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Exploring the Use of Social Media Platforms as a Marketing Tool in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda

by

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Research submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

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2026

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DECLARATION

I, Takalani Thabo (Student Number: 23009806), hereby declare that the proposal entitled *Exploring the Use of Social Media Platforms as a Marketing Tool in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda* is my own original work. This proposal has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies at the University of Venda.

I confirm that this study was conducted under the supervision of Dr T. Nodoba and Dr M. Mabika, and that it complies with the ethical and academic requirements of the University of Venda.

Signature: 

Date: 23 February 2026

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family for their unwavering support, encouragement, and patience throughout my academic journey. Their belief in my abilities provided me with the strength and motivation to persevere during challenging moments.

I also dedicate this work to my supervisors, lecturers, and mentors who guided me with wisdom, professionalism, and constructive feedback. Their commitment to academic excellence greatly shaped the quality of this study.

Finally, this study is dedicated to all students and scholars who aspire to contribute to knowledge in the field of media studies, particularly in understanding the role of social media in higher education marketing within South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed communication and marketing practices globally, enabling institutions to reach large audiences more quickly, affordably, and interactively than traditional methods such as radio, print, and television. Although social media has transformed communication and marketing practices globally, its potential as a strategic marketing tool remains underutilised in some institutions of higher learning in South Africa. This study examined the use of social media platforms as marketing tools in institutions of higher learning, with a specific focus on the University of Venda in South Africa. Despite many advantages, many South African universities, including the University of Venda, do not seem to have fully utilised social media's potential to engage students and promote institutional services. The study employed qualitative research design within an interpretivist paradigm. Likewise the study used data collected through semi-structured interviews with students, academic staff, and marketing personnel, and that was complemented by social media ethnography. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) the study explained how perceptions of usefulness and ease of use influence the adoption of social media in university marketing. This study revealed several important findings regarding the use of social media in higher education. The study affirmed that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn are widely used and effective for marketing, communication, and stakeholder engagement. The findings also indicated that the effectiveness of social media is constrained by challenges including limited staff capacity, inconsistent content management, and the absence of a coordinated institutional strategy. Further, the study discovered that the strategic use of planned content, interactive engagement, and continuous feedback significantly enhances visibility, participation, and communication with both internal and external stakeholders. To address these issues, the study recommends strengthening staff training, adopting structured content planning, promoting interactive communication, establishing clear social media policies, and implementing regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The research aims to contribute to knowledge on digital communication in higher education and provides recommendations for developing effective social media marketing strategies.

Keywords: Social media marketing, higher education institutions, University of Venda, student engagement, communication strategies.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BPS: British Psychological Society

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

ESRC: Economic and Social Research Council

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

ICT: Information and Communications Technology

ICTs: Information and Communications Technologies

POPIA: Protection of Personal Information Act

TAM: Technology Acceptance Model

TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UNIVEN: University of Venda

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction and background

Social media has become an important tool for communication and marketing in many organisations, including institutions of higher learning such as universities. In this regard, social media provides a platform for reaching large audiences quickly and efficiently. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2020), social media allows institutions to share information, interact with users and promote their services in real-time. For universities, this is essential as it helps them connect with students, staff and the wider community.

The University of Venda, like many institutions, relies on effective marketing to attract new students, promote events and share updates. However, like all other institutions and universities, the University of Venda primarily followed traditional marketing methods, including but not limited to print media, radio and television broadcasts, as examples. These traditional marketing methods are often limited in their reach and cost-effectiveness. Social media platforms like Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok have become more appropriate to address these challenges by offering faster, more interactive and efficient ways of communication and marketing (Ngulube, 2019).

In South Africa, the use of social media in institutions of higher learning has grown significantly over the years. Studies have shown that universities can use these platforms to improve student engagement, promote academic programmes, and build their reputation (Moyo, 2021). Despite this, some universities in Africa seem to struggle to fully utilise social media's potential. While social media has become an indispensable tool for enhancing communication, student engagement, and university branding across the world (Al-Khalifa & Hussain, 2021; Andersen & Müller, 2023), the situation in many African countries remains constrained by the persistent digital divide. Scholars note that in the Global South, particularly, poor internet infrastructure, high data costs, and inconsistent Wi-Fi access continue to restrict students' effective use of digital and social media platforms for academic engagement (Ngwenya & Zulu, 2022; Kamara & Chikwe, 2021; Makgopa & Moeng, 2020). According to Mhlanga and

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Moloi (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant inequalities in digital access among South African universities, where rural and township students often lacked stable connectivity and adequate digital devices. Similar findings by Ibrahim and Eze (2023) in Nigeria and Otieno and Adebayo (2022) in East Africa indicate that despite universities' growing dependence on digital communication, many students still rely on costly mobile data rather than affordable campus Wi-Fi, which limits their online participation.

Around the world, studies show that social media enhances learning engagement and institutional communication when there is adequate digital infrastructure (Wang, Liu & Chen, 2021; Lee & Cooper, 2022). However, in Africa, socioeconomic barriers continue to influence the extent to which institutions and students can harness such benefits (Mensah & Tetteh, 2023; Okoro & Nwafor, 2021). In South Africa, Ngwenya and Zulu (2022) argue that the digital divide reflects deep socioeconomic inequalities rooted in the country's spatial and historical disparities, where urban universities have superior connectivity compared to rural ones. Similarly, Mabuza (2022) and Banda (2021) highlight that limited Wi-Fi coverage in rural areas constrains student interaction and reduces the visibility of universities' online campaigns. These challenges undermine the potential of social media to support inclusive and participatory education, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.

Studies across Africa have demonstrated that while institutions recognise the value of social media in improving access to academic and administrative information, the lack of affordable internet and digital literacy training prevents equitable participation (Ibrahim & Eze, 2023; Otieno & Adebayo, 2022; Makgopa & Moeng, 2020). Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) emphasise that bridging the digital divide requires strategic investment in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and partnerships between government, universities, and private telecommunications providers. Kamara and Chikwe (2021) also recommend that African higher education systems adopt hybrid strategies that combine offline and online communication tools to ensure inclusivity. Thus, while global trends reveal that social media has transformed higher education communication and engagement (Dwivedi, Shareef, Simintiras & Weerakkody, 2021; Nelson & Adams, 2024), in Africa, such transformation remains limited by infrastructural and economic realities that hinder universal access to Wi-Fi and affordable data.

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Before the widespread adoption of social media, universities primarily relied on traditional marketing methods to communicate with prospective students and promote their services. These methods included printed brochures, posters, banners, campus open days, radio and television advertisements, and word-of-mouth campaigns (Banda, 2020; Kekana & Baloyi, 2021). While effective in reaching local communities, traditional methods often had limited reach, and they were costly and limited the necessary interactivity to engage students meaningfully (Dwivedi, Shareef, Simintiras & Weerakkody, 2021). Moreover, such approaches provided minimal opportunities for real-time feedback or personalised communication.

The rise of social media has significantly transformed university marketing by enabling dynamic, interactive, and cost-effective communication with a global audience (Kapoor, Tamilmani, Rana, Patil, Dwivedi & Nerur, 2018; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X allow universities to share updates, promote events, and engage students directly, often complementing traditional methods (Banda, 2021; Ngwenya & Zulu, 2022). Despite these advantages, in many African contexts, social media marketing must be contextualised within existing limitations of infrastructure, Wi-Fi access, and data affordability, as these factors influence the effectiveness of digital strategies compared to traditional channels (Makgopa & Moeng, 2020; Kamara & Chikwe, 2021). Hence, universities often adopt a hybrid approach, combining both traditional and digital marketing to ensure inclusive outreach. According to Sharma and Verma (2020), Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube are the most popular social media platforms for universities, helping them reach students, parents and the general public. These platforms remain important and for many years Facebook has dominated because it allows universities to create pages, post updates and share events. However, recent studies show that TikTok is increasingly becoming relevant in the higher education context. For example, Akbari, Jastacia, Setiawan and Ningsih (2022) established that a university account on TikTok experienced large growth in views and profile activity over a short period. Dali and Aziz (2023) argue that TikTok offers higher education institutions a unique channel for dynamic storytelling about campus life that resonates with younger audiences. Hence, while universities should still maintain presence on established platforms (particularly for older stakeholders and formal communications), they increasingly need to consider TikTok as a complementary channel, especially

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when targeting Generation Z and prospective students who discover universities via mobile-first short video content. It also helps with advertising to reach more students (Kapoor Tamilmani, Rana, Dwivedi & Nerur, 2021). X (formerly X) is used for short messages and quick updates about university activities. Instagram is useful because it allows universities to share pictures and short videos, which attract young people (Dwivedi, Kapoor & Chen, 2020). LinkedIn is more professional and is used to connect with students, lecturers and employers. YouTube is important for universities because it helps them to share lectures, campus tours and student testimonials (Chugh & Ruhi, 2019).

In Europe and America, universities also use platforms such as Snapchat and TikTok to engage with students (Rutter, 2021). TikTok, in particular, has become increasingly popular among young people because it allows the creation and consumption of short videos that are entertaining, visually engaging, and easy to watch. According to Akbari, Jastacia, Setiawan, and Ningsih (2022), universities that utilise TikTok for campus updates, student achievements, and promotional content have observed higher levels of student interaction compared to traditional social media platforms. Dali and Aziz (2023) further emphasise that TikTok enables higher education institutions to adopt a more dynamic and creative approach to digital marketing, fostering stronger connections with Generation Z audiences. This trend reflects a broader shift in student engagement strategies, where short-form, mobile-friendly content complements traditional platforms like Facebook and Instagram, allowing universities to reach prospective students in more innovative and relatable ways. Universities utilise TikTok to share student experiences and advertise courses (Rutter et al., 2021). In Asia, WeChat and Sina Weibo are more commonly used in China, while LINE is prevalent in Japan and Thailand for university marketing (Zhang & Lin, 2019).

In Africa, many universities are also using social media to market their services. However, some challenges, like slow internet and high data costs, make it difficult for all students to access social media (Adegbilero-Iwari & Amusa, 2020). Facebook remains the most used platform in African universities because it is free and easy to use (Bansah & Asamoah, 2021) while X is also growing in popularity, especially for sharing academic events and achievements. Instagram and YouTube are preferred by universities that want to attract international students (Bansah & Asamoah, 2021).

