queries, an average of 92% of the responses were generated by their HEI page administration. The four private HEIs with Facebook pages had the highest response rates amongst all the HEI SNS pages. Similar to Boston and IHS's overall response rate on the page, UJ also had approximately 75% of their queries responded to on their page. But only 4% of these responses were generated by UJ's page administration and the majority generated by unidentifiable users, other prospective students or current students.

UKZN and UNISA Twitter pages had an overall average response rate of 30% to queries posted. However the UKZN page administration generated only 50% of these responses, and UNISA 20% of actual responses. Of the four Twitter pages analysed, the two public HEIs had bigger user-audiences in terms of followers than the other HEIs (DUT is public and Inscape is private) and revealed initiative to address and respond to some queries. UNISA's user-audience is approximately three and a half times larger than UKZN; UKZN's user-audience was approximately four times larger than DUT and DUT's user-audience was three and a half times larger than Inscape. These user-audience proportions can be directly linked to the HEI student capacities where UNISA has the largest student capacity and Inscape has the smallest student capacity as a specialised design HEI. UNISA's student capacity is greater than the other HEIs as it is an institution offering accessibility to education via correspondence.

DUT and Inscape Twitter pages, not surprising, following their lack of interactions with prospective student users or any users via the platform, had a zero response rate. DUT had five queries directed to their page and Inscape only 1, which, compared to the other HEIs, the HEI page administrators are not actively taking initiative to encourage interaction with their posts or encouraging responses via Twitter. Hence their main subject in their posts is about HEI news, announcements and some did-you-know fact type posts. UCT’s Facebook page is somewhat similar in that they too did not generate any responses to queries on their page at all, but through the user interaction on their page via comments on their posts, of the few queries that were within the comments thread, 33% were responded to by other unidentifiable users. See Table 1.6 as summary:

Table 1.6: Summary of HEI Response rates per page

<b>HEI</b>	<b>% Response Rate on SNS Page</b>
AFDA FACEBOOK PAGE	100%
BOSTON FACEBOOK PAGE	93%
CTI FACEBOOK PAGE	93%
IHS FACEBOOK PAGE	91%
UKZN TWITTER	50%
UNISA TWITTER	20%
UJ FACEBOOK PAGE	4%
UCT FACEBOOK PAGE	0%
INSCAPE TWITTER PAGE	0%
DUT TWITTER PAGE	0%

### **Indicators of successful user engagement**

A successful SNS page can be defined, for this research, in terms of using the SNS page as a marketing platform to engage prospective students; the following criteria could be considered by post popularity and comments on the same or similar topic that is clearly engaging prospective students which may further give an indication of recruitment potential via the HEI’s SNS page. An indication of popularity can be based on the amount of ‘likes’ on a Facebook post or ‘favourites’ on

a Twitter post also known as a 'tweet'. A like or a favourite on a post is where a user can show support of or agreement with the content or message in the post. Another popularity indicator is by the amount of 'shares' on a Facebook post or 'retweets' a tweet may get from users. This is where a user can click to share the full post visible onto their user profile, which their followers will also see. This too is a complementary means of indicating agreement with or support of the post content, or even an initiative to spread news or information via electronic and online word of mouth. Sharing or retweeting can be both highly beneficial and effective for marketing, but also highly damaging depending on the subject and content of a post and how it may relate to the HEI from a user or what the HEI posted about.

On the HEI Facebook pages, the post that attracted most popularity in quantity overall was by UJ announcing their 2015 registration dates. This post had 1552 likes, 202 shares and 236 comments excluding sub-comments and can be attributed to the fact that the UJ page does have the most followers overall and therefore greater reach. Another top post in terms of likes was a post of an open invitation to high school learners about signing up for their future student mobile website and this gained 432 likes. The post that got shared the second most was a notice about no walk-in applications being permitted in January 2015. The main quality of these posts is that they are each useful information resources to assist prospective students with application and registration related announcements.

UCT Facebook page was next in line in terms of having highly popular posts by the amount of likes. Both of these posts included photographs of graduates about their graduation ceremony that took place in December 2014, when the photos were posted. Both photos included a caption about the graduate, what they were doing in the photograph or advice they could give to current or prospective students on finishing a degree. These posts gained 384 and 397 likes. Qualities of both posts include a sense aspiration and a symbol of ambition and achievement, which proved to have to be the most popular for UCT's SNS user-audience. UCT's most shared posts were separate from their most liked posts. One of their most shared posts is about promoting international exchange to UCT and that it is a high-ranking university with a link to an article justifying the same with a quality of prestige and

international culture. This was shared 24 times. Another UCT post with 22 shares was a purely inspirational quote about how to succeed.

The next highest liked posts on SNS page are mainly on Facebook from IHS, Boston, CTI, UCT and AFDA which only ranged from 27 – 77 likes on a post which is significantly lower compared to UJ and UCT's posts. UCT's followers in quantity make up 60% of the followers Boston has, yet Boston's most popular posts have proportionately less likes per post than the UCT posts. Both of Boston's most liked posts were announcements with links about applying for 2015, but both also included a photograph with an inspirational but also general (that is, non-specific to Boston) image and quote about the potential of what learning and education can do for you depending how you perceive it. One of these posts was also the most shared post on their page, which was shared four times.

IHS had one of their most popular posts gain 70 likes which was, similarly, not specific to IHS but purely inspirational about education. This post was also one of the top shared posts along with three other posts each with two shares. Two of the top shared posts were photographs of students applying their skills they studied in a professional environment with the caption, "South Africa's leading private hospitality education provider". The most shared post was about the traineeship and earn-while-you-learn opportunities. The most liked post on the IHS page in terms of likes was a shared photograph and caption originally posted by an IHS staff member of students with an industry celebrity. The caption gave the overall post qualities of pride and prestige by the association and exposure their students got with an industry leader. This gained 77 likes.

CTI's most popular post was an announcement about a registration deadline of a specific course. This included a photograph reiterating the same announcements and gained 67 likes and 17 shares. The next most liked and shared post was an announcement to apply online via Facebook to study at CTI, which gained 47 likes and 16 shares. AFDA's Facebook page had the least amount of followers compared to all the HEI Facebook pages analysed and this can be considered proportionate to the amount of likes gained on their top posts.



The two highest liked posts from and about AFDA overall seemed to be a part of a campaign they ran called “Humans of AFDA”, where a photograph of a current student is posted relevant to the specialisation they seem to be doing with a caption relating to the reasons they may be studying what they are or what they are aiming to achieve in their careers. These were aspirational and personal, revealing the types of students that may enrol at AFDA. These posts gained 27 and 29 likes and included a link and note about applying. Their two most shared posts were separate to their most liked posts and each had up to three shares. The one was a continuation of the “Humans of AFDA” campaign but it featured a 2015 applicant sharing her aspirations and goals of what she aims to achieve when she enrolls at AFDA. The other most shared post was similar to UJ’s most popular post because AFDA was announcing the enrolment dates for January 2015, but AFDA included a link to their website with the full details.

As an overall comparison, Facebook HEI pages reveal higher quantities of likes, shares, comments or replies overall and the Twitter HEI pages have much fewer favourites, retweets and replies. UNISA, with the most amount of followers of all four Twitter pages, had 15 favourites and 49 retweets on one of their posts which was not only the most popular (tied with a user posting about UNISA using #unisa) of all UNISA’s posts but also of all Twitter posts analysed on all four HEI Twitter pages. The post by UNISA was an inspirational quote and can have be considered to have particular relevance to UNISA’s students studying via correspondence. The user post about UNISA that tied with the amount of favourites and had 22 retweets posted was not necessarily directly about the HEI itself but a comment or joke about current affairs of the time where a public figure was being investigated for claiming to have a degree via UNISA but no official record was traceable. Qualities of these posts are that they each have relevance to the user-audiences. For example, as UNISA offers correspondence learning which requires self-discipline and motivation and this is something the inspiration quote addressed. Similarly the user post was relevant to the current affairs of the time and while the user may be unidentifiable in terms of his relationship with UNISA, the post content can discredit the HEI for poor administration should the claims of having attained the degree be true.

The next most popular tweet was by UKZN who had the second highest followers of the HEIs on Twitter. This tweet gained 13 favourites and 28 retweets from users and was a photograph of a UKZN campus with the caption explaining that it dates back to 1932. This type of post may evoke nostalgia or memories of UKZN alumni or staff and may also bring current and/or prospective students pride in the campus and how much it has grown since that time. The next most popular post tweeted by UKZN was about giving tips or advice to graduates or soon-to-be-graduates about how to prepare and do well in an interview with a link to a full article. This gained four favourites and had a caring quality for their users where the HEI posts free advice to them to encourage success in the job market. A top shared post on the UKZN page with 32 shares was their own tweet announcing that the academic programme was suspended on all campuses until a specified date. The reason for the suspended programme is not mentioned but, this as an SNS has the opportunity to reach users immediately, or at least quickly, as it would affect a lot of current students. Another user posted about UKZN by tagging them as the user, a current or recently graduated student, announced that he/she received an award for architecture. The same as the previous post, this gained four favourites and had qualities of achievement and pride in UKZN.

On DUT's Twitter page, their most 'favourited' post by their HEI page administration was about a campaign about the HEI's commitment to deliver to their students and stakeholders with a link to the full article and report. It gained six favourites and, similar to UKZN's post about giving advice, this post similarly had qualities signifying they care for their students and stakeholders. There were two other posts by users mentioning DUT that gained the same amount or more favourites than the above DUT post. The first post was a current DUT student of the time using the words "Proudly DUT" with the rest of the caption suggesting she is studying a design-related qualification and a link to an image on a photo sharing application called Instagram. This post gained six favourites and had qualities of pride and aspiration for the future, which is tied to how their qualification at DUT was enabling them. The most 'favourited' post mentioning DUT was by an unidentifiable user announcing that the top students studying within a specific course and department have been awarded internships and then there was a link to the full article. This gained 10 favourites, which is the most out of all posts by, or related to, DUT and had

qualities of achievement and reward for high performance. Their most retweeted tweets were separate to those that had the most favourites. DUT's most retweets on a tweet is five, on a post about DUT's graduation ceremony beginning with a link to Facebook with more information. A user that tweeted about DUT also received five retweets on their post about representing the HEI at an event with multiple other Twitter accounts that are tagged within the tweet to ensure attention is attracted quickly by the tagged users. This tweet also had a link to a photograph of the event.

Inscape's Twitter account had the least followers overall and the most that their post or a post by a user mentioning them only gained one favourite and one retweet on each post. Inscape's tweet was about a competition announcement to share photos via social media from which the winner gets a hamper. This had qualities of opportunity for an easy reward via SNS posts to attract interaction and online visibility via users. The other post by a user related to Inscape's field of industry posted about Inscape at a design type careers expo happening in Cape Town, along with a photograph. This post reveals Inscape's presence in big events and activities outside of their education delivery practice in order to actively reach their prospective student market.

### **The aim and potential value behind SNS marketing for HEIs**

Recruitment potential is evident where the HEI SNS page administration and strategy is to optimise the SNS as a marketing platform to attract and engage prospective students. The engagement factor is key where valid information is provided to prospective students in relation to what they may be querying about. The top pages that actively engaged with their user-audience and provided information relevant to prospective students were the UJ Facebook page, Boston Facebook page, CTI Facebook page, AFDA Facebook page, IHS Facebook page and the UNISA Twitter page. However, while UNISA tweeted relevant information for prospective students, they did not respond to any queries or questions tweeted directly to them.

The value of SNS marketing efforts can be in interpreting the recruitment potential via the communication occurring by, to, or about, the HEI. Positive indicators of recruitment potential can be where the HEI responded to a query directed to them with valid information, which is advantageous to the HEI. In some

cases, another user had responded to some of the queries, which can have both positive and negative implications. It may be positive if the responding user is providing the querying user with valid information, however it may be negative if the responding user is providing invalid information which could lead to difficulties in cases where administrative complications, and complaints may arise from any user that read the invalid information and understood it to be true. This can be a disadvantage where such content could further damage their SNS user-audience's impression of the HEI, especially if the HEI is not actively responding to, or resolving, SNS communication that may have invalid information. These would be directly visible to the HEI page administration and to their user-audience, as users who do not tag the HEI but post about them indirectly have their posts and content visible to their SNS profile's followers. This can have both positive and negative implications depending on the content and tone of the independent post. The greater value in independent posts can be recognised as electronic word-of-mouth or eWOM (du Plessis, 2010), which, without seeking to credit or add reach to their post by tagging the HEI page, they are most likely sharing their true opinion or experience to do with the HEI that their followers may see. This makes the post appear like the user took initiative to post about the HEI without the possibility of needing or receiving endorsement from the HEI or users that may see the post, because of the tagged HEI page name.

The possibilities on SNSs empower Digital Natives to contribute, share and co-create the institutions, brands and establishments that they choose to interact with in whichever direct or indirect way that may be. This empowers Digital Natives to choose, contribute and co-create and it is with this therefore, that allows the HEI SNS pages operating by these standards to be attractive to their user-audience and successfully grow the user-audience. As Wyld (2010) noted, outcomes ensure value creation, and such outcomes can be recognised as the posts that engage prospective students in order to encourage them to apply and join their HEI, which in turn brings value back to the HEI in building the HEI brand and sustaining the HEI economically, with student numbers.

The themes recognised that bring positive advantages to the HEI SNS page by followers, likes, favourites, comments, shares or retweets include: immediacy of

response; encouragement of interaction which further allows an HEI to gauge a demand of information; growth in courses and numbers; or improvement on services. An additional theme with advantages of HEI marketing via an SNS page is that brand identity can be reinforced by example, through testimonials and alumni achievements. This also links to the theme of prestige, which was visible in various posts about students, staff or alumni achievements further associating the HEI with it. The themes are often closely related to the subject of the content in a post such as news and announcement type posts which had themes of revealing the HEI's growth or expansion, their engagement with industry and even demonstrating types on opportunities available via the HEI for students and graduates. Other announcement type posts were notices of dates, deadlines or campus closure, which may have affected prospective or current student, plans within the time frame that was announced. Public events at or related to the HEI were also announced as an invitation to their user-audience, whether specific groups within the user-audience or not. Efforts to engage their user-audience varied per HEI page. Some posted debate topics not directly related to the HEI, others posted can-you-guess-the-answer i.e. fun trivia type questions about the HEI or even asked users to share their opinion or what their favourite thing is related to topic of the post. Other themes that arose amongst the HEI posts are step-by-step how-to information about processes for applying to or within the HEI, or even how-to tips towards becoming successful in the user's career. The SNS pages were sometimes also used as a platform to share course information through media that is, photograph/s representing what the students learn in the course. A final recurring theme in most of the HEI posts was the inspirational quotes or motivational sayings, often paired with a photograph to target their user-audience members with aspiration for success.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

The transcribing process followed by the analysis of the complete transcribed data provided extensive insight into the value of the SNS relationship between HEIs and Digital Native prospective students. The thematic networks revealed the trends and patterns occurring within the SNS communication and points indicating effective marketing strategies that were implemented on the difference HEI SNS pages. These were constructed as a result of identifying the links among the themes that emerged from the transcribed data and providing meaning with regard to the purpose of marketing relationships on SNS platforms. This constructed network was then explored, with descriptions and summaries being addressed in this chapter.

### **Constructionism**

Constructionism refers to the way users use SNSs to understand and decipher their environments by the way they may perceive something as useful (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The context and possibility of uses of each SNS affects the type of communication that would occur on each SNS platform and thus the data allows for the research to construct meaning from the results. As similarly reported by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a thematic analysis with a constructionist method considers events, realities and meanings that occur due to a range of communication exchanges happening within society – particularly in this research, communication exchanges occurring on HEI pages on SNS platforms. The combination of the terms to develop the phrase ‘Digital Native prospective students’, embodies the adequate skill of utilising SNSs and using the platform to find out information about the HEI and the courses on offer or just engage with the HEI in which they may have future interest in enrolling. The thematic analysis allowed for rich description over the entire data set indicating the themes, networks and nature of a marketing communication platform. A constructionist method was adopted for the thematic analysis, as this brings perspective to the data in that meaning and experience were produced socially and recycled in that production process rather than considering individual influences and motivations of users. If the user identifies functionality, sociability and/or entertainment in the SNS communication, then value is created for the user (du Plessis, 2010).

Braun and Clarke again refer to the notion that a process such as this one adopted in this research, considered the socio-cultural contexts of SNSs and the conditions in which the communication and interactions take place including positive, negative, neutral or other attitudes that may emerge as a result (2006).

### **Engaging SNS content**

The first research question was to explore the overall communication generated by an HEI on SNSs valuable based on the content of the posts and the quantity and quality of responses they get. Furthermore it was investigated whether the rate of response from an HEI or on their SNS page affect value and what overall indication was of the potential of the prospective students enrolling as a result of the communication on an SNS.

The first objective of this research was to identify themes in the value of HEI marketing communication on their SNS pages, directed to prospective students. One of the main themes recurring in several of the HEI Facebook pages was in the volumes of application-related and information relevant to new students types of queries. This gave a direct indication that prospective students were interacting on the page and had the intention to study at the HEI. Further evidence that indicated a strong presence of prospective students was in posts by the HEI detailing information mainly relevant to prospective students and applicants, which posts gained popularity in terms of, likes, shares and comments. Examples include UJ, Boston and CTI, which all had their most popular posts covering subjects such as registration dates, application deadlines or general announcements such as how to apply and a new online application platform via Facebook. This information is beneficial to prospective students because it assists and enables them to take a further step towards enrolling as a student. Boston, and occasionally CTI, would combine an application related announcement or information with an image including an inspirational quote to motivate ambition to succeed, which indirectly associated with applying and studying further at the HEI.

IHS's most popular posts all had photographs of young people working in hospitality, dressed (in uniform) as professional restaurant or hotel staff, chefs and

even with an industry celebrity giving an indication of students and graduates successfully transitioning into working in the hospitality industry from the qualification they get at IHS. Another one of their popular posts was about their earn-while-studying traineeship courses. All off these suggest a high probability of success and employment, which is relevant according to (Mattes, 2011) point that the current young South African generation still face the same or even worse levels of unemployment than their parents did. In this way, their marketing strategy can appeal to both parents and prospective students with the underlying assurance that they would have increased chances of securing employment.

AFDA's most popular posts included two that were part of a seemingly continuous campaign they posted which was called "Humans of AFDA". This concept is comparable to the "Humans of New York" photography blog and social media project where a photograph of a person (generally in New York) along with a caption from something they have shared about themselves. Many media scholars have criticised the representations of the various posts and the overall concept, there is a communicative formula used in Humans of New York with persuasive effects in the image and caption combination attracted online engagement with millions of social media users worldwide, (Girard, 2014). The themes within the posts revolved around awareness, empathy and also aspiration and there are parallels found in the Humans of AFDA posts. The two posts included a photograph of a student and an applicant accepted to enrol at AFDA the following year, with a quote from the featured student or applicant about how they are realising, or intend to realise, their dream through their qualification at AFDA. These link to the theme of aspiration and clearly gained higher engagement than other posts by the page administration on the AFDA Facebook page.

UCT indicated a low level of effort to try engage with or respond to a prospective student via the subjects of their SNS posts. Their HEI page administration did not post about any subjects relevant to a prospective student, yet their most popular posts were about UCT students graduating which may engage current students more. Goals of current students will differ to prospective students. In simple and generalised terms, current students aim to finish their qualification and graduate and would be immediately affected by current experiences or events on campus.



Prospective students are in a space of making a career-related choice and aim to get accepted to enrol and begin a journey with the HEI, and perhaps with only longer-term aspirations to finish their qualification and graduate like current students. While graduation can still, in a sense, be a long-term aspiration of a prospective student, it is not necessarily a priority and therefore lacks immediate relevance to engage a prospective student.