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Some universities in Africa have started using WhatsApp groups for marketing purposes. They create groups, share information about courses, events, and application processes (Ogunmodede & Popoola, 2019). WhatsApp is more popular because it allows direct communication between students and university staff. In countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, universities also use LinkedIn to connect students with companies and professionals (Edeh & Ekene, 2021).

In South Africa, universities have also adopted social media to market their services. Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube and WhatsApp are the most commonly used platforms (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020). Facebook is very popular because many students and parents use it. Universities in South Africa usually create Facebook pages where they post important information about courses, events, and application deadlines (Kekana & Baloyi, 2021).

X (formerly X) is also used, especially by universities with large campuses, to engage with students and the public. For example, University of Cape Town, the University of Pretoria, and Stellenbosch University use X to share news, research findings, and university rankings (Molefe & Moyo, 2019). These universities also use Instagram to attract young students because it allows universities to share pictures of their campus, student life, and other events (Ngcobo & Dlamini, 2020).

WhatsApp is also very important in South African universities. Many universities have WhatsApp groups where they communicate directly with students. This is helpful because students can ask questions and get quick responses from university staff (Sithole & Mbatha, 2021). YouTube is also popular as universities use it to share virtual tours, lectures, and student success stories. Some universities in South Africa have started using TikTok to reach younger students. In addition, the University of Johannesburg and the University of KwaZulu-Natal use TikTok to share fun and informative videos about student life, courses and university facilities (Mokoena & Ndlovu, 2021). LinkedIn is used by universities to connect students with potential employers and to share research findings.

1.2. Problem statement

Marketing is an important tool for universities because it helps them attract students, share information, and build their reputation. At the University of Venda (UNIVEN),

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marketing plays a critical role in communicating academic programmes, institutional events, and student support services to both prospective and current students. Traditionally, UNIVEN has relied on marketing methods such as printed posters, campus notice boards, community radio, and occasional outreach initiatives to disseminate information. While these methods have been useful, they are often costly, have limited reach beyond the immediate locality, and do not allow for real-time interaction or feedback (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). For instance, printed posters placed around campus may not effectively reach off-campus students, while radio announcements do not allow students to engage or seek immediate clarification.

In recent years, the increased use of smartphones and internet-enabled devices among students at UNIVEN has created opportunities for digital communication. However, there is evidence of gaps in how effectively these platforms are utilised. Informal observations and institutional communication challenges suggest that students do not always receive timely information about academic deadlines, campus events, and support services. This often results in low attendance at university programmes, missed deadlines, and limited awareness of available opportunities. Despite the presence of official social media platforms, their use appears to be inconsistent and not fully integrated into the university's broader marketing strategy (Moyo, 2021).

Social media has emerged globally as a powerful marketing and communication tool in higher education, offering faster communication, lower costs, and real-time engagement. Platforms such as Facebook and X enable universities to build interactive relationships with their audiences and improve the dissemination of information (Ngulube, 2019). At UNIVEN, however, the extent to which these platforms are strategically used to address existing communication gaps remains unclear. There is limited empirical evidence that demonstrates how social media contributes to improving student engagement, participation in university programmes, and overall institutional visibility within this specific context. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how social media platforms are currently used at UNIVEN and how they can be effectively integrated with traditional marketing approaches to improve communication, enhance participation, and strengthen the university's visibility at both national and international levels.

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1.3. Aim

This study aimed to investigate how social media can be used as an effective tool to improve marketing services at the University of Venda.

1.4. Research objectives

The study was pinned on the following objectives:

i. To identify the types of social media platforms used for marketing services at the University of Venda.
ii. To assess the effectiveness of social media in promoting events and services at the University of Venda.
iii. To determine how social media helps in communication and interaction between the university, students and the communities.
iv. To recommend strategies to enhance social media marketing at the University of Venda.

1.5. Research questions

The research questions of this study are:

i. What social media platforms des the University of Venda use for marketing services at the University of Venda?
ii. How effective is social media in promoting the university and services at the University of Venda?
iii. How can social media help in communication and interaction between University of Venda students and the communities.
iv. What strategies can be used to enhance social media marketing at the University of Venda?

1.6. Significance of the study

The significance of this study was that it explored how social media can enhance marketing services at the University of Venda. In an era where digital communication is essential, institutions of higher learning, specifically universities in the context of this study must adopt effective strategies to reach students, staff and the wider community. Traditional marketing methods, such as print newspapers and posters, have limitations in terms of cost and reach. Social media platforms offer an affordable and interactive

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way to promote university events, academic programs, and student services. This study aimed at addressing the problem by exploring how social media can be better utilised as a tool for marketing at the University of Venda. The findings will assist universities improve their marketing services and better connect with students, staff, and the wider community and build their reputation.

This study is important for the universities' marketing as it provides insights into the effectiveness of existing social media strategies and identified areas for improvement. Through understanding how students and staff engage with social media, the universities and other institutions of higher education can refine their approaches to ensure better communication and engagement. This can lead to increased student participation in university activities, improved awareness of academic opportunities and stronger institutional branding.

Academically, this study will contribute to literature on digital marketing in higher education by offering practical recommendations for universities and other institutions of higher learning facing similar challenges. The study will also inform policymakers and university administrators on best practices for leveraging social media for effective communication. The study will assist in improving student experiences by ensuring timely and accessible information sharing through modern digital platforms.

1.7. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section explains how the study on exploring social media as a tool for improving marketing services at the University of Venda was conducted. The section includes, research paradigm, research methodology, the research design, study area, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

1.7.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is a framework that guides how research is conducted, including the researcher's beliefs about reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology) and the methods used to gather and analyse data (Creswell, 2020). It provides a philosophical foundation for a study and influences the choice of research methods. Research

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paradigms help researchers determine what is considered valid knowledge and how to obtain it.

There are four main types of research paradigms: positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism and critical realism. Positivism follows a scientific approach and relies on objective facts, often using quantitative methods (Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretivism, on the other hand, focuses on understanding human experiences and social contexts using qualitative methods (Bryman, 2018). Pragmatism combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches, allowing flexibility in research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). Critical realism examines social structures and power dynamics, often using mixed methods to analyse complex social issues (Bhaskar, 2020).

1.7.1.1 Interpretivism

The appropriate research paradigm for this study is interpretivism because the study aims to explore how social media can improve marketing services at the University of Venda. Interpretivism is suitable for studies that focus on human behaviour, social interactions and subjective experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). Since this study investigates how students, staff and marketing personnel perceive and use social media for university marketing, a qualitative approach is deemed more appropriate.

One of the main reasons for choosing interpretivism is that it allows the researcher to collect rich, detailed insights from participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2019). This study used semi-structured interviews to understand participants' views on the use of social media platforms as a marketing tool at the University of Venda. In addition, the study used social media ethnography to examine how the university and its stakeholders interacted on selected social media platforms, including the nature of content shared, levels of engagement, and communication patterns. These research methods helped to capture in-depth personal experiences, perceptions, and practices related to social media marketing that could not be adequately measured using numerical data alone.

Another reason interpretivism is appropriate is that it acknowledges multiple perspectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2019). Different people experience social media marketing in different ways. For instance, the researcher anticipated that some students might find it useful for receiving university updates, while others might feel that it was not effective. Marketing staff also might also have different views on the

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challenges of using social media. By using interpretivism, the study explored these different perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of these perspectives (Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretivism aligns with the thematic analysis method, which was used to analyse the collected data. Thematic analysis helps identify patterns, themes and meanings from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This approach allowed the researcher to understand common trends in how social media is used at the university and suggest strategies for improvement.

1.8 Research design

The study used a qualitative research design. This approach was preferred because it helps to understand people's opinions, experiences and ideas (Creswell, 2020). The qualitative design allowed the researcher to explore how social media is currently used at the University of Venda and how it can be improved.

1.9 Study location

This study was conducted at the University of Venda, which is located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The university was selected because it accommodates a large number of students, staff and communities which interact with its marketing services. The University of Venda is one of the rural-based institutions in South Africa, playing a significant role in providing higher education opportunities to communities in remote and underserved areas.

1.10 Target population

The target population included students, staff members and marketing personnel at the University of Venda. These groups were selected because they interact with the university’s social media platforms and marketing strategies. Students and staff represented the audience for the marketing services, while marketing personnel are responsible for managing and implementing these services. Undergraduates and postgraduate students were included in the study to provide diverse perspectives on the use of social media as a marketing tool.

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1.10.1 Sampling technique

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on their knowledge, experience, and relevance to the research problem (Creswell, 2014; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Unlike probability sampling, purposive sampling does not aim to achieve statistical representativeness; rather, it seeks to obtain rich, detailed, and information-dense data from participants who are best positioned to provide insight into the phenomenon under investigation. This approach is widely used in qualitative research, where the emphasis is on depth of understanding rather than generalisation to a population.

In this study, purposive sampling was appropriate because the aim was to explore perceptions and experiences related to the use of social media as a marketing tool at the University of Venda. Participants were therefore selected because of their direct involvement with, exposure to, or influence on social media use within the institution. The sample comprised five students, five marketing staff members, and five lecturers, making a total of fifteen participants. During the period of the study, the University of Venda had a large student population running into several thousands, supported by hundreds of academic staff and a smaller number of administrative and marketing personnel. Given this context, the selected participants represented three key stakeholder groups central to university marketing: students as primary recipients of marketing communication, marketing staff as implementers of social media strategies, and lecturers as academic stakeholders who interact regularly with students and institutional platforms. While the sample was small in relation to the total population, qualitative research literature emphasises that sample adequacy is determined by information richness and data saturation, not necessarily by population size or percentages (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The literature suggests that qualitative studies often achieve data saturation with sample sizes ranging from 10 to 20 participants, particularly when the study is focused and the participants are relatively homogeneous within categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, selecting five participants from each category allowed for balanced representation of perspectives while ensuring manageability and depth of analysis. The repetition of themes across interviews indicated that sufficient data had been collected to address the research objectives. Further, the semi-structured interviews

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were supplemented by social media ethnography. Therefore, the sample of five students, five marketing staff, and five lecturers was justified as appropriate and sufficient for achieving the study's aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of social media marketing practices at the University of Venda.

1.11 Data collection methods

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews (herein also referred to as interviews). Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from marketing personnel about the challenges and successes of using social media for marketing (Bryman, 2018). These interviews allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore participants' views in detail. Interviews were conducted with students and staff to understand their experiences and opinions about the university's social media platforms.

In addition, social media ethnography was employed to observe how students and staff interact with UNIVEN's social media accounts in real-time. This method involves systematic monitoring of content, comments, likes, shares, and other engagement metrics on social media platforms (Ngwenya & Zulu, 2022) such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Social media ethnography provides insights into actual user behaviour, patterns of engagement, and the effectiveness of communication strategies, complementing the perspectives gathered from interviews (Kapoor et al., 2018; Ngwenya & Zulu, 2022). Combining interviews with ethnographic observation allowed the study to capture both perceived and actual social media engagement, providing a more comprehensive understanding of marketing effectiveness at UNIVEN.

1.12 Data analysis

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. This method involves identifying patterns and themes from the participants' responses (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The researcher carefully reviewed the interview transcripts, highlighting key themes such as the effectiveness of social media, challenges faced and suggestions for improvement.

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1.13 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are necessary in research because they protect participants' rights, dignity, and well-being while ensuring the credibility of the research process. Recent literature emphasises that ethical practices such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation prevent harm and promote respect for participants (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Ethics also guide researchers in minimising risks and responsibly managing sensitive data, particularly in qualitative studies (Israel, 2023). Adherence to ethical standards enhances public trust and academic integrity, ensuring that research is conducted responsibly and contributes positively to knowledge (Resnik, 2020).

1.13.1 Permission to conduct the study

Permission to conduct the study means getting approval from the relevant authorities before starting research (Creswell, 2020). Researchers must seek permission from institutions, such as the university's ethics committee, to ensure the study follows proper guidelines. In this study, the researcher obtained approval from the University of Venda to conduct interviews with students, staff, and marketing personnel. This ensured that the research was conducted legally and ethically.

1.13.2 Informed consent

Informed consent means that participants must agree to take part in the study after fully understanding its purpose, risks, and benefits (Bryman, 2018). Researchers must explain what the study is about and allow participants to ask questions before they decide to participate. In this study, participants signed consent forms to show they understood the research and agree to be part of it. This ensured that their participation was voluntary.

1.13.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality means keeping participants' information private, while anonymity means not revealing their names or personal details (Saunders et al., 2019). Researchers must ensure that data collected from participants is protected. In this study, the researcher did not use participants' real names in the final report and stored

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the collected data securely. Codes were used for identity purposes, and the data was also password-protected. This helped protect participants from any possible harm.

1.13.4 Minimising harm

Minimising harm means making sure that participants are not physically, emotionally, or mentally hurt by the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2019). Researchers must ensure that participation does not cause stress or discomfort. In this study, questions asked during interviews and discussions were designed to appropriately to minimise sensitive or distressing topics. Participants were also assured that their responses would not be used against them.

1.13.5 Voluntary participation and withdrawal rights

Voluntary participation means that people take part in the study by choice, not by force. Withdrawal rights mean they can stop participating at any time without punishment (McQuail, 2019). Researchers must respect participants' decisions. In this study, participants were informed that they could leave the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable. This ensured that no one was forced to participate.

1.13.6 Plagiarism and attribution

Plagiarism is using someone else's work without giving them credit, while attribution means acknowledging the original author (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2021). Researchers must ensure that all sources of information are properly cited to avoid academic dishonesty. In this study, all references from books, journal articles, and online sources were cited correctly using in-text citations and a reference list. Social media platforms used in the study for data collection were acknowledged. This ensured the study maintained academic integrity.

1.14 Limitations of the study

Generalising the findings to all students and staff was limited. This study focused solely on one university, which meant that the results are not necessarily be applicable to other higher education institutions in South Africa or beyond. Despite these limitations, the use of qualitative methods ensured rich, in-depth insights into social media marketing practices and experiences.

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1.15. Definition of key terms

1.15.1 Social media

Social media refers to online platforms that allow people to create, share and exchange information, ideas and multimedia content in virtual communities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2020). Examples of social media platforms include Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and WhatsApp. These platforms help individuals and organizations to communicate, interact, and promote their services.

In the context of this study, social media is seen as a tool that the University of Venda can use to improve its marketing services. Traditional marketing methods, such as newspapers and posters, may not be effective in reaching students quickly and widely. Social media provides a faster and more engaging way to share information about university programs, events and services. Research shows that universities worldwide use social media to attract students, promote academic programs and communicate with the public (Ngulube, 2019). However, not all universities use social media effectively and this study seeks to explore how the University of Venda can enhance its social media marketing strategies.

1.15.2 Marketing

Marketing refers to the activities involved in promoting and selling products or services to customers (Kotler and Armstrong, 2021). It includes advertising, public relations and digital marketing strategies. In the business world, marketing helps companies attract customers and increase sales. However, marketing is also important for educational institutions like universities, where it helps them attract students, share information about academic programs and build a strong reputation.

In this study, marketing focused on how the University of Venda promotes itself using social media. The university needs to communicate important information about admissions, scholarships, research programs, and student services. Many universities have moved away from traditional marketing and are now using social media platforms to engage with students and staff (Moyo, 2021). Effective social media marketing can help the university increase student enrolment, improve event attendance and strengthen its brand identity.

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1.15.3 Higher education institutions

Higher education institutions refer to education provided by universities, colleges, and other institutions that offer post-secondary education (Altbach et al., 2019). It includes undergraduate and postgraduate programs, professional training and research activities. Universities play a crucial role in developing skilled professionals, conducting research and contributing to society. In this study, the concept is also used interchangeably with institutions of higher learning.

In this study, higher education institutions referred to universities and other tertiary institutions. This study explored how higher education institutions, particularly the University of Venda, can improve their social media strategies to connect better with students and stakeholders.

1.15.4 Student engagement

Student engagement refers to the level of interest, participation and interaction that students have with their university and its activities (Trowler, 2020). Engaged students are more likely to attend classes, participate in extracurricular activities, and succeed academically. Universities aim to keep students engaged by providing interactive learning experiences, supporting student welfare and fostering a sense of community.

In this study, student engagement refers to how the University of Venda can use social media to involve students in university activities. Many students rely on social media for news and updates about their institutions (Kapoor et al., 2021). If a university does not actively use social media, students may miss out on important announcements, leading to lower participation in events and programs. Social media can help universities engage with students by sharing interactive content such as polls, live videos and discussion forums (Dwivedi et al., 2020). This study will examine how social media marketing can improve student engagement at the University of Venda.

1.15.5 Communication strategies

Communication strategies refer to the planned ways that organisations share information with their audience to achieve specific goals (McQuail, 2019). Good communication strategies help organisations deliver clear, accurate and engaging

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messages to the right people. In universities, communication strategies involve how information is shared with students, staff, and the public.

In this study, communication strategies focused on how the University of Venda uses social media to communicate with students and promote its services. Effective communication ensures that students receive important updates about admission deadlines, academic programs and campus events. Research shows that universities that use social media well have stronger connections with their students (Chugh and Ruhi, 2019). For example, some universities use WhatsApp groups for direct communication with students, while others use X to provide quick updates about university news (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020).

However, poor communication strategies can lead to confusion and a lack of student engagement. If universities do not use social media effectively, students may miss important information, leading to low participation in academic and social activities. This study will explore ways in which the University of Venda can improve its communication strategies through social media to enhance marketing and student engagement.

1.16. Chapter outline

The study is structured into five chapters, each serving a distinct purpose in guiding the research from introduction to conclusion.

Chapter One introduces the study as well as the background information on the role of social media in university marketing. It outlines the research problem and highlights the need to explore how the University of Venda can enhance its marketing strategies through social media. The chapter further presents the research aim, objectives, and questions that guide the study. Chapter 1 furthermore discusses the significance of the research and defines its scope and delimitations while also clarifying key terms used throughout the study. The chapter outline was also provided in this chapter.

Chapter Two reviews existing scholarly literature on social media marketing in higher education, drawing from previous studies to establish a foundation for the research. The discussion includes relevant theories and conceptual frameworks that helped in understanding the role of social media in university communication and marketing.

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The chapter also identifies gaps in existing research, and demonstrates why this study was necessary, and how it contributes to knowledge in the field.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology adopted in the study and explains the chosen research paradigm and design. It describes the study area and target population while detailing the sampling techniques used to select participants. The chapter also provides an overview of data collection methods and explains how interviews were conducted. Data analysis procedures are discussed, alongside ethical considerations to ensure the study followed proper research guidelines.

Chapter Four presents the data collected from participants and provided an analysis of the findings. The discussion was structured around key themes that emerge from the data, with interpretations supported by participant responses. This chapter provides insights into how social media is currently used for marketing at the University of Venda and likewise identifies areas for improvement.

Chapter Five concludes the study by summarising the key findings and discusses their implications. It also offers recommendations on how the University of Venda can improve its social media marketing strategies. The chapter highlights the limitations of the study and suggests areas for future research.

1.17 Chapter summary

Chapter 1 introduced the study on exploring social media as a marketing tool at the University of Venda. It highlighted the growing role of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, WhatsApp, YouTube, and LinkedIn in enhancing communication, promoting events, and engaging students, while acknowledging challenges such as limited internet access, high data costs, and infrastructural constraints in African contexts. The chapter outlined the problem statement, research aim, objectives, and questions, emphasising the need to understand the effectiveness of social media marketing. It also presented a preliminary literature review, theoretical frameworks Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) research design, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and study limitations. Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive literature review, analysing global and African experiences of social media marketing in higher education. It will

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synthesise existing research, highlight gaps, and establish a conceptual framework linking theory and practice, guiding the study's methodology and analysis.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter began by introducing the focus of the study, which was to investigate how social media could be used as an effective tool to improve marketing services at the University of Venda. It critically reviews existing literature to provide context for the research, highlighting global and African perspectives on digital communication, student engagement, and higher education marketing. The literature review identifies key patterns, emerging themes, and gaps in current knowledge (Raeesi, 2020), including challenges related to limited internet access, data availability, and uneven adoption of social media strategies. It also considers the role of traditional marketing methods and the need for hybrid approaches. The chapter concludes by linking the insights from the literature to the study's research objectives and theoretical framework, establishing a foundation for understanding the effectiveness and challenges of social media marketing at universities and other institutions of higher learning. Specific focus is, however, given to the literature review on universities and their use of social media in marketing.