UKZN's most retweeted tweet was about the academic programme being suspended, however this post was directly addressed to current staff as specifically mentioned in the post. Their next most popular post was a historical photograph of one of their campuses from 1932, which may evoke a sense of establishment, nostalgia or appreciation for how much UKZN has been developed and expanded since then. This tweet is not addressed to any particular type of user so therein lacks an appeal to engage any prospective student user specifically, other than those individually interested in the history of the institution.

UNISA's most popular tweet was a general inspirational quote addressing the pace and consistency that a person works. This was interpreted to be most relevant to current students as most of UNISA's courses are done via correspondence so this encourages the self-discipline and motivation for them to keep working towards completing their course with UNISA. This could also inspire a prospective student to work hard in order to qualify for entry into one of their qualifications, however the interpretation of all the possible ways this tweet can be relevant to different types of users could have continuous ripple effect and therefore 'spreadability'. In terms of marketing to a prospective student user, this type of tweet and its popularity lacked the direct marketing potential of having engaged prospective student users.

Regardless of whether the popular posts on any of the HEI SNS pages were directly aimed at engaging prospective students or not, shared content and user collaboration cultivate increased chances of success in marketing efforts to recruit new students (Cromity, 2012). Similarly, shared social media posts can be the catalyst for word-of-mouth marketing which does not completely eliminate the value in the marketing potential to recruit students at an HEI.

Considering the popularity of posts within the HEI SNS posts, this allowed the marketing strategies to have been generally categorised into direct and indirect strategies to market the HEI to prospective students. The indirect type content included announcements of achievements of students, staff and alumni, which contributed to the prestige, as well as associating the HEI and its stakeholders with success. There were also posts about news to do with the HEI's growth of facilities or student capacities and increased opportunity for their students. Debate topics relevant to curriculum content or within industries linked to the courses offered at the HEI were occasionally featured as an encouragement to engage with the topic by following a link to another website, and reading the article there. An example of this shared link was found on the UCT page where the article was written by a head of an academic department at UCT. This type of post may stimulate thought amongst interested users but interestingly, the HEIs that posted this type of content did not explicitly invite SNS users to engage on the topic on their SNS page as a discussion forum. This may be intentional because in some instances depending on the topic, it may spark controversial discussions on the HEI page for public view and therefore may have unpredictable, even negative effects on how the HEI is viewed via their SNS. A popular recurring theme was for HEIs to post inspirational posts including a quote or motivational saying and occasionally including an image of a famous figure that may have made a significant impact in the world with a significant message he or she once said or something they did. Positive messages such as this can indirectly give the impression of how the HEI supports, inspires and motivates their stakeholders, mainly their students, but as this is posted publically, this sentiment is revealed to prospective students as well. Another type of post where the HEI indirectly demonstrates support for students is by sharing tips via their posts including topics like how to prepare for a job interview by (UKZN), offering choice via a variety of platforms to contact and engage with the prospective students (UJ) and providing tips on preparing for exams (UNISA).

### **Themes within marketing strategies**

Themes that revealed more direct marketing strategies by the HEI to engage prospective students included posts about how to apply, details about applying, registering or enrolling as in a step-by-step guide. This also includes posts with specific course information, minimum requirements and application deadlines or

registration dates for new students. There were also open invitations to events hosted by the HEI, either specifically for prospective students such as Open Days or workshops for AFDA, Inscape and UJ and other related events. Some were events that were open to anyone as a public lecture that UKZN hosted or where an HEI was involved in a bigger public event relevant to the course content they offer, where their students gained experience and prospective students could attend, such as IHS at the Good Food and Wine Show. This point also links to HEI posts that promote the perks of studying at their institution such as student experiences including attending events and interacting with industry professionals, receiving a new PC tablet with the course material loaded on when enrolling, and discounted fees if a certain portion of fees are paid before a certain date ahead of enrolment (CTI; Boston).

Engaging with the Digital Natives has become essential for HEIs and therefore marketing, communication and recruitment strategies should be critically examined for strengths and weaknesses and analysed to determine which aspects bring the most meaning and usefulness to their Digital Native market (Wiese *et al.*, 2009a, Jones & Czerniewicz, 2010). SNS communication that is generating meaning can be identified by the interaction the post and content attracts from prospective students relative to the HEI and what they offer. The dominant themes emerging out of the HEI's page posts revealed that their primary purpose and concern was in having a dedicated page for their HEI on an SNS. Based on the content posted by the page administration on the AFDA, Boston, CTI, IHS and UJ pages, they were primarily used as a marketing platform to directly engage prospective students, promoting course information and sharing relevant dates, deadlines, links and other information about applying, registering and participating in prospective student related events such as Open Days. Institutions such as DUT, Inscape, UCT, UKZN and UNISA indicated slightly different strategies by the content their page that is posted by administration; their primary strategy in running their HEI page was to market the HEI in more general and indirect terms to engage many stakeholders and not just prospective students. Their posts were about the HEI history, links to articles that reinforce the relevance of their institution and the types of courses they offered, and non-specific inspirational posts just as quotes to do with hard work or getting an education. They also posted about events that were either happening at their campuses or that the HEI is participating in, such as graduation, conferences and so on.

As with Fagerstrom and Ghinea's study, recruitment efforts were successful with those applicants and prospective students who interacted more on the HEI closed SNS group than those that did not interact (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013). Therefore higher interaction, communication and response rates can contribute positively to recruitment, therefore utilising an SNS page as a marketing tool is advantageous provided you engage the user-audience, particularly prospective students. Similarly, the circulatory effect of media and its 'spread-ability' has potential to reach extensive online users that may not be engaging with the HEI at that point, but due to the shared content it may capture their attention and even have them engage with the media content, or the HEI directly (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013).

The HEI pages that may have a high traffic on their SNS page in terms of page followers, likes or favourites on posts, shares or retweets of posts and posts on or to the HEI page may consider their SNS strategy as successful. But as this research is focused on analysing the SNS page as a marketing platform for the relationship between HEIs and Digital Native prospective students, various other factors had to be considered in terms of a successful marketing strategy. The online traffic on an SNS page is relative to their quantity of stakeholders, particularly the size of the institution with its staff, students, alumni and other stakeholders such as prospective students. These factors included analysis of the narrative text in terms of the actual communication and conversations occurring on the HEI pages and in some cases about them, but not directly linked to their page. Barnes & Lescault (2011) agree that engaging with prospective students via online social platforms has become an essential marketing tool, and similar to the results of this study, Facebook was a more popular platform for HEIs to market themselves on compared to Twitter (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). Overall it was evident where some HEIs had made more constructive effort and were utilising a more effective strategy engaging prospective students than others. Overall, when users commented on a post or posted directly to the HEI page when requesting information, there was an expectation to receive a response, preferably a prompt one. Mattes (2011) found that the youth in South Africa do not view themselves to be bound by the official laws or limitations of where they can go, work or live compared to the previous generations who lived through apartheid (2011). This view perpetuates an attitude to believe in the limitlessness of their future, compared to the waning and out-dated thinking from older generations, hence the

similar outcome found in these results with many of the SNS posts by users requesting information.

### **The value in SNS marketing communication**

The second and third objectives of this research was to identify the value of the communication through the way prospective student users (Digital Natives) responded (through comments) to content generated by the HEI about the education they offer in a reception analysis, as well as to identify themes in the value of communication from a user, independent of the content generated by the HEI. This would be in the form of tweets or wall posts on or with the SNS page officially tagged, or independently posted, mentioning the HEI but not officially tagging the HEI.

Recurring themes of prospective student attitudes were visible via all the Facebook pages including UJ, Boston, CTI, AFDA, IHS and although there was a minor prospective student presence on the UCT page, the prospective student presence on this page was also considered thematically. Themes around prospective student attitudes included that of victory and pride about being accepted and starting at the HEI the following year and some attitudes of shame and even some to the point of slander towards the HEI if they did not get the desirable feedback about their entry exam or acceptance into the HEI. When it came to queries, there were attitudes of neutrality in terms of general queries and comments in conversation with other users, desperation for information or clarification around financial aid and their acceptance feedback status or to be accepted into the institution if they received a response of rejection; in some instances there was even an attitude of entitlement where neutral comments escalated into demanding and complaining ones, particularly if they were previously left unanswered. Many of these were often accompanied by a brief backstory about their life to justify their need for information, acceptance or financial aid. There were also attitudinal themes of confidence verses an unsure or undecided attitude towards meeting entry requirements, there was also an indication of not wanting the pressure of having to make the decision immediately or a wish to change the decision they had made previously. In another study, it was the perception of a majority of a Grade 11 sample, that making a decision on a career choice should happen during Grade 11, 12 or as you finish high school (Mitchell, 2001). This is

visible amongst the users' communication that there are still prospective students (a combination of high school learners and high school graduates) that enquired about applying as late as December for January enrolment when application deadlines have passed, or they requested a chance to change their chosen course(s) in their application after submitting. This indicated, that while many may perceive that they 'should' have made a decision about a career and HEI, they haven't yet, and would have preferred to have the opportunity and freedom to decide without societal pressure, HEI deadlines or administrative restrictions. Many of these attitudes line up with the characteristics of the generation with an expectation and sense of entitlement to be able choose what they want, when they want, and how they want it, as described in Time Magazine (Stein, 2013).

Themes of prospective student attitudes on Twitter varied from those identified in the Facebook data and there was overall a smaller quantity of data available for collection, and to analyse. DUT, Inscape and UKZN all only really had one tweet each that indicated the user was a prospective student and UNISA had 25. Similarly to Facebook, there were themes of victory and pride in having been accepted to study at the HEI as well as queries that ranged from neutral to demanding and/or entitled. Additional themes that emerged in the attitudes depicted in prospective student tweets were a sharing of career dreams and goals, more so to the user's followers than directed to the HEI mentioned in the tweet. There were tweets with slightly more negative attitudes including disagreeing or disputing an application deadline announcement tweeted by the HEI and reporting problems with their online registration system. These themes were identified as the attitudes of prospective student users, because they had appeared in more than one tweet by one or more users.