2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING IN UNIVERSITIES

Marketing in universities is not only about recruitment but also about building a strong institutional identity. Strategic marketing initiatives can enhance student engagement, foster alumni loyalty, and improve community relations. Empirical studies indicate that institutions with structured marketing strategies experience higher student participation rates in institutional programmes and improved retention levels. For instance, targeted communication campaigns have been shown to increase awareness of scholarships and academic support services, leading to improved utilisation of these services among students. Well-designed campaigns can inform students about scholarships, academic support services, extra-curricular activities, and university achievements, which may increase participation in events and utilisation of services. Also, marketing strategies can help universities differentiate themselves in a crowded higher education landscape, attract research funding, and enhance

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partnerships with local and international stakeholders (Banda, 2020; Nkosi & Moeti, 2021).

Marketing plays a crucial role in higher education as universities compete to attract students, retain staff, and build institutional reputation in increasingly competitive environments. Recent higher education reports suggest that universities that actively invest in marketing and communication strategies tend to experience higher application and enrolment rates compared to those that rely on passive recruitment approaches. Effective marketing enables universities to communicate their offerings, achievements, and values to prospective students, parents, alumni, and the broader community (Otieno & Adebayo, 2022). In addition, marketing strategies can influence student enrolment decisions, enhance engagement, and foster a positive public image, which is critical for both national and international recognition.

Before the emergence of social media, universities relied heavily on traditional marketing methods. These included printed materials such as brochures, flyers, and posters, as well as newspapers and magazines advertisements, radio, television campaigns, open days, and public events. Empirical evidence shows that while these methods were effective in creating initial awareness, their reach was often geographically constrained and associated with high production and distribution costs. For example, print-based campaigns require repeated distribution to remain visible, while broadcast media campaigns demand significant financial investment for airtime. Traditional methods offered visibility within specific geographic areas but were often costly, time-consuming, and limited in their ability to reach a wide audience or provide immediate feedback (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). Traditional marketing approaches lacked interactive capabilities, and this made it difficult for universities to engage students directly or gauge their responses in real time. Despite these limitations, conventional methods were essential in establishing initial awareness of institutional offerings and creating trust among target audiences.

The advent of social media has revolutionised university marketing by providing platforms that allow institutions to interact with stakeholders in dynamic and cost-effective ways. Empirical studies have shown that social media usage among university students is significantly high, with a large proportion of students accessing

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platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and messaging applications daily. This widespread usage increases the likelihood that institutional messages shared through these platforms will reach and engage the intended audience. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat, and increasingly TikTok allow universities to share information about courses, events, achievements, and research breakthroughs instantaneously to a global audience. These platforms offer features that facilitate user engagement, including live video streaming, interactive posts, polls, and comment sections, creating opportunities for dialogue rather than just one-way communication. Social media has also proven to be an effective tool for brand building, as universities can craft narratives that highlight their unique attributes and values, thereby influencing perceptions and attracting prospective students (Ngulube, 2019; Moyo, 2021).

In Africa, however, the adoption of digital marketing in higher education institutions is influenced by measurable challenges such as the digital divide, limited internet connectivity, high data costs, and varying levels of digital literacy among students and staff. Studies indicate that a significant proportion of students in rural-based institutions experience inconsistent internet access, which directly affects their ability to engage with online platforms. Additionally, the high cost of mobile data remains a barrier to continuous online participation. These factors can hinder the effectiveness of social media marketing and require universities to consider hybrid strategies that combine digital platforms with traditional methods (Makgopa & Moeng, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). For example, universities may continue to use printed materials, newsletters, radio broadcasts, and television campaigns alongside online platforms to ensure comprehensive reach, particularly in rural areas where digital access is limited.

2.3 ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING UNIVERSITY EVENTS AND SERVICES

Social media has become an essential part of communication in modern universities. It is now one of the most widely used tools for sharing information with students. Through platforms like Facebook, X (now X), Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and YouTube, universities can reach students more quickly and efficiently than traditional methods like email or notice boards. Social media allows for easy interaction between students and institutions, and it provides visual and written content that students can

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access from their mobile phones or computers. The role of social media in promoting university events and services is outlined below.

2.3.1 Instant communication and student engagement

One of the key strengths of social media is its ability to communicate instantly with a large number of students. Unlike emails, which some students ignore or check less frequently, social media platforms are checked multiple times a day by most young people. According to a study conducted in the United Kingdom by Smith and Patel (2021), over 80% of university students reported checking their social media accounts daily, making these platforms ideal for sending time-sensitive updates such as event reminders or changes in venue. This finding highlights the high level of digital engagement among students and reinforces the importance of integrating social media into university marketing and communication strategies. It also reflects a broader global trend in which social media has become a key channel for information sharing, student engagement, and institutional branding.

In the United States, a study by Lee and Cooper (2022) shows that university students responded better to short, visual posts with clear calls to action. For example, universities that used Instagram stories and Facebook posts with bright images and short videos saw an increase in event attendance by up to 25%. Interactive content, such as live Q&A sessions, polls, and comment sections, also played a major role in assisting students feel more involved.

Similarly, a European study by Andersen and Muller (2023) established that students at universities in Denmark and Germany felt more connected to their institutions when social media was used to share day-to-day campus activities. These included student life, upcoming workshops, and services like counselling and health check-ups. The authors noted that social media fosters a sense of community, which can be difficult to achieve with traditional communication tools. In the Middle East, Al-Khalifa and Hussain (2021) observes that students in the United Arab Emirates felt more informed about university events due to regular updates on platforms like Snapchat and WhatsApp. Their study concludes that universities using multiple platforms, rather than just one, were more successful in keeping students informed.

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2.3.2 Broadening access to university services

Social media also plays an important role in making university services more accessible. In both the global south and the global north, social media has been widely used to share information about mental health services, academic support programmes, bursary applications, library operating hours, and student job opportunities. A study by Browne and Tanaka (2021) in Australia discovered that students who followed university social media pages were three times more likely to be aware of available support services.

In African countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, social media has become a lifeline for students in remote or rural areas. A study conducted by Otieno and Adebayo (2022) established that universities using Facebook groups and WhatsApp broadcasts managed to reach students who otherwise had no access to physical campuses. In Nigeria, research by Ibrahim and Eze (2023) shows that updates shared through social media assists students in rural areas to stay informed about scholarships and exam timetables, despite irregular internet access.

Likewise, in South Asia, universities in India and Pakistan have used platforms like Telegram and Instagram to provide continuous updates on admission deadlines and examination procedures. A study by Farooq et al. (2024) reveals that students from low-income backgrounds, especially, benefited from these updates, as they often could not afford to travel to campus to ask questions. In the United Kingdom (UK), a British Council report (2022) discovered that most universities increased their use of social media to promote student support services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift was driven by the need to maintain communication and engagement with students during periods of remote learning and restricted campus activities. These included virtual counselling, online learning support, and digital career guidance. The report recommended that universities continue using social media to keep students informed and engaged, especially those studying remotely.

2.3.3 Promotion and visibility of university events

Another important area where social media is highly effective is in promoting university events. Whether it is a cultural festival, a job fair, or an academic conference, social media makes it easy to share details with a large audience and encourage

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participation. Posts can include photos, videos, countdowns, live streams, and links to registration forms.

In Asia, Zhang and Kumar (2023) observe that universities in China and India that frequently posted about their events on platforms like Weibo and Instagram saw a notable rise in attendance, especially among first-year students. The study also established that students were more likely to attend events when posts included comments from peers or testimonials from past participants. In Canada, White and Jones (2020) revealed that universities that shared behind-the-scenes content, such as setup videos or speaker introductions, generated more interest in academic events. They concluded that showing the preparation process made events feel more relatable and inclusive.

Social media also helps in promoting the achievements of students and staff, which in turn builds a positive image of the university. In South Africa, Madonsela and Ncube (2024) reveal that universities using social media to celebrate student awards, graduations, and community projects received more online engagement and positive feedback. This form of indirect event promotion creates a sense of pride among current students and assists to attract prospective students. In Latin America, Gómez and Ortega (2022) show that social media posts about sports competitions, art shows, and community volunteering led to higher student turnout and participation. Their research recommended that universities maintain active social media teams to handle content creation and event promotion on a daily basis.

While social media has many benefits, it also presents several challenges. One major issue is digital inequality, as not all students have equal access to the internet or smartphones. Kamara and Chikwe (2021) in Sierra Leone show that students in rural areas often struggle with poor internet coverage and high data costs. This means that universities continue to rely on other communication methods such as SMS, notice boards, and printed newsletters to ensure no student is left behind. Another challenge is misinformation. Social media makes it easy to spread false information, especially when unofficial pages or accounts share incorrect event details. Green and Morrison (2023) reveal that in the United Kingdom 17% of students receive false information about university events from unverified social media sources. The authors recommend

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that universities verify their social media pages and use blue checkmarks where possible to help students identify official accounts.

Too much information can also overwhelm students. Posting too frequently or sharing too many updates at once can lead students to ignore messages. A study by Mensah and Tetteh (2023) in Ghana found that students preferred fewer, more focused posts rather than constant updates. Mensah and Tetteh (2023) recommend that universities create weekly summaries or short videos instead of daily posts. Managing social media accounts requires time and skilled staff. Universities must invest in trained digital communication teams to plan, schedule, and respond to student questions promptly. A study by Nelson and Adams (2024) in New Zealand reveals that universities with dedicated social media teams have better online engagement and student satisfaction.

2.4 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND STUDENTS

International studies have highlighted the growing use of platforms like Facebook, X and WhatsApp as tools for enhancing communication and learning. In the United States, Junco, Heiberger and Loken (2011) discovered that when students used social media platforms such as X (current X) in class, there was an increase in student engagement and overall academic performance. This was because social media allowed students to engage with both their peers and instructors outside traditional classroom settings, encouraging collaboration and immediate feedback. Likewise, Davis and Roblyer (2020) explore the impact of social media on student-teacher communication, and their study reveal that these platforms enabled quicker responses to academic inquiries and therefore reduce barriers to communication.

In India, social media has become an essential tool for enhancing educational experiences, particularly for students who need additional support outside the classroom. Bharucha (2018) examines the use of WhatsApp and Facebook by business students, revealing that these platforms allowed for informal, yet effective, discussions related to coursework. The study points out that students could clarify doubts, exchange resources and engage in peer-to-peer learning, which significantly improved their understanding of the subject matter. Kumar (2019) established that students in India used social media to discuss assignments and prepare for exams,

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and this provides them with a sense of community even when they were not physically together.

China's adoption of microblogging sites like Weibo for educational purposes also demonstrates the global trend of using social media to connect students with their institutions. Gao, Luo and Zhang (2012) investigated how Chinese students used microblogging as a tool for educational interaction, and they discovered that students used these platforms to exchange ideas, engage in class discussions and receive feedback from professors. This virtual communication was particularly helpful for students who faced geographical or time-zone challenges in traditional classroom settings. However, some students reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information and constant updates, which can sometimes hinder productive learning (Gao, Luo, and Zhang, 2012).

Social media has revolutionised the way universities communicate with students. It enables quicker, more efficient communication between students and teachers, and that provides a platform for real-time discussions and announcements. In many universities, social media is used to share important updates about lectures, events and deadlines. According to Wang and Chen (2020), social media allows universities to reach a large number of students simultaneously, ensuring that no one misses crucial information. This kind of communication is particularly beneficial for students in large classes, or those who might struggle to get direct access to their instructors.

Social media also assists in creating a more inclusive learning environment. It enables students to ask questions or express concerns in a less intimidating space compared to face-to-face interactions. According to Zhang (2021), students feel more comfortable asking questions or providing feedback on social media, as it removes the fear of judgment that sometimes accompanies in-person communication. This has been particularly beneficial for introverted students who find it difficult to speak up in traditional classroom settings.

Beyond student-teacher interaction, social media also facilitates peer-to-peer learning. In South Korea, Park and Lee (2020) discovered that students used social media platforms to collaborate on academic projects, exchange notes, and discuss complex topics. This form of collaborative learning has been shown to improve student engagement and academic achievement. By engaging in group chats or online study

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sessions, students can share ideas, challenge each other's perspectives and learn from one another's experiences.

Similarly, in a study conducted in South Africa, Mabuza (2022) highlights that South African students were increasingly using social media to form study groups and engage in academic discussions. The researcher notes that students in rural areas (who may have limited access to formal educational resources) particularly benefit from these digital platforms, as they allow students to collaborate and learn together without geographical limitations. This collaborative aspect of social media plays a crucial role in bridging the educational gap between students from different regions, enabling more equitable access to learning resources.

In South Africa, social media has become an essential communication tool for both universities and students. Further, Mabuza (2022) observes that South African universities, particularly those in rural areas, are leveraging social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and X to keep students informed and connected. The study reveals that social media assisted universities disseminate important information to students, including updates about courses, exams, and events. For many South African students, especially those in remote areas, social media provides an affordable way to stay engaged with their university community.

Social media has been shown to enhance student engagement in South African universities. A study by Nkosi and Moeti (2021) established that students who actively participated in university-run social media groups were more likely to feel a sense of belonging and involvement in their academic community. The researchers also noted that students used social media to share study materials and form study groups, which improved both individual and group learning outcomes. This virtual community building is particularly crucial in South Africa, where students often face socio-economic barriers to accessing traditional educational resources.

2.4.1 Improved communication between students and universities

Many universities use social media to keep students updated about important matters. These may include class timetables, exam dates, campus events, and emergency notices. According to Wang and Chen (2020), social media assists universities reach a large number of students at once. This means that students do not miss important

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messages even if they are not on campus. In countries like the United Kingdom, universities have started using X and Instagram to post reminders, live updates and changes in schedules. These platforms allow for fast sharing of news and reduce the chances of confusion among students.

In the United States, Davis and Roblyer (2020) assert that social media platforms improve how speedy and efficient communication between teachers and students. When students have questions about their studies, they can post them in group chats or send private messages (Okoro & Dike, 2023). Teachers can then respond in real time or shortly afterwards. This saves time and helps students get the answers they need without waiting for the next class or office hour (Ibrahim & Eze, 2023). This kind of communication helps students feel more supported and improves their academic experience.

In Canada, social media has also been used to reach students living far from campus. According to Patel and Singh (2021), universities in Canada started using Facebook groups and WhatsApp channels to ensure that all students, and that included those in remote areas, and this enabled them to receive the same information. These platforms made it easy to send out announcements and learning materials in formats like videos, PDFs, and voice notes. As a result, students felt more connected to their university, no matter where they lived.

2.4.2 Encouraging students' participation and engagement

One of the biggest benefits of social media is that it encourages more students to take part in university life. In traditional classroom settings, some students may feel shy or scared to speak. On social media, however, they can ask questions and join discussions without fear of being judged. Zhang (2021) observes that many students, especially introverts, are more comfortable expressing themselves on platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. They are more likely to give feedback, ask for help, or share their views when they are online.

In South Korea, Park and Lee (2020) show that students used social media to work together on group projects and homework. They share notes, ask questions, and discussed ideas using messaging apps and group pages. This helped students to learn from each other, correct their mistakes, and improve their understanding of the

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topics. The researchers revealed that this kind of peer interaction increased students' interest in their studies and made learning more enjoyable.

In Australia, Jones and Riley (2022) note that students who joined university-run Facebook groups felt more involved in the university community. These platforms allow students to join competitions, attend webinars, and participate in surveys. The groups also posted motivational messages and academic tips, which helped to keep students focused and encouraged. Social media gave students a sense of belonging, which is important for mental well-being and academic success. Even in countries with limited resources, such as Nigeria, social media has become a useful tool for increasing student participation. According to Okoro and Dike (2023), students in Nigerian universities formed online study groups to discuss lessons and share learning materials. These groups were often created by students themselves, but lecturers also joined in to offer guidance. The result was better communication, increased student confidence, and improved academic outcomes.

2.4.3 Support for peer-to-peer learning

Besides student-teacher communication, social media also plays a big role in peer-to-peer learning. This means that students can learn from each other by sharing ideas, study materials, and feedback. In India, Kumar (2019) discovered that students often used WhatsApp and Facebook groups to prepare for tests and assignments. They helped each other understand difficult topics, and it provided moral support during exam periods. This made learning less stressful and more interactive.

The notion of interactive learning is further supported by Mendoza and Cruz (2021), who revealed that group chats in the Philippines assisted students build strong academic relationships. These chats were used to explain homework, plan group tasks, and remind each other about deadlines. Students felt that this teamwork made them more organised and responsible. They also alerted that they enjoyed working together more than studying as individuals. Social media gave them a space where they could study in a friendly and informal way, which improved their academic performance.

In the United Arab Emirates, Al Khatib and Hassan (2022) note that social media platforms were used to promote online discussions between students of different

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nationalities. In international universities, students come from various cultural backgrounds, and social media helps them overcome language barriers and cultural differences. It allowed for a more inclusive learning environment where all students could contribute. In Brazil, universities have used Telegram to create large study groups that are supervised by teaching assistants. According to Silva and Andrade (2023), these groups allowed students to ask questions at any time and receive quick answers. The teaching assistants also posted quizzes and summaries to help students revise their work. Students said they appreciated this support because it made them feel like help was always available. This approach reduced the feeling of isolation that some students experienced in large classes or during online learning.

2.4.4 Enhancing access to learning and bridging gaps

Social media has helped many universities reach students who may otherwise struggle to stay connected with their academic institutions. In rural or poor communities, students often face difficulties such as long travel distances, poor internet, or limited educational support. Social media can help to reduce these problems by providing a cheaper and more accessible way to get information and support.

In South Africa, Mabuza (2022) also discovered that students in rural areas used social media to form study groups and share learning materials. These students often did not have access to libraries or computer labs. However, through WhatsApp and Facebook, they could still stay up to date with lessons and work together with others. This was especially useful during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools and universities were closed and students had to study from home.

In Kenya, Omondi and Kipkoech (2024) show that universities used X and Facebook to keep students informed during times of crisis. These platforms were used to post updates on school closures, health guidelines, and online learning options. The researchers note that students who followed university pages were better prepared to continue their studies despite the disruptions. This shows how social media can help make learning more flexible and responsive to change. In Bangladesh, Rahman and Ali (2023) examine how mobile-based apps like Messenger and WhatsApp helped students from low-income families access educational content. Many students could not afford laptops or high-speed internet. However, they could use basic smartphones

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and free social media apps to receive class notes, videos, and voice recordings. This made education more equal, and this gives all students the chance to succeed regardless of their background.

Even in the global north social media continues to play a key role in helping students who need special support. In Germany, Müller and Schmidt (2025) recently studied how students with disabilities used social media to seek academic assistance and receive emotional support from peers. These students felt more included and valued when they were able to take part in online communities that respected their needs. The study shows that social media can promote equality and assist students achieve their goals without feeling left out.

2.5 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR MARKETING AT UNIVERSITIES

Universities around the world are now using social media to attract new students, keep current students engaged, and even improve their brand image (Keller, 2019). In countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, universities have been successful in using social media to market themselves. For example, higher education institutions in the United States strategically utilise platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X to provide insights into campus life. Through carefully curated content, these universities highlight extracurricular activities, major events, and student accomplishments as a way of enhancing institutional visibility and attracting prospective students (Smith, 2020).

The suggested strategies for enhancing and improving social media marketing at universities are discussed individually under several key subheadings. These include promoting university programmes, encouraging interactivity and engagement, creating engaging and meaningful content, targeting the right audience through smart advertising, encouraging student participation and user-generated content, using social media influencers and student ambassadors, ensuring cultural relevance in social media content, training university staff in social media management, and monitoring and evaluating social media performance. Each of these strategies addresses a specific aspect of effective social media marketing and together provides a comprehensive approach for strengthening universities' digital marketing efforts.

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2.5.1 Promoting university programmes

In some countries, like Brazil and Mexico, universities are also using social media to promote their programs to students in rural areas who may not have access to traditional advertising. They use videos, infographics and online live sessions to show how students from rural areas can benefit from higher education (Miller, 2019:22). Social media gives these students a chance to see and experience the university life before they even visit the campus.

Although existing studies discuss the use of social media for promoting university programmes, much of the literature focuses on international contexts and urban, well-resourced institutions. There is limited research that examines how social media is used to promote academic programmes within rural-based universities in South Africa, where access to traditional marketing and digital resources is often constrained. This study addressed the gap by focusing on the University of Venda and exploring how social media was used to market university programmes in a rural context. By incorporating the perspectives of students, lecturers, and marketing staff through qualitative methods, the study provided context-specific insights into the effectiveness and challenges of social media marketing in under-researched higher education settings.