### **Encoding/ decoding**

In an American study on the positive or negative emotion in MySpace comments, it was found that positive comments were frequent in the giving and receiving between users. Negative emotion in comments were much rarer (Thelwall *et al.*, 2010). This data was overall able to identify the same pattern in the quantities of attitudes and emotions depicted by engaging users. The reception analysis was based on user responses where the HEI post subject was specifically relevant to prospective

and new students. Their positions were identified according to Hall's 'Encoding – Decoding' theory (Hall, 2010). The analysis similarly revealed that overall, most users responded to the HEI posts from a preferred position. This was in the form of agreement with the message in the post or a positive attitude of excitement to join the institution or requesting additional specific information to enable them to further their process of becoming a student at the institution. The second most prevalent position was a negotiated one. This was where users would ask a question on the post. They were questioning the post content or they had a question about another matter altogether, yet it is still relevant for a prospective student to ask.

### **Networked publics**

As the HEI SNS pages analysed were publically accessible, what any user posts on the page was publically visible to their own users, both connected to their profile and others connected to the users posting. With this consideration, alongside boyd's (2011) theory of networked publics, users see and are seen by other users. This may affect what they decide to post publically in that prospective students may have wanted to be seen more from a preferred position rather than be seen engaging from an oppositional or negative position. If a prospective student wants to attend the HEI and publically interact on their page, they probably did not want to establish themselves from an oppositional position if they still wish to attend and/or are waiting for acceptance feedback from the HEI. Therefore for the most part, the dominant preferred positions could be a reflection of how users wish to be associated and seen by the HEI and the public online community of users on a particular SNS. The majority of the oppositional user responses, of which there were few, that were present on the various HEI posts, were identified as current students, not prospective students. Their comments were complaints relating to challenges they faced at the HEI. In only a handful of instances however, prospective students commented from an oppositional position demanding feedback from the HEI, which they had been waiting for and still not received.

Users responding to posts from an aberrant position were utilising the SNS platform and specifically the HEI page and posts as an opportunity to promote an unrelated product or service to the HEI. These included a call for votes for another user to win an online competition, promoting a company, which students can utilise

and a few others. These positions all diverge from the HEI's purpose of the post. If the purpose was to engage prospective students, this type of response departs from the type of response they would like.

### **Response rate**

The response rate on an HEI page can affect how users may decode content that is posted by the HEI page administration. If a user did not receive a timeous response to a query, they may then post on the page or comment on a post from an oppositional position in order to attract the attention and demand a response to their original query. When an HEI responded to a user query on the SNS page, this held value for marketing as users who received timeous and even informative responses expressed appreciation and in this way may be inclined to commit to the HEI. If the Digital Native prospective student user finds value in the HEI by the marketing interaction they had on the SNS page, it has greater potential to positively influence their decision in enrolling at the HEI. This would prove that there is potential for success and marketing value when the opportunities to market the HEI via the SNS page were optimised and a strategy to engage prospective students is implemented. However this is not to dismiss that SNS content and posts by HEIs on their SNS page can be polysemic. According to (Greer, 2010), multiple meanings can be understood depending on the social and cultural context of the user-audience members on the SNS page.

### **Impression and relationship management**

The possibilities of the SNS platform are require adjustment in administering and time management of the page for good customer relationship management of a company via an online platform such as a SNS. This forces a company or an institution such as an HEI shift their marketing thinking as some HEI SNS pages have demonstrated. The value for a customer-user to receive real time feedback and vice versa for a company or institution, contributes to effective relationship management by embracing the opportunities that new media such as SNSs present, as found by (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010). On the CTI Facebook page, there were a few user posts of negative statements about the HEI. The value in this was CTI's timeous and high response rate, which indicated that they would actively address the issues that the user was posting about. This prompt ability for the HEI to respond may have given a



positive impression to users who had seen the posts, that the HEI was active and willing to address the matter, despite the negative post. The immediacy of being able to release specific information for mass reach is valuable for both followers and the HEI. The followers can gain value from being able to find up to date information via an SNS page and the HEI can make announcements about various dates, events or information including direct links to the HEI or another website where further information is available. The user may not have otherwise been visiting or have known which website to look at to find such relevant information and the SNS post enabled them to do so.

An example of the value of immediate feedback was on the UNISA Twitter page that announced that registration for 2016 was open and included the process for online registration. Within two days, numerous students trying to register for 2016 reported direct feedback via Twitter about the problems with the online registration and missing information. These responses were one of the UNISA posts, which gained a high number of responses relative to their other tweets, and relative to that of the other HEI's tweets. This immediate online response by students may have enabled the SNS page administrator to report the issue to their relevant IT department to fix the problems with their online registration. However, the value of this communication exchange is affected when UNISA did not follow up with another announcement on the online registration problems, and users continued to have problems with their online registration.

The value in the SNS relationship is in the connection and/or exchange between the HEI and the engaging users where both users reap benefit. The SNS users' benefit would depend on the type of role that the user or group of users were adopting. As the focus on this research is to do with marketing and engaging prospective student users, it was found that were prospective student users who could find the specific information they needed, and then they were able to benefit from the SNS relationship, meaning that value was then created. This was revealed in various capacities for different prospective student users. Some were positively, and others negatively, impacted by the HEI response rate. Others sought a valid and functional set of information, or were establishing a social presence by their public SNS interaction on the HEI page or engaged with the entertaining and motivating aspects

of the SNS page, such as inspirational quotes, competitions, fun participatory quiz-type posts about the HEI and did-you-know posts.

An attraction for users to engage on an HEI SNS page is to find and see relevant information; if they are prospective students, then it may have also give them an idea of the HEI by how other users interact on the page. This SNS experience, or that of a direct HEI interaction on SNSs, may potentially affect prospective students users' choice of whether to study at the HEI or not, and could also affect how they interact with the HEI in future, on SNSs or otherwise.

### **SNS users and generational groups**

Prensky (2001), who originally coined the term 'Digital Natives', also coined the term 'digital immigrants', which Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) similarly identified as 'digital strangers'. Digital Natives are 'native speakers' of the digital language of the possibilities of online communication and interaction. Digital immigrants however have to learn the digital language, and do not understand it as easily or use it as their primary choice to source information or communication. In this research, it would have another project altogether to specifically identify and analyse each user as a Digital Native or a digital immigrant, as it would have required individual user profiling and communication to check their age and background in using digital tools in their day-to-day lives. Therefore, of the users who interacted and communicated via the HEI SNS pages, trends were recognised and parallels could be drawn to the characteristics of Prensky's Digital Native definition. Similarly the definitions of a generation such as the Digital Natives or others would have been based on generalised practices of the profiled group and not that of every individual is of the same age group.

Class, culture and numerous other factors affect the profiling of whether a person is a Digital Native or not. Other than according to age, the Digital Natives had also been characterised by the fact that they are used to receiving information quickly, they multi-task, they prefer seeing graphics first before having to engage with a text and they thrive on regular rewards and instant satisfaction (Prensky, 2001). While it is debatable that within a South African context whether the Digital Natives are only a small elite group of students that could technically fulfil all characteristics (Brown &

Czerniewicz, 2010). However Student Village's (2015) report about Afrillennials specific to the South African market, describe this group as a generation who want flexibility, thrive on constant feedback and engagement, seek instant gratification, generally embrace of cultural diversity through collaboration and they also have a huge fear of failing. With the availability of cellphone technology, it has enabled a huge market to access online platforms, and this therefore, questions whether the availability of cellphone technology meets the criteria and requirements of Digital Native definitions. The need for flexibility was visible in the comments on posts or direct posts to the HEI such as requests for application and registration deadlines to be made flexible because of reasons they had that caused them to be unable to meet the deadline. The Afrillennials' need for constant feedback and engagement was found in the data where they were requesting information with little acknowledgement of working hours of the page administration and/or of the HEI, but with more importance on the fact that their query is responded to with the relevant information. When queries were responded to by the HEI, in most instances the user would express gratitude, often with somewhat enthusiastic grammatical emotion. This would be visible if the answer they received from the HEI was useful to them and contributed positively to their situation, as well as the reason they had lodged the query. This ties in with their desire for instant gratification of commenting or posting and engaging in conversation with other users or the HEI. This is possible with the immediacy and accessibility of SNS content, hence the Digital Native generation's attraction to SNSs. And similarly the possibilities of SNS use also contribute and reinforce the Digital Native's attitude of desiring immediate feedback. However, even while these characteristics are visible in the Digital Native prospective student user market, it cannot be confirmed that every user, which interact with the HEI on their SNS page was specifically a South African citizen.

In some prospective student posts or comments, were questions of how to apply online, how to check their application status online or how to find information on the website. These types of queries would typically not be a characteristic of the Digital Natives, or even Net Generation, Afrillennials and other similar generations mentioned in this research, as they should be more digitally literate, and be able to find this information independently. Yet these types of queries may also be linkable to Prensky's defined trait of wanting to receive information fast and not having to sift

through the HEI website to find it (2001), and it may also appeal to the user-friendly nature of an SNS such as Facebook. Throughout the data many more characteristics of Digital Natives and generational groups alike were identified and emerged as themes in the data. With all of these over-lapping labels of a similarly defined generation, there is no consensus on a single term to describe the generation, nor the same agreed period, that this generation began and would end (Jones & Czerniewicz, 2010).

### **Diversity and communication amongst SNS users**

The characteristic of embracing cultural collaboration is that all types of users, which appeared to be from different cultural backgrounds according to the profile picture and sometimes use of language, engage with one another without much evidence of cultural divide. Refer to Images 1.4 and 1.5 as an example. Despite these differences Afrillennials engage for the need to connect with another user or find information, which may generally have been a matter of age, but this could have been more challenging for the older generations. Interactions, commenting and conversations amongst users on an HEI post, page or about an HEI would flow along the subject being addressed, and seldom were there instances of racial or political tension. The HEI page where political tension was found was on the UCT Facebook page. This page has already been established to have a low priority from the page administration side to interact or engage with users, let alone prospective student users. The relevant post was to do with the announcement regarding the Student Representative Council and their association or partnership with a political party. This sparked numerous user comments with strong opinions about UCT and its association with the party. This, however, did not turn into any inter-user attack based to cultural or racial profiles of the commenters or SRC members. The Afrillennial characteristic about fear of failure was notable when users has queries about minimum requirements, application deadlines, entrance tests and in some cases users would even plead with the HEI or add a suggestive comment about their dreams to desperately study at the HEI. This also ties in to their want for flexibility in rules, regulations and deadlines in order to fulfil their own desires. Many of these characteristics also link to boyd's notion of the always-on lifestyle by the need to be connected and receive information on demand (boyd, 2012).

The results on the response rates on each of the HEI pages gave insight to whether an exchange between the HEI and prospective student user was occurring and to what extent. The data also exposed whether or not that user received a response to their query and whether it was by the HEI or by other users on the page. The user may find value in having their query answered if the response they receive is useful, important within the context of the query and ultimately fulfils a purpose. If the users feel they have gained from this interaction, then by association of the interaction to the HEI, the prospective student may then pursue their application for enrolment into the HEI. This, in effect, would make the SNS page for an HEI a valuable marketing platform to post information and engage and interact with prospective students. In the instances when the HEI page administration responded to a prospective student user query, it was a recurring pattern to see the user respond with expressive language of gratitude for the useful information and even just for the fact that the HEI responded. Therefore meaning is exchanged both for the user to receive the information and response needed, and for the HEI to gauge the needs of their online market. The exchange of meaning, therefore, builds a positive marketing relationship (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

While all results are contextual to the size and make-up of the user-audience on each page, most HEI posts that had received SNS attention in likes and comments relevant to the subject of the post fell within three purposes. They were either informational posts useful to prospective students or current student users, they attracted interaction amongst users such as did-you-know, or they had a motivational or comedic type purpose. These three identified purposes of a post aligned with (du Plessis, 2010) value creation in marketing content in that the content should be either functional, social or provide entertainment value. The informational posts would fall within the functional category and includes posts that address announcements about application deadlines, course information, campus open days, finding information on the HEI website etc. The posts inspiring interaction amongst users and with the HEI would fulfil a social purpose such as did-you-know or can-you-guess as well as posting photographs of campus events featuring their main user-audience such as current and/or prospective students. Then the final purpose of marketing content that creates value, as noted by du Plessis, is that content should be entertaining to engage the user-audience. HEI posts with entertainment value would be posts with

motivational quotes, sayings, images, comedic posts (which were rare), the Humans of AFDA campaign as well as certain posts with video content. Other posts that may fall within the entertainment purpose may include posts with links to articles discussing HEI related topics. The title and topic would depend on its entertainment value for the HEI's user-audience on their page. Some of the purposes of value creation in each of the posts may be debatable as having more than one value-creating purpose and are always relative to the actual user-audience on the page as well as any other users that may engage with the post.

### **Stuart Hall's positions**

Having used (Hall, 2010) Encoding – Decoding methodology for the reception analysis, the results of the analysis provided further insight into SNS user perceptions and responses to the content the HEI page administration was posting. When users responded to the HEI SNS content in a way that demonstrated they have engaged in the preferred meaning, value was added to the HEI's marketing strategy. The value was where the users were engaging with the content and interacting with the HEI; the way that they engaged and responded in the preferred way to the post indicated that the strategy behind engaging users via the post was a success. While the positions of negotiated, oppositional or aberrant were each a minority in relation to users who actually engaged in the preferred meaning, their presence on the HEI posts still contributed towards how users were engaging with the HEI marketing content and SNS strategy.

Many of the negotiated positions that emerged were queries or questions, and were generally related to the subject of the HEI post and included prospective students querying about the application process or entry requirements or when they should expect acceptance feedback. While in some cases, such a response was not directly relevant to the subject of a specific HEI post, it would have aligned with an overall marketing strategy to engage prospective students that would essentially contribute to the HEI's recruitment. This would not have necessarily been damaging to their reputation, as it would have depended on each specific comment from this position. The positive marketing aspect on this is that users are posting queries to the HEI, indicating their desire to converse with the HEI on applying for or enrolling at

the HEI. This conversational aspect builds their SNS relationship and can have positive effects when the conversation is continued from both sides.

The oppositional positions that emerged out of comments on HEI posts often revealed complaints about not having received prompt responses to their applications or a previous query or that the user had previously received inaccurate or unhelpful information. Occasionally there would also be posts by users, which appeared to be current students commenting on a post directed towards prospective students. Their oppositional positions were, in some cases, based on current student dissatisfaction and complaints about the HEI's standard of curriculum delivery or that their previous complaint they submitted internally had not been resolved, and they were looking to draw attention to the issue/s via the SNS platform (this was found on the CTI page). The UCT page attracted oppositional positions in the comments on the posts but of a different nature as seen on the CTI page. Some of UCT's posts were articles about current affairs or a politically related event on campus, which sparked debate and a sharing of opinions amongst users from negotiated and oppositional positions. Both of these pages had different types of user-audiences considering both the HEI post content and whom they are directing the subject matters to. This then affected the way in which users responded to the content. Depending on the nature of the specific post subjects and attitudes behind the users responding from an oppositional position, their public visibility had and could continue to have the potential to cast the HEI in a negative light to other users, especially prospective students as it may affect their decision to apply and enrol at the HEI.

Aberrant positions of users were identified in the comments of only a few HEI posts, where their responses were indifferent and generally unrelated to the post subject. These were mostly found on the pages with large amounts of followers and large quantities of comments on posts such as the UJ or UCT Facebook pages. Often these were users who were commenting on an HEI post in order to gain attention about something that user is promoting such as accommodation, rallying votes to win a drawing competition, attracting entries for a new competition and others. These efforts were by users who attempted to optimise on a marketing opportunity via the HEI to the page's user-audience.

### **Reception analysis**

The reception analysis contributed to a process of recognising the value of utilising SNSs as a marketing platform and building relationships with prospective student where the HEI provided useful, social and entertaining information to the prospective student and they engaged with it and the HEI. This relationship building process was most valuable in a marketing sense as the prospective student could find meaning in the relationship with the HEI as a basis of deciding how and where they may have intended to study to enable the start of their career through the information they receive on SNSs. This SNS relationship also provided opportunities for immediate responses and the HEI could gauge the real-time feedback to their SNS strategy by the responses they received from users. When posts were encoded with marketing information relevant to prospective students and then clearly decoded and responded to by prospective students with a preferred meaning, as intended with the strategy, this could be an indicator of successful SNS marketing. Additional factors were also contributors to determining the success rates of HEI SNS pages including quantities of followers, comments, favourites, likes, posts and other.

There were other subjects in the marketing content and communication analysed that contributed to the value of the existence of the page. There were both direct and indirect marketing in each HEI post, aligned with their strategy behind posting it. The entertainment-based content such as motivational sayings, quotes or otherwise would be more an indirect marketing strategy as it gives a sense of the HEI's ethos and their support for their page followers that may have needed the motivation at the time to pass matric or their exams at the HEI. There were also posts marketing directly to prospective students providing information about the application process, registration dates and deadlines for new students and so on. These types of posts were direct in their strategy to engage prospective students.

### **The SNS relationship between HEIs and active users on their page**

The fourth objective was to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the relationship between the HEI and prospective students on social network sites in a South African higher education context. This objective ties into the third research question, which was about the marketing advantages and disadvantages of the



relationship between the HEI and prospective students on SNSs in a South African higher education context.

Evidence of Duffet's (2015) and Broekman's (*et al.*)(2002) findings on Millennials characteristics of demanding, easily bored and need to be engaged effectively within a South African context, is visible first-hand in the data within the UJ and Boston Facebook pages where the page administration either scheduled posts to be repeated or manually posted a repeat of a previous post. Within the comments of section of the repeated posts, users clearly articulated their complaints for seeing a repeat of the same information or there was visibly less user activity on the repeated post than the first time it had been posted.

Similar to Duffet's (2015) findings, the data in this research study revealed that the majority of active users on the SNS pages were from black or coloured ethnic groups and a minority were from a white ethnic group. While proportions on every page differed, the findings were the same, that the largest ethnic groups dominating the public activity on the HEI SNS pages were black or coloured. This was visible by either the thumbnail profile picture appearing attached to the user's post or comment within the data, their name or occasionally the language they used within their comment or post. The data also revealed that a common query by prospective students on the HEI SNS pages was about funding, bursary and scholarships. Prospective students from poorer backgrounds would generally rely on seeking information they need from social sources such as people within the community or friend and family circles, both in person or online and media (Lubbe & Petzer, 2013). Given the patterns in the data and the other previous findings, the generalised majority of SNS prospective student user market could be defined as being from a lesser-advantaged background. It is clear that a flexible and effective strategy would be required to captivate the diverse South African Digital Native user-audience in order for the marketing efforts to be successful in recruiting prospective students locally. An additional strategy could be considered to appeal to the African, and international markets, enabled by globalised nature of SNSs. An example of this is in Image 1.4 and 1.5 below (on the following page) as examples from UJ Facebook page:

Image 1.4

**University of Johannesburg**  
November 25

2015 Registration at UJ  
2015 Registration dates  
Senior Students  
12 January 2015 - 16 January 2015 (You can register online from home)  
19 January 2015 - 30 January 2015 (On Campus assistance will be available)  
First Year Students  
19 January 2015 - 23 January 2015 (You can register online from home)  
26, 27, 28 & 29 January 2015 (on Campus assistance will be available)

-m'dee

Like · Comment · Share ↗ 202 Shares

👍 1,556 people like this. Top Comments ▾

Write a comment...