2.5.2 Encouraging interactivity

Social media marketing strategies in universities often focus on engagement. One strategy that has worked well in other parts of the world is sharing content that encourages students to interact. For example, universities post quizzes, fun facts, or challenges that get students talking, liking, or commenting (Thompson, 2020). This interaction helps to build a sense of belonging and excitement about the university. Some universities also use paid advertisements to target specific groups, like international students or students interested in a particular field of study (Cheng, 2018). By using social media's ability to target specific audiences, universities can focus on students who are more likely to apply or enrol.

In South Africa, universities have started to use social media marketing in similar ways. However, there are still many challenges. One of the main challenges is access to the internet. Not all students in South Africa have easy access to the internet, especially

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in rural areas where data costs are high and internet connections are unstable. According to a study by Makgopa and Moeng (2020), many students from rural areas struggle to access information about university programs because they cannot afford the data or do not have stable internet connections. This makes it difficult for universities to rely solely on social media for marketing.

A strategy to overcome this challenge is for universities in South Africa to use social media platforms more creatively. For example, they can create content that can be easily shared and viewed on mobile phones, as many students in rural areas use smartphones. Posting videos that are easy to watch on small screens or using WhatsApp, which is widely used in South Africa, can help spread information more effectively (Banda, 2021). WhatsApp groups could also be used to connect students with university staff, answer questions and share important updates.

In South Africa, cultural relevance plays a critical role in the effectiveness of university marketing strategies. The country's higher education landscape is characterised by a diverse student population representing various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. As such, universities must ensure that their social media content reflects and respects this diversity. Creating culturally relevant content means understanding the values, languages, traditions, and social contexts of different student groups and incorporating these into marketing messages in a way that promotes inclusion and belonging.

When universities post content that acknowledges South Africa's multicultural identity, they demonstrate respect and sensitivity toward all communities. This helps students feel seen and valued, fostering a sense of connection between them and the institution. For example, posts celebrating cultural holidays, local languages, and community achievements can enhance engagement and build a positive institutional image. Zulu (2020) notes that culturally inclusive communication not only strengthens the relationship between universities and students, but also improves the university's reputation as an equitable and socially responsible institution. Culturally relevant content can help attract prospective students who are more likely to choose universities that recognise and celebrate their identities. Conversely, ignoring cultural nuances can lead to disengagement, misinterpretation, or perceptions of bias. Therefore, universities must invest in diverse marketing teams, community

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engagement initiatives, and language-sensitive communication strategies to ensure authenticity in their messaging.

In South Africa, there is also a growing use of social media influencers to market universities. These are people who have large followings on platforms like Instagram or YouTube and universities are starting to partner with them to share their experiences on campus. This can be particularly effective because young people often trust influencers more than traditional advertisements (Ngwenya, 2021). Influencers can show a behind-the-scenes view of what university life is really like, which helps students make informed decisions about whether they want to apply.

Universities in South Africa can benefit from focusing on student-generated content. Students can be encouraged to share their own stories, photos, and videos about their experiences at university. This not only increases engagement, but also helps the university to appear more authentic (Banda, 2020). When potential students see real-life experiences, they feel more connected to the university and are more likely to apply.

Despite these strategies, the use of social media for marketing in South African universities is still evolving. Many universities are still learning how to effectively use social media platforms for marketing, and are still figuring out how to measure the success of their social media efforts. According to research by Gwala (2020), some universities are struggling to keep up with the fast-changing trends in social media and are not using these platforms to their full potential. There is a need for more training for staff on how to create effective social media campaigns, how to use data analytics to track performance and how to adjust strategies based on what is working.

To improve the use of social media for marketing at South African universities, there is a need for a more strategic approach. Universities should conduct regular surveys to understand their audience better and create content that responds to their interests and concerns. For example, if students are interested in scholarships, the university can create posts that explain the scholarship application process in detail (Mkhize, 2020). Regularly updating content and keeping the conversation going is also key to keeping potential students engaged.

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While existing studies extensively examine social media marketing in higher education, most focus on well-resourced universities in developed countries and emphasise quantitative outcomes such as reach and engagement metrics. There is limited qualitative, context-specific research that explores how social media marketing is implemented and experienced in rural-based universities in South Africa, where challenges such as digital inequality, high data costs, limited infrastructure, and cultural diversity are more pronounced. Furthermore, the perspectives of key stakeholders, particularly students, lecturers, and marketing staff, are often underrepresented in the literature. This study addressed these gaps by adopting a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and social media ethnography at the University of Venda. By focusing on a rural-based institution and incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives, the study provided in-depth, contextually grounded insights into both the opportunities and constraints of social media marketing, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of digital marketing practices in under-researched higher education contexts.

2.5.3 Creating engaging and meaningful content

One of the most effective strategies for improving social media marketing at universities is by creating content that is both engaging and meaningful. Content must do more than just advertise the university; it should tell stories, share experiences, and offer value to the audience. According to Dwyer (2021), universities in the United States have successfully used short videos and live sessions to showcase student life, campus events, and academic activities. These forms of content make it easier for prospective students to imagine themselves as part of the university.

In the United Kingdom, universities have improved their online presence by using high-quality images, infographics, and creative storytelling (James, 2022). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities shared personal stories of how students and staff adapted to remote learning. These stories helped build trust and showed the human side of higher education. In Australia, some universities have included behind-the-scenes content, such as a “day in the life of a student” or academic staff introducing their courses in a friendly and informal manner (Carter, 2023). This type of content helps break down the formal image of universities and makes them appear more approachable. When it comes to students in rural or low-

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income areas, it is important that the content be easily accessible. Universities in Latin America, such as in Brazil and Mexico, have designed mobile-friendly videos and low-data posts that can be easily viewed on smartphones (Rodriguez, 2021). This is especially useful for students who rely on limited internet access. In the same vein, universities in rural parts of South Africa could adopt this strategy because they face similar challenges.

As alluded to earlier, creating culturally relevant content is another important factor. As seen in countries like Nigeria and South Africa, where there is a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, universities must ensure that their messages speak to all groups. According to Zulu (2020), marketing that respects cultural identities and uses local languages where possible can have a stronger emotional impact and encourage a sense of belonging.

2.5.4 Targeting the right audience through smart advertising

Social media is a powerful tool because it allows universities to target very specific groups of people. By using data from social media platforms, universities can create advertisements that only appear to those who are most likely to be interested in their courses. This is called targeted advertising.

In countries such as Canada and Germany, universities have used Facebook Ads and Google Ads to reach students based on age, location, interests, and even past online behaviour (Thomas, 2020). For example, an engineering faculty can create a campaign that only appears to users who have searched for engineering degrees or related content. This saves money and increases the chances of reaching the right students. Social media advertising is also useful for reaching international students. According to research by Liu and Ahmed (2023), many universities in Asia, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia, are using Instagram Stories and TikTok ads to connect with students from nearby countries. These platforms offer short and interactive content that matches the habits of today's youth.

Some universities have also used sponsored posts during special times of the year, such as application periods or open days. These posts are more visible and can include links for easy registration or to chat with an advisor. Smith and O'Connor (2024) argue that paid advertising is most effective when it is combined with organic

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content that keeps the university active on its page. In South Africa, targeting the right audience remains a challenge due to limited internet access in rural areas. However, there has been progress. WhatsApp, a platform widely used in the country, is being used more by universities to communicate with applicants and share course information (Banda, 2021). WhatsApp uses less data and is more accessible to students with limited resources.

2.5.5 Encouraging student participation and user-generated content

A powerful way to build trust and engagement on social media is by encouraging students to participate in content creation. When students share their own experiences, photos, and videos, it makes the university look more real and honest. This is called user-generated content.

Universities in the United States and Canada have set up hashtag campaigns that ask students to post about their lives on campus (Johnson, 2022). For example, students may be encouraged to use a specific hashtag when attending an event or when they receive good news, such as passing an examination. These posts are then shared by the university, creating a strong sense of community.

Influencers are also becoming a big part of university marketing. Many young people trust influencers more than traditional advertisements (Nguyen, 2021). Some universities partner with student influencers who already have a large following. These students post about life at the university, answer questions, and even take over the university's social media account for a day. In South Africa, this strategy is also growing. According to Ngwenya (2021), universities are working with influencers to reach students on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These influencers often come from similar backgrounds as the students they target, which helps build a personal connection.

Student ambassadors are another helpful strategy. These are students who represent the university online by creating videos, giving tours, and answering questions. According to Parker and Singh (2023), student ambassadors help prospective students feel more confident because they hear from someone their own age, and this is someone who understands their worries and can explain things in a simple way. Universities in Africa, Asia, and Europe have also discovered that involving alumni

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(former students) in social media can be effective. Alumni often share success stories that inspire new students. For example, an alumni video showing how a university degree helped them get a good job can motivate others to apply.

Although existing studies acknowledge the value of student participation, user-generated content, influencers, and alumni involvement in university social media marketing, most research focuses on institutions in developed countries and largely examines these strategies from a marketing performance perspective. There is limited empirical research that explores how these participatory strategies function within rural-based universities in South Africa, where students' access to digital resources, cultural contexts, and institutional support structures differ significantly. In addition, the voices of students themselves are often underrepresented in the literature, despite their central role in content creation and engagement. This study addressed the gap by focusing on the University of Venda and adopting a qualitative approach that captured the lived experiences and perspectives of students, lecturers, and marketing staff. By examining student participation and user-generated content in a rural context, the study provided nuanced, context-specific insights into how participatory social media strategies can be effectively implemented in under-researched higher education settings.

2.5.6 Training university staff and monitoring social media performance

Even though social media platforms are popular and easy to use, managing them for marketing purposes requires specific skills. This is why it is important for universities to train their staff on how to use social media effectively. According to a study by Gwala (2020), many universities in South Africa still struggle to keep up with social media trends because their marketing staff are not well trained in digital communication. This problem is also seen in other countries. For example, a report by Harper and Lopez (2022) reveal that in some universities in Spain and Portugal, staff do not fully understand how to use social media tools to attract students or measure their results.