**Mondli Mbonani** thank God m registering on 26 January I wll b attending oriental week frm 20 to 23 January @ APK just can't wait 4 2nd of February 2015 for my first class in Varsity  
Like · Reply · ↻ 51 · November 25 at 11:43pm  
16 Replies

**ANelisa Lisa Noguda** It's so cute how these first years are sooo excited...we'll talk again this time next year, after you've failed a few modules or better yet,academically excluded  
Like · Reply · ↻ 32 · November 26 at 8:16am  
16 Replies

View more comments 2 of 236

Image 1.5

**Mondli Mbonani** thank God m registering on 26 January I wll b attending oriental week frm 20 to 23 January @ APK just can't wait 4 2nd of February 2015 for my first class in Varsity  
Like · Reply · ↻ 51 · November 25 at 11:43pm

[Hide 16 Replies](#)

**Keke Charmaine Motshoane** 😊😄 Can't Wait Too... See You There #APK  
Like · ↻ 1 · November 26 at 2:02am

**Lebo Mothibi** wow I also cnt w8! 😊 my oriental week starts on da 19th to 28th Jan @DFC  
Like · November 26 at 3:40am

**Thanwane Graced** welcome to the real world of studing books##if u need assistance@dfc i will highly help you guys##  
Like · ↻ 1 · November 26 at 7:28am

**Tshepho Mpusheng Makgolane** All the best guys...as m passing baton 2 u guys...  
Like · ↻ 1 · November 26 at 8:22am

**Lebohlang Lesh Motale** change and new experience is good but varsity is really a mental torture. When January comes, put your brains in study mode, #HeavyWorkLoad all the best  
Like · ↻ 6 · November 26 at 9:07am · Edited

**Xavi El Maestro** Lebo let's meet  
Like · November 26 at 2:47pm

**Uviwe Tumie Jonase** so this also applies to first year students as well??  
Like · November 26 at 3:46pm

**Cass-leigh Oranje** How and where did you find out the dates for orientation week?  
Like · November 27 at 6:35am

**Mondli Mbonani** Dey sent me a link den I browse it  
Like · November 27 at 8:01am

**Gift Twala** Lol all the best mfanas. What degree programme are you gonna do?  
Like · November 27 at 11:39am

**Hildah Amanda** Sorry 4 not krwing things,plz dnt find dis as a stupid

There is rapid growth of Internet access via cellphones throughout Africa which can enable South African HEIs to reach prospective student markets across the continent and the world via SNS marketing and even SNS advertising without having to travel to the countries to do direct marketing (Stork, Calandro & Gillwald, 2013). When it is known where an HEI's SNS page followers are from, it may help to build a strategy around posting relevant content that may appeal to potential students or assist them with relevant application, registration or enrolment information, which is another opportunity for further research in the potential marketing relationship on SNSs.

Each HEI page has a different demographic user-follower make-up and so greater page accessibility would be required to gather data beyond the publically visible user activity data. Furthermore the demographic findings and user-follower make-up may or may not be an accurate reflection of their applicant or current student body. Each HEI SNS page could analyse their user-follower demographic and evaluate the current page in order to design future elements of their SNS marketing strategy to appeal to and engage a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-class South African and international prospective student user market.

### **Advantages and disadvantages**

There are both advantages and disadvantages for the overall SNS relationship between HEI and the prospective student user, as well as for an HEI to create and utilise an SNS page, particularly as a marketing platform. There are also advantages and disadvantages for the prospective student user to utilise SNSs to get information about the HEI and the types of courses or fields of study they are interested in.

The SNS relationship overall has advantageous opportunities for both the HEI and prospective student. The first is that it is a platform where conversation and communication is enabled and when it is reciprocated on both sides, there is potential for relationship building, trust and commitment, which brings a sense of recruitment security for the HEI, and worth for the prospective student to believe in the education the HEI can deliver. This added platform saves time on telephonic conversations, extensive email conversations or the need for repeated meetings to engage and

interact with the other. Furthermore it also serves as a central directory and database for those who have common interest in the HEI. This may be where the HEI can provide information relevant to a large group within the user-audience and for the prospective students to enquire on one central platform to find specific information, as the HEI SNS page would represent all the department or course information. The immediacy of releasing and seeing information is both mutually beneficial. For the HEI they can make urgent or specifically timed announcements and the prospective student user can see them immediately. There are also greater possibilities of extensive communication through real-time responses and cyber conversations. A disadvantage affecting both the HEI and the prospective student user is the general always-on demand that comes with the Internet and SNSs with the need to check the HEI page for valid information and announcements that could be missed on their newsfeed, or the need to respond to queries on the page from prospective student users and/or other users. While the commonly used language found in the data was English, language barriers may also put either HEI page administrators or prospective student users at a disadvantage. However if the HEI's primary language of teaching, practice and operation is one specific language, then prospective student users with very little capability within that language would not fall within the target market and therefore this is a relatively minor disadvantage.

The advantageous aspects for the HEI differ to those of the SNS relationship. The HEI can reach and has the potential to engage a large Digital Native market where SNS pages can be seen as a broadcast platform. Because of the potential for two-way engagement and the opportunities for users to post their opinions, queries, send direct messages and otherwise, it allows the HEI to gauge the needs and demands of the Digital Native market and determine what kind of content to post. If user activity is low on the page, HEIs can view other HEI pages with higher user interactions that have a similar market to theirs to view and compare their strategies with the goal of improving their own. There is also control over the content, aesthetic, and timing of the release of a post or a series of posts from the HEI. Furthermore, the ability for HEI posts to spread virally can bring enormous marketing value in the form of free publicity, especially when the content casts the HEI in a favourable light to prospective students. However whether posts spread virally or not, to have an SNS page such as on Facebook or Twitter, the marketing opportunities via posts and

interactions with active users on the page is a free platform that may lower some other online advertising costs. However, the page would need to be managed by a dedicated HEI staff member or outsourced page administrator that can respond to the daily queries, at least on weekdays. This staff member as the page administrator would need to manage the page, implement the HEI's marketing strategy, design, write and be knowledgeable to generate the content to be posted on the page.

Disadvantages for the HEI include that high quantities of enquiries and interactions via the HEI page is difficult to measure and track the success of marketing efforts, particularly where users can alter their SNS display name. It is therefore difficult to link to the HEI application and enrolment databases when there are not enough common threads of information. An accurate measure of successful SNS marketing and recruitment efforts is difficult to attain with the current technological means of information access, without having large costs for tracking attached to it. There are numerous disadvantages to HEIs having an SNS page in that it is not easy to control what other users may post on the page and in some cases, this could deter a prospective student from wanting to enrol at the HEI. This can include complaints or 'troll'-like behaviour where a user insistently posts negative comments or criticisms on the HEI page. This could be current students venting about a poor experience they may have had with the HEI and, as Digital Natives, use the power of SNS to share this with other users. For a prospective student user or event parents to view complaints about the HEI on an SNS weakens the impression of academic excellence, prestige, reputation or other qualities the HEI may be trying to cultivate. Similarly a prospective student who values academic standards may be deterred by the shortened language use and spelling of many SNS users posting on the page, and view it as a reflection of the HEI and not the types of users who populate SNSs. When a page also attracts high volumes of comments on their posts and queries, it becomes a time-consuming endeavour for one page administrator to respond and engage with each user query. Similarly, an HEI would also want to attract quality students to contribute to the prestige and academic excellence of the HEI and it is difficult to accurately identify and measure quality amongst users who engage with the page. A further point to consider is the quality of the HEI SNS page administrators who need to be knowledgeable about the HEI in order to implement their marketing strategy and to respond adequately to queries.

Advantages for prospective student users to use HEI SNS pages and engage with an HEI via an SNS include the ease of access and likelihood of being able to find relevant needed information or post a request for it. Assuming the working hours of the HEI may affect when the page administrator responds to queries and questions, may mean that the HEI would only respond to queries within normal working hours. Any user visiting the page and/or following the page, can view other user posts about matters that have arisen, experiences had with the HEI and, based on others' feedback, then evaluate the overall review of the HEI. This type of research may give beneficial insight to the prospective student user to assess the possible strengths and weaknesses of the HEI and what neutral, positive or negative experiences other users on the page are having. The SNS page also provides opportunities to prospective student users to socialise and network with other prospective or existing students. The potential benefits and uses for a prospective student user to visit and engage on the HEI SNS page comes down to a matter of individual preference as to what extent they may wish to utilise the HEI page. Disadvantages affecting prospective student users may be in their expectation to receive prompt responses to their queries and, as was found in some of the data, they may become vocally disappointed in the lack of response from the HEI, which the format of the platform enables to occur. As a consequence of this, another user could respond to their query and provide inaccurate or insufficient information. Similarly, should the HEI respond, the page administrator may not be equipped to answer specific queries about course curriculums or other specialised information (depending on the extent of the educational opportunities that the HEI offers), and therefore cannot provide a sufficient response for the user.

There are extensive opportunities in how an SNS page can be utilised by the HEI and by the user following the page. Other than the general marketing content posted on the page, there are additional aspects that can contribute to increasing prospects of engaging a market and optimum use of the SNS page as a marketing platform. The quality of the prospective student user's experience with an HEI SNS page will be affected by the marketing strategy, the page management as well as the skill and knowledge of the page administrator/s. The environment for getting attention on an SNS and within the field of higher education is competitive and it is important for HEIs to differentiate themselves in their SNS and overall marketing strategy.