Training should include how to create engaging posts, how to respond to comments, and how to use analytics. Analytics is the process of looking at numbers and data to see what is working and what is not. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram provide tools that show how many people saw a post, clicked on a link, or left a comment. By using analytics, universities can understand what kind of content people like the most

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and when they are most active online. This information helps the university improve its posts and reach more students. According to Martins and Huang (2024), regular analysis helps universities save time and money by focusing only on what works.

2.6 SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION, POLICY, AND MONITORING

Social media has become a powerful communication and marketing tool for universities, but it also presents serious risks if not managed properly. Without firm policies and effective monitoring systems, these platforms can easily be abused, leading to reputational damage, misinformation, and ethical breaches. The rise of online harassment, fake accounts, and the spread of unverified information highlights the urgent need for universities to regulate how their social media platforms are used. Effective social media management, therefore, involves not only content creation and engagement but also the development of clear guidelines, continuous training, and systematic monitoring to ensure responsible use.

2.6.1 The need for regulation and policy development

Universities operate in a public and highly visible environment, which means that every post, comment, or interaction shared online can affect institutional reputation. The lack of social media regulation can result in misuse, such as unprofessional behaviour by staff, misinformation, or the inappropriate sharing of confidential information. According to Lewis (2021), several universities in the United Kingdom have faced controversies due to staff members posting offensive or inaccurate content online, which negatively affected public perception and trust. These incidents demonstrate that while social media can enhance visibility and engagement, it can also expose institutions to risk if there are no clear behavioural expectations or accountability mechanisms. Developing a social media policy is therefore a crucial step for universities. A well-defined policy outlines how social media should be used, what type of content is appropriate, and the consequences of policy violations. It sets standards for communication, professionalism, and ethical conduct. Such a policy should cover both official institutional accounts and personal accounts used by staff or students when they identify themselves as affiliated with the university. Clear policies ensure consistency in messaging, prevent reputational harm, and help maintain the integrity of the institution’s public image.

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Although existing studies extensively discuss the use of social media in university marketing, most focus on well-resourced institutions in developed countries and adopt a broad, quantitative perspective. There is limited context-specific, qualitative research that examines how social media marketing operates in rural-based universities in South Africa, where challenges such as digital inequality, limited resources, and infrastructural constraints are more pronounced. This study addressed this gap by focusing on the University of Venda and using semi-structured interviews and social media ethnography to capture in-depth perspectives from students, lecturers, and marketing staff. In doing so, the study provided contextually grounded insights into both the opportunities and constraints of social media marketing in a rural higher education setting.

2.6.2 Policy implementation and staff training

Having a policy alone is not sufficient; implementation and regular staff training are equally important. Social media is dynamic and constantly evolving, requiring universities to regularly update their guidelines. As Chen and Davies (2023) point out, platforms that were once dominant, such as Facebook, are being overtaken by newer ones like Instagram and TikTok, particularly among younger audiences. Universities must adapt to these changes by reviewing their communication strategies and ensuring that staff understand how to use emerging platforms effectively and responsibly.

Training programmes should include guidance on tone, confidentiality, fact-checking, and how to handle sensitive issues. Staff should be encouraged to separate personal opinions from institutional communication and to avoid posting anything that could be interpreted as discriminatory or unprofessional. Importantly, training should also cover how to manage negative feedback. When students or members of the public post critical comments, staff should respond respectfully, address concerns, and demonstrate transparency. Ignoring or deleting negative feedback can damage trust, whereas responding thoughtfully can enhance the institution’s reputation and show accountability.

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2.6.3 Monitoring and accountability mechanisms

Continuous monitoring of university social media accounts is essential to ensure that policies are followed and that communication remains aligned with institutional values. Monitoring helps identify potential problems early, such as the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, or the misuse of official logos and branding. Universities can assign a dedicated digital communication team responsible for overseeing official accounts, approving posts, and managing interactions. This team can also ensure that branding guidelines are adhered to and that communication maintains a professional and inclusive tone. In addition, universities should adopt technological tools for social media analytics and monitoring. These tools help track engagement, sentiment, and public perception, providing valuable insights for improving communication strategies. They also help detect trends or problematic content that might require attention. Regular reporting and evaluation ensure that universities remain proactive rather than reactive in managing their online presence.

2.6.4 Ethical and legal considerations

Social media regulation is not only about maintaining professionalism, but also about adhering to legal and ethical standards. Universities must comply with data protection laws, copyright regulations, and privacy policies. Sharing personal information, photos, or videos without consent can lead to legal liabilities. Moreover, the increasing use of social media for data collection, recruitment, and marketing requires institutions to act responsibly and transparently. Ethical communication builds credibility and demonstrates respect for all stakeholders. Universities should establish codes of conduct that address issues such as hate speech, online harassment, and academic integrity in digital spaces. The policy should make it clear that discriminatory or harmful online behaviour by staff or students will not be tolerated and will lead to disciplinary action. By embedding ethical principles into their digital governance structures, universities create a safer and more respectful online environment.

The digital environment evolves rapidly, and social media trends change frequently. Universities must stay updated on new technologies, platform features, and user preferences. For example, short-form video content has become increasingly popular among students, shifting marketing priorities toward platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels. To remain relevant, universities should periodically review their

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strategies, train staff in emerging tools, and encourage innovation in content creation. However, staying updated also involves being responsive to crises or incidents. In the event of negative publicity, fake news, or online backlash, having a crisis communication plan is essential. This plan should outline how to respond quickly, who should speak on behalf of the institution, and what steps should be taken to correct misinformation. Swift, transparent, and empathetic communication can prevent further damage and reinforce public trust.

Ethical and legal considerations in social media use extend beyond maintaining professionalism to ensuring compliance with relevant laws and ethical standards. Universities are required to adhere to data protection legislation, copyright laws, and privacy policies when using social media for communication and marketing. The sharing of personal information, images, or videos without informed consent may expose institutions to legal risks and reputational damage. As social media is increasingly used for recruitment, engagement, and data collection, universities are expected to act transparently and responsibly. Ethical communication enhances institutional credibility and demonstrates respect for all stakeholders.

To promote responsible online behaviour, universities should establish clear social media policies and codes of conduct. These should address issues such as hate speech, online harassment, discrimination, and academic integrity in digital spaces. Clear guidelines help ensure that staff and students understand acceptable online behaviour and the consequences of violations. Embedding ethical principles within digital governance structures contributes to the creation of a safe, inclusive, and respectful online environment.

Given the rapidly evolving digital landscape, universities must also remain responsive to changes in social media trends, technologies, and user preferences. The growing popularity of short-form video content, for example, has shifted marketing focus toward platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels. To remain relevant, institutions should regularly review their social media strategies, provide ongoing staff training, and encourage innovation. In addition, universities should have crisis communication plans to address negative publicity, misinformation, or online backlash. Timely, transparent, and empathetic responses are critical in managing crises and maintaining public trust.

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2.7 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN UNIVERSITY MARKETING

Social media has transformed how universities communicate, market their services, and engage with various stakeholders. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly X), LinkedIn, and TikTok have made it easier for institutions to promote their academic programmes, share updates, and strengthen their brand identity. However, while these platforms offer numerous benefits, they also present challenges and limitations that must be acknowledged. Understanding both the strengths and weaknesses of social media use in higher education will assist universities to design more balanced and effective marketing strategies.

2.7.1 Strengths of social media in university marketing

One of the major strengths of social media lies in its widespread accessibility and immediacy. Universities can reach a large audience in real time, including prospective and current students, alumni, parents, and the general public. According to Smith and Patel (2021), a global study reveals that over 80% of university students check their social media accounts daily, allowing institutions to communicate important updates, event reminders, and academic announcements quickly and efficiently. This immediacy makes social media an essential communication tool in modern education.

Another significant advantage is cost-effectiveness. Unlike traditional marketing methods such as print advertising, television, and radio campaigns, social media platforms enable universities to promote their services at a fraction of the cost. Institutions can design campaigns, post updates, and interact with users without the high expenses associated with conventional media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). This has been especially beneficial for universities in the global south, where marketing budgets are often limited but the need for visibility is high.

Social media also enhances student engagement and participation. Through interactive posts, live streaming, comment sections, and polls, students can communicate directly with the university and feel part of an active community. This two-way communication strengthens institutional identity and fosters a sense of belonging. Also, platforms like LinkedIn provide professional networking opportunities, helping universities build stronger relationships with graduates and industry partners.

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The use of TikTok and Instagram Reels further supports creative engagement, allowing universities to connect with younger audiences through visual storytelling. A further strength of social media is its data analytics capability. Platforms provide universities with insights into audience behaviour, engagement levels, and reach. This data allows marketing teams to track the effectiveness of campaigns, understand audience preferences, and make evidence-based adjustments to communication strategies. As noted by Nyumba and Mulyungi (2021), data-driven marketing in higher education contributes to more targeted and efficient resource allocation.

Although the literature highlights several strengths of social media in university marketing, most studies adopt a broad or international perspective and give limited attention to how these strengths are realised within rural-based universities in South Africa. There is a particular lack of empirical, qualitative evidence on how accessibility, cost-effectiveness, engagement, and data analytics are practically utilised in such contexts. This study addressed this gap by examining how these strengths were experienced and applied at the University of Venda. By focusing on a rural-based institution, the study provided context-specific insights into how social media strengths can be leveraged despite resource and infrastructural constraints.

2.7.2 Limitations of social media in university marketing

Despite these strengths, social media has several limitations that can hinder its effectiveness. A major challenge is digital inequality. Not all students have equal access to the internet, smartphones, or data. Kamara and Chikwe (2021) show that in Sierra Leone and other parts of the Global South, students in rural areas often face high data costs and poor network coverage, which limits their ability to access university content online. This creates a digital divide where some students benefit fully from online updates, while others remain excluded. Another significant limitation is the spread of misinformation. Because anyone can post or share content, false or misleading information about university events, admissions, or policies can easily circulate. Green and Morrison (2023) in the United Kingdom report that 17% of students receive incorrect information about university events from unverified social media sources. Such misinformation can damage the institution’s credibility and create confusion among stakeholders. Universities are therefore encouraged to verify their accounts and clearly identify official communication channels.