When it comes to marketing and advertising, the message received by the client creates a natural expectation on the delivery of what is being marketed, particularly in the process of deciding to engage with the company or brand. Questions of morals or ethics would arise if there wasn't sufficient delivery on the marketed or advertised product or service. Numerous scholars have debated the ethics behind the marketing of higher education by the institutions offering it, as has been mentioned. Within the context of the study questions, presenting false information in marketing has the potential to attract serious negative publicity. As is notorious with the age group of the Digital Natives, Millennials and similar generations, they have high expectations and are entitled. Therefore, while only a few cases were found in the data, repeated complaints around similar matters posted on an HEI page by their Digital Native page followers gave an indication that there were users who were unhappy with the HEI's delivery. While this is difficult to pinpoint specifically where the HEI may have made false promises or promises they could not deliver on, the repeated complaints drew perhaps unwanted attention or publicity for the HEI on their own SNS page. Via searches of the HEI, some complaints were found in user posts independent of the HEI page. These still have great potential to draw attention to the HEI's weaknesses to the audience of the complaining user and beyond, but without the HEI being able to see. As market feedback is beneficial, HEI page administrators should constantly check on the existence of additional feedback that is not directly linked to their page by searching for mention of the HEI in individual posts. These present opportunities of immediate user feedback and areas at the HEI that may need to address, depending on the nature of complaints or feedback being posted on SNSs.

### **Limitations**

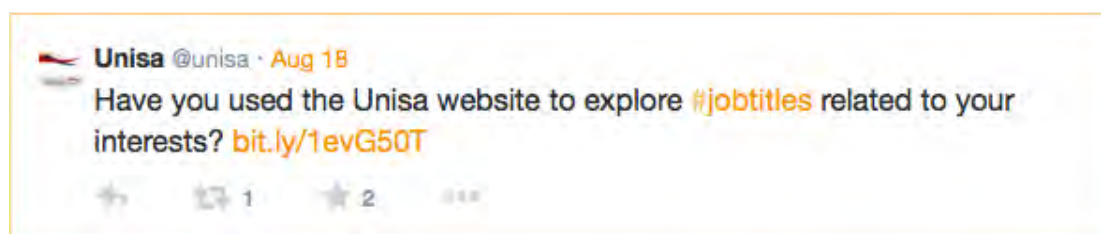
While this research may not have included the follow-through of SNS activity and interaction on the HEI page into actual enrolments, the potential cannot be underestimated given the extent positive communication and the power of word-of-mouth found in the results of this research. Duffet (2015) affirms that this generational cohort using SNSs cannot be underestimated given their power and influence amongst one another, and therefore strategies need to be efficient, interactive and appealing to engage the younger market. Similarly many user interactions could have been traceable and tracked per user, which may reveal more about patterns within the SNS relationship of specific users who are repeatedly active on the HEI page. This would

have required use an online data capturing system for the data to be effective, and would not only have had possible added cost implications but may also have required more permissions for the accessibility to monitor specific users.

### **Facebook data vs Twitter data**

The thematic findings and insights within the research were mostly extracted from the Facebook data as the quantity of the data on Facebook was significantly greater to that of Twitter. The nature of the Facebook platform allowed for user interactions and comments on posts to be collectively visible. The Twitter platform has less collective visibility with user interactions and posts. User replies are less visible on a Tweet compared to Facebook because they do not automatically show a number as summary of the replies the post had. The numbers visible only show 'Favourites' and 'Retweets'. See image 1.6 as follows:

Image 1.6



### **Relevance and longevity of findings**

The data of this research focused on five months of SNS communication, however the findings could assist to develop new and improved online communication strategies to meet the needs of the Digital Native market. There could, however, also be questions of the longevity of new strategy development and implementation based on the findings in this research, as technology and the way people communicate continues to evolve rapidly. In order to continue to engage upcoming prospective student users from the youth generations, marketing departments, particularly for HEIs, should be flexible to adjust or change their strategy to evolve with the continuous changes and adaptations in technology, in order to maximise effectiveness in engaging their Digital Native audience (Barnes & Lescault, 2011, Tess, 2013). Furthermore, software, programs and online media monitoring services are becoming more available to provide a detailed analysis and



reporting on the users posting about the HEI without tagging their Facebook page or Twitter handle, including the location that they are posting from. This can give greater insight into the international reach but requires access and permissions from the page administrator to subscribe to such media monitoring programs for further research in this field. Similarly, as an HEI page administrator managing a Facebook page or Twitter handle, it would be beneficial to motivate subscription as a budgeted expense for their SNS pages because there are added insights available on the account including views, post traffic, impressions, user mentions and user activity which could add not only offer greater insight into this type of study but help develop more effective marketing strategies for the HEI as well. One such monitoring program available in South Africa is called Meltwater. This type of program monitors mentions and activities around key phrases for example the name of the institution, which may track down more mentions of the HEI without otherwise being able to find other posts. A daily report from Meltwater can be delivered to the Meltwater member and/or key administrator of the HEI page to keep track of activities linked to the HEI.

There are many possibilities in the scope of SNS marketing research. The findings presented in this study add to the existing knowledge in the field as they provide information in the trends of SNS use for marketing tertiary education to the Digital Native market without the added expense of paid advertising.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The competition for students in the Higher Education industry has escalated the importance for HEIs to have effective marketing strategies in place. The prospective student market has so much choice when it comes to selecting what they want to study and at which HEI they can and want to study. HEIs need to ensure to market on multiple platforms in order to engage the prospective student market. This would include incorporating the use of digital technology platforms to market the HEI such as SNSs.

The aim of this research has been to explore the value of SNS marketing for HEIs to engage the Digital Native prospective student. Multiple marketing possibilities have been discovered through the analysis of content posted on the HEI SNS page and occasionally some content was found that mentioned the HEI, but posted independently of the HEI page. Ultimately, the SNS platform offers the HEI an opportunity to build a marketing relationship with the Digital Native prospective students who seek information online and have a platform to post their queries or receive new updated information when announcements are made. The content the HEI posts can also offer an opportunity for Digital Native prospective students to understand and get a taste of the culture, ethos and campus life the HEI can offer. Some subjects of HEI posts on their SNS page proved more popular than others based on the feedback from users on the post. These insights from the findings can help HEIs that have SNS pages to strategise their online content to engage their prospective student target market. Similarly, it was visible that when a prospective student user posted a query on the page, they gained value in receiving a prompt response with the information they needed and it may alter their perception of the HEI in a more positive way, which is valuable for the HEI in their student recruitment.

There were additional indicators that could be identified showing positive or negative feedback from the Digital Native prospective students and overall page followers to the HEI's marketing strategy. Some of the positive indicators

signifying that the SNS marketing strategy was being well received included users expressing gratitude for the HEI's response to their query, or their excitement about the HEI's events, achievements or about the fact that they are excited to enrol as a student. Other positive indicators were seen in users making efforts to socialise on the page with others to build a network online, prior to their enrolment the following year where they could physically meet as students. These indicators can also contribute further to the marketing of the HEI because other users can publically see the positive communication, and content is passed around via eWOM. This would be an indirect benefit for the HEI's marketing and could attract more traffic to the HEI page. Additional positive indicators would be the significant quantities of likes/favourites, comments/replies, shares/retweets particularly to the posts directed at prospective students and applicants, which reveals that they are engaging in the marketing content directed to them, and it's another indicator of the higher probability of Digital Native prospective students that will likely enrol at the HEI.

Some of the negative indicators of a lower probability of Digital Native engagement on the SNS page or even enrolment at the HEI could be low quantities of likes/favourites, comments/replies, and shares/retweets, particularly in relation to the posts directed at prospective students and applicants. This means that the current strategy is not attracting any significant interaction. An additional negative indicator would be numerous complaints, either as posts on the page or in comments on HEI or user posts. Complaints from prospective students were often related to a lack of response from the HEI either from their previous post/s on the page or via their alternate contact methods such as email or telephonic. Complaints from current students had the potential of being to the HEI's detriment, particularly the marketing strategy they are trying to get prospective students to buy into.

There were multiple advantages and disadvantages found from different aspects of the HEI's marketing efforts via their SNS page, including point-of-views from the HEI, the prospective student user and the relationship overall. The

advantages offer numerous opportunities and positive aspects to utilising the SNS platform. SNSs are convenient, easily accessible and help form a central network of users converging as followers, based on an overall common interest in the HEI. It has the potential to be a stable and continuous source of information, with the opportunity for immediate and instantaneous release of information or the ability to make easy contact with a user. It is a platform for conversation with users who have voluntarily selected to follow the SNS page and therefore engage directly with the HEI's market. This aspect allows a relationship to be built online, particularly with prospective students prior to their enrolment at the HEI. With the multi-user communication possibilities, the HEI can gauge the needs of their market based on what they are querying about or commenting on. With the extensive amount of users online, the potential reach is significantly large and the SNS page content can be broadcasted. Similarly, when users interact on the HEI posts or they share the content, it can be spread further to users who do not voluntarily follow the page, but may choose to do so after seeing the content. In this way SNSs can serve publicity objectives at a lower cost. This implies that it can be used as a platform for public announcements and news without the added cost of having every post as it would for more traditional media such as announcements via news, television or radio. However, should there be negative complaints about the HEI with the HEI mentioned, the HEI page administrators are also able to see this and have a chance to respond timeously to acknowledge and address the subject matter. Similarly, as a public platform, prospective student users can, in a way, 'shop around' on multiple HEI SNS pages, and HEIs can do the same to keep track of any HEIs in competition for a similar type of student and what strategies are being used to engage them. The effective use of this platform shows exceptional potential in the recruitment of Digital Native students provided the advantages are acknowledged and used to adapt or improve the HEI SNS marketing strategy.

While the advantages provide plenty reason to invest resources in running the HEI SNS page, the disadvantages were also important to note for marketers. Negative complaints on the HEI page can be damaging to the impression given to

Digital Native prospective students, however it may be advantageous for prospective students to see what problems users are complaining about in the HEI. The page administrator would have an opportunity here to respond timeously and acknowledge the complaint, which could improve the impression given to other users reading it. SNSs are easily accessible at any time with a device and an Internet connection, but the nature of SNSs is that they are demanding and the decision to run one should also consider the extent a commitment it requires to run the page. Similarly, the hours that the HEI page administrator should be available are also a consideration, as users do post outside of normal working hours. This may attract many to flock to the SNS page for information inappropriate for the SNS platform and rather suited to a request through internal HEI channels, particularly if it involves any personal information. When there is insufficient commitment to maintaining the page and posting engaging content, there can be a decline in followers, as seen on the Inscape Education twitter page. Similarly, if the page administrators are not equipped with sufficient knowledge about the HEI to respond to queries, there can be a decline in the user interest in the page if they are not getting the value they seek from their interaction. However, if they are ill-equipped with the right information, they should at least be able to refer them to a person or department to contact with the details. While the main purpose of the HEI SNS page, marketing strategy depending, may be to recruit Digital Native prospective students that will enrol at the HEI, the volumes of the interactions and extent of each of the various interactions would vary and are difficult to keep track of manually, along with whether they follow through to enrolment. This is because users can select any display name that may not reflect the name on their Identification Document, which they would be required to apply, register and enrol with.

The data for this study was available publically and on a historical timeline, which, as boyd suggests, offers extensive opportunities to conduct research via tracing data online (boyd & Ellison, 2008). This also allowed much greater insight into the user-audience engaging on HEI SNS pages. In Prensky's (2001) original definition of Digital Natives, he explains how they spend significantly more time

in front of a digital device of sorts including gaming, email, Internet, mobile messaging and so on. They are “native speakers” of the digital language, they multi-task, expect to receive information quickly and prosper on instant gratification (2001). They also actively share, contribute and search for content via SNSs (Bolton et al., 2013) but it must be engaging and meaningful to them. All of these traits are quite identifiable within the findings, particularly the expectation to receive information quickly and how they thrive on instant gratification, and if this doesn’t occur on the SNS page, they are clear to make it known via badgering comments and posts with a demanding tone. Bennett (2012) recognised that not all young people fall within previous scholars’ definitions of a Digital Natives, Net Generation, Millennials or others born within a certain window period because of notable diversity with the youth population’s technological access and prowess.

While the users are difficult to identify on SNS by the above-mentioned criteria and age groups, Digital Natives and similarly defined groups may not accurately cover the SNS market in totality, but it is assumed that most of them are by their choice to engage with the HEI via their SNS page. There may also have been a lack of vested interest in technology-enabled communication or information sources amongst some youth, however they still have the potential to engage in development through higher education. In such a case, SNSs are not the only marketing platforms for HEIs and prospective students to engage with one another. Other marketing platforms could include HEIs exhibiting at careers events or presentations. These may occur at high schools or other venues for greater access to the public. Generally this would be where a HEI would have physical marketing material to distribute for prospective students to take with and read about the HEI. Other marketing methods may be direct communication via post, email, telephonic call or SMS. HEIs may also include advertising as a way to engage their prospective student market. The whole purpose of marketing higher education is to exchange value and meaning in order for the prospective student target market to apply to enrol at the HEI, and for the prospective student engage with the HEI to help their decision-making process as to which HEI to study at for the best possible development, experience and learning through higher education

(Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Similarly, the HEI's role by marketing is to facilitate a relationship through the exchange of interaction (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006) and therefore constantly offer the prospective students opportunities to do so via their SNS page.

There are several considerable contributions of this research. These include the insights into relationship-building through discourse on SNS platforms and the conversation topics that arise in response to the HEI content or even just the presence of the page for users to post queries and opinions. The findings may provide insight for HEI's through their process of developing effective marketing strategies on SNSs that are relevant and appealing to their Digital Native target market. However, as digital technology capabilities continue to evolve and SNS affordances continue to be developed and adapted, continuous research and analysis in the future of a similar nature as this study will provide up to date insights into means of digital communication and interactive marketing via online platforms. The advantages and disadvantages may allow for marketers to strategically optimise on the advantages and use them to help design their content. Knowing that the HEI can select the content and timing of any of their posts empowers the HEI up until the second it is posted, as well as what topics are generally more effectively in attracting interactions than others.

The aspects of relationship-building through marketing efforts by the HEI with Digital Native prospective student that was covered in the study, gives marketers an understanding of the scale of efforts and factors that go into building a workable relationship via a public online platform. This relationship requires continuous attention, as inactivity on the SNS page, leads to a drop in activity from any users as was seen with the Inscape Twitter page and their lack of engaging content. Due to the nature of the demands of Facebook or Twitter, it is always on, always accessible with an Internet connection and therefore, there are no expected times when a user could post a query, question or comment on a post with any preferred or oppositional opinion. In this way, there are both uncontrollable and demanding aspects of SNS marketing for the HEI and therefore

having dedicated and skilled staff to be the page administration is important, at least only during working hours and throughout important HEI events.

With matters of marketing budgets, the findings could assist a HEI or a similar establishment to strategise the content they post in order to engage the Digital Native market, but with attempting to do so without SNS advertising spending. However, while the HEI may not be spending budget on paid SNS advertising there are costs involved for the HEI such as the staff or a specialised SNS company to run the HEI page, along with the Internet costs for continuous access and the intellectual capacity to write and design the relevant SNS post content aligned with the marketing strategy in order to effectively engage the Digital Native prospective student. Given this contribution, the study was however limited in investigating the potential of advertising on SNSs.

While much of the context of the study is limited to HEI marketing on SNS platforms, other findings have contributed to further understanding the South African Digital Native generation and their behaviour in engaging on the SNS page representative of a company or organisation. Other factors that may have limited the potential findings on the research subject is that the data was manually collected and transcribed, which may have limited the amount of quantitative stats and data insights that may have been possible through SNS data analysis software. While there are potential budgeting benefits to only implementing marketing content without any paid SNS advertising, this limited the full scope of using an SNS page as a marketing platform that can be explored. SNS advertising can extend to reach the exact target market according to budget spend, as well as demographic and geographic specifications. This advertising can provide the page administrator with details, statistics and interactive insights on the advertised posts. As this and all general page activity information is limited to the viewing of the page administrator/s, this would have required special permissions and accessibility to be able to view such data. Relatedly, as all the data in this study was available publically, there were no permissions required in order to access and collect the data. However there are many possibilities of interactions with Digital



Native prospective students and the view of these direct and publically hidden conversations is inaccessible without assistance from the page administrator or permission from the HEI. As digital technologies will develop and SNS platforms will change, so too will the marketing possibilities as well as the advantages and disadvantages. Given all of these limitations, however, the findings in this study can at least allow for progression in marketing strategies by acknowledging the potential of the online market and therefore incorporating SNS use and digital technologies.

Recommendations for further research opportunities in this field include continuous research and analysis on digital technology platforms and SNSs, because new opportunities in digital communication continue to be introduced and developed as potential marketing platforms. The continuity in research flow in the field and access to the findings would enable marketers to re-evaluate and adapt their marketing strategies based on digital technology trends. In this way, as technology changes, so could the demands of the Digital Native market or the future generations to follow.

For HEIs to understand and engage their prospective student market, their marketing departments would benefit from investing their time and resources to research their specific prospective student target market and all the effective platforms to market on, such as public online platforms, direct private communication methods and marketing events such as Open Days, expos, presentations and so on. These would exclude the paid advertising platforms such as online, digital, print or outdoor advertising.

As this study's focus was on online, and specifically SNS marketing, a research recommendation for HEIs would be to track the prospective student user interactions on their SNS pages and follow up this information through their access into the HEI applications data. Whether they apply, register and enrol at the HEI as a result or partial result of the connection via the SNS page would be a truer indicator of whether the HEI's marketing efforts via SNSs are or were

effective. If a researcher outside of a HEI were to conduct such research, then permissions and access to HEI data would be required. This type of research would also be very challenging to conduct manually for several reasons. The quantity of interactions to track vary depending on the page traffic and the size of the user-audience following the page, and therefore one cannot easily measure, per page, the time it would take to collect the data to then code it to link to incoming applications for matching names. However, users can sign up to the SNS with a fake name or pseudonym and some also edit their visible name to anything they choose, which may not be relatable to the applicant's actual name, according to their ID. This would make manual tracking very challenging to accurately trace the name from their HEI interactions and SNS communication on the page to their application. Any other information in correctly identifying the prospective student user to an application is difficult because much of the personal information a user can add to their profile is optional. Therefore, a solution for linking data effectively would be best if developed as an online software or programme. While this could be costly, it may be more cost effective to spend fewer resources in running a marketing survey amongst newly enrolled students at a HEI within their first semester or upon enrolling. While there could arguably be inaccuracies in the survey results, as they would be relying on the student's memory of their interactions, this may be a simpler marketing process to undertake than that mentioned above.

When it comes to online advertising there would be more insights available on it when it comes to measuring clicks on a link leading to an online application or similar. Often, such paid platforms will provide additional possibilities such as summarising advert views, likes, comments, shares, retweets or as mentioned, the amount of users who clicked through on the advert. Based on the great value in the online advertising opportunities, it could be predicted that more platforms for online marketing and advertising will become available and be in demand. These platforms already can target online users based on specific demographics in selected geographic areas. Similarly, online software such as Meltwater is already available to companies and organisations to subscribe to and monitor all posts that

mention a specific name (in this case the HEI) or key phrases (relatable to the HEI). This type of online media monitoring software will most likely become essential for HEIs or any organisations running an SNS page for marketing and will therefore become an essential expense in the HEI marketing budget.

Essentially, for the HEI to engage Digital Native prospective students and gain value from running an SNS page, the HEI needs to research and design a strategy appropriate for their targeted online market. The implementation and the importance to gauge the feedback from users, and be able to adapt the strategy as needed, has the strong potential to effectively influence the Digital Native prospective student market. It is important for staff or company that manages the SNS pages to be well trained about the HEI and the courses on offer, so that the time and resources it takes to run the SNS page is worthwhile and the resources used and marketing efforts made can pay off because the user finds value in engaging with the HEI SNS page when they receive a response to their posted query or they engage with the information and subject matter posted by the HEI. Extended management plans of the page are important for both the maintenance and growth of the user-audience connecting with the HEI and following the SNS page. This continuity in management and adaptable strategy will ensure the bringing of value to the HEI in terms of student recruitment.

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