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Privacy and data security are also major concerns. Social media platforms collect large amounts of user data, raising questions about how this information is stored, used, and protected. Universities must ensure compliance with data protection regulations and maintain ethical standards when using student information for marketing or engagement purposes. Inadequate data management can lead to reputational harm and legal complications. Another limitation relates to information overload. Because social media users are constantly exposed to large amounts of content, university posts can easily be overlooked. The fast-paced and competitive nature of digital platforms means that marketing teams must continually produce fresh, engaging content to capture attention. This requires time, creativity, and skilled personnel, which can strain university resources. Excessive reliance on social media can reduce the effectiveness of traditional communication methods that still play an important role, particularly in rural or resource-limited settings. Print materials, radio, and community outreach remain vital in reaching audiences without reliable internet access. Therefore, universities should adopt a hybrid marketing approach that combines digital and traditional strategies to ensure inclusivity and comprehensive coverage.

The literature reveals a gap in context-specific studies that examine social media marketing within rural-based universities in the Global South, particularly in South Africa. While existing studies focus largely on digital inequality, misinformation, and privacy concerns, they often overlook how these challenges are experienced and managed at institutional level. This study addressed this gap by exploring social media marketing practices at the University of Venda, a rural-based university, using qualitative methods. By capturing the perspectives of students, lecturers, and marketing staff, the study provided in-depth, contextually grounded insights into both the limitations and practical ways of improving social media marketing in such settings.

2.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined what scholarly literature reveals about how institutions in general and specifically universities use social media to promote their events and services. The chapter began by defining a literature review. Also, the literature review shows where there are gaps in knowledge and helps support the current study with facts and examples from other countries. Studies from the global north and the global south show that students feel more involved when universities use social media

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effectively (Mensah & Tetteh, 2023). Social media, to a certain extent, also assists students in rural areas or with limited internet access to stay connected. This chapter also highlighted the limitations and challenges of social media like misinformation, poor internet access, and information overload. It should be noted that, not all students have the same access to technology, so universities must also use other communication methods like SMS or printed notices (Dwivedi, Shareef, Simintiras & Weerakkody, 2021).

The chapter further discussed the two main theories guiding this study, namely, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT). TAM helps explain why people choose to use or not use certain technologies based on how useful and easy they think the technology is. SMMT focuses on how organisations can use social media to build strong relationships with their audience. In this chapter, the researcher also provides the rationale for the selection of the two theories together, their strengths and limitations, and also how the two complement each other.

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CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

A theoretical framework is a structure that guides research by providing a clear understanding of key concepts, theories, and principles related to the research topic. It helps to explain the relationship between different variables and provides a basis for interpreting the research findings (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The framework is built on existing theories and ideas that support the study and form the foundation for analysis and conclusions. It also helps to justify why specific variables are chosen for study and how they are related. In this study, a theoretical framework can help explain how social media influences marketing, and how it can be effectively used to improve marketing strategies at the university. There are several theories that could support this study; however, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) are particularly deemed appropriate choices for this study.

3.2 TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is one of the most widely used models for understanding how people accept and use new technologies. It was developed by Fred Davis in 1989 and has been widely used in different sectors such as education, healthcare, business, and government (Dwivedi, Shareef, Simintiras & Weerakkody, 2021). The model is very useful when we want to study how individuals decide whether or not to use a particular technology. In the case of universities using social media for marketing, TAM helps us understand why some people are willing to use social media platforms while others are not.

TAM is based on two main ideas. The first idea is called perceived usefulness (Dwivedi, Shareef, Simintiras & Weerakkody, 2021)). This means how much a person believes that using a certain technology will help them do their work better or faster. The second idea is called perceived ease of use, which means how much a person believes that using the technology will be simple and not require too much effort. If people think that a technology is useful and easy to use, they are more likely to use it.

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3.2.1 Perceived usefulness in university marketing

Perceived usefulness is especially important in university marketing. When university personnel believe that using social media assists them reach more students and stakeholders effectively, they will see it as a valuable tool. Social media can allow universities to advertise academic programmes, public lectures, open days, and achievements. This is faster and sometimes more affordable than using traditional media like newspapers or radio. Research by Dwivedi et al. (2021) show that digital tools, especially social media, offer real-time communication, which is highly valued by institutions. When universities use social media platforms to respond to student queries or update information instantly, students and parents may feel that the university is active, modern, and responsive.

A study by Ahmad and Hashim (2020) in Malaysia revealed that when lecturers saw clear results from their posts, such as high engagement, increased student participation, or positive feedback, they considered social media to be useful for academic and marketing purposes. This supports the idea in TAM that perceived usefulness is directly connected to a person's intention to use technology. In the context of universities, social media is used for many purposes, including promoting events, sharing news, recruiting new students, and building the institution's image. However, for social media to be effective, it must be accepted and used by students, academic staff, administrative staff, and even external stakeholders.

3.2.2 Social media marketing theory

Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) is about how organisations use social media in a planned way to reach their goals, specifically in marketing. It helps them create awareness about their brand, connect with people, and build long-term relationships with their audience (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This theory sees social media not just as a tool for sharing information, but as a space where people and organisations can talk to each other, ask questions, give feedback, and build trust.

In today's world, social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly X), LinkedIn, and TikTok are very popular. People use these platforms every day to communicate, share ideas, and follow the news. For institutions like universities, social media gives them a chance to talk to students, parents, staff, and the general public.

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This is where Social Media Marketing Theory becomes important. It explains how institutions can use social media platforms effectively to connect with people and promote their services (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social Media Marketing Theory is therefore deemed relevant for this study. Universities have to be seen as welcoming, reputable, reliable, and excellent places to study. To do this, they need to reach out to all their stakeholders, including young people who are thinking of registering with such a program and going to university. Social media is one of the best ways to do this because many young people use it every day. The SMT can provide a standard on how universities can design messages and posts that speak directly to potential students and help them feel connected to the institution.

According to Felix, Rauschnabel, and Hinsch (2017), successful social media marketing involves understanding your audience, creating interesting content, and being consistent. When the university posts news updates, important dates, academic achievements, and campus events, it is not just giving out information it is building a relationship with its audience. One of the key principles of Social Media Marketing Theory is engagement. Engagement means more than just liking or sharing a post. It means real communication, asking questions, giving opinions, joining conversations, and forming relationships. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that social media works best when it allows for two-way communication. This means a university should not only speak to people but must also listen to and respond to them. For example, if a student asks a question about registration or fees on Facebook, and the university responds quickly and clearly, that student feels valued. When many students experience the same thing, they start to trust the university more. Trust leads to loyalty, and loyal students are more likely to recommend the university to others. Recent studies have also confirmed the importance of engagement. Alalwan (2020) established that customers who regularly engage with brands on social media develop stronger trust and loyalty. This means that if universities keep their audience engaged, positive word-of-mouth and a stronger brand identity may result. Students will also feel more involved and connected to the institutions, which can lead to higher satisfaction and better student retention rates.

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Social media is dynamic. Platforms keep updating their features, and new trends keep appearing. Universities need to stay updated so that they can use the latest tools to reach their audience effectively. Social Media Marketing Theory allows for flexibility and innovation, and this makes it easier for institutions to keep up with changes.

According to Tuten and Solomon (2020), institutions must use data from social media to understand what their audience like and dislike. By analysing likes, shares, and comments, universities can see which types of content work best. For example, videos showing campus life or interviews with successful alumni often get a lot of engagement. This information helps universities improve their content and connect better with their audience. Live videos, reels, stories, and interactive polls are now very popular on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. These tools give universities a fun and engaging way to talk to students. Using SMT principles, universities can plan how and when to use these tools to share their message. It can also involve students in creating content, thereby increasing participation and building a sense of ownership. Hossain et al. (2023) note that user-generated content (UGC), such as student testimonials or campus life videos created by students, significantly increases trust and interest in a university. This shows that SMT is not just about what the university says, but also about encouraging its community to speak on its behalf.

SMT encourages creative planning to make sure messages remain engaging. Another challenge is managing negative feedback. On social media, people can easily share complaints. SMT advises organisations to respond to such feedback professionally and quickly. A good response to a complaint can even improve the institution's image. According to Chugh and Ruhi (2022), institutions that manage online criticism well are seen as more responsible and transparent.

Also, social media marketing requires time, skills, and money. SMT suggests that organisations should invest in staff training and in creating a clear social media strategy. Hiring a dedicated social media team or involving media students in social media campaigns can also help reduce pressure on university staff. Social Media Marketing Theory provides a clear framework for understanding and using social media for marketing. It shows that social media is not just a place to post adverts, but a platform for real communication and relationship-building.

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3.2.3 Rationale for combining technology acceptance model and social media marketing theory

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) were selected together because they address different but complementary dimensions of social media use in university marketing. TAM focuses on the individual-level adoption of technology (Dwivedi, Shareef, Simintiras & Weerakkody, 2021), and it explains why staff and students are willing or unwilling to use social media platforms based on perceived usefulness and ease of use. However, a key limitation of TAM is that it mainly explains acceptance and intention to use technology, while paying limited attention to broader organisational strategies, content creation, engagement, and relationship-building processes (Yang, 2021). It also does not adequately account for social, cultural, or marketing dynamics that influence how social media is used once adoption has occurred.

In contrast, Social Media Marketing Theory focuses on strategic communication, engagement, and relationship-building between institutions and their audiences (McQuail, 2019). Its limitation lies in assuming that users are already willing and able to use social media, without fully explaining the factors that influence initial acceptance or resistance to these platforms. By combining TAM and SMMT, this study bridges the gap between technology adoption and strategic marketing use, providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding both the acceptance and effective utilisation of social media in a university context.

3.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the theoretical framework guiding the study on the use of social media as a marketing tool in higher education, with specific reference to the University of Venda. The chapter explained the importance of theoretical frameworks in providing a structured foundation for understanding key concepts and relationships relevant to the research problem. Two main theories were discussed, namely the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT). TAM was used to explain the factors influencing the acceptance and use of social media technologies based on perceived usefulness and ease of use. SMMT, on the other hand, was used to explain how institutions strategically use social media to engage audiences, build relationships, and promote services. The integration of these two theories provided a

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comprehensive framework for understanding both the adoption and effective utilisation of social media in university marketing, thereby strengthening the analytical foundation of the study.

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CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the research design and methodology employed to investigate the use of social media as a marketing tool in institutions of higher learning at the University of Venda. It outlines the philosophical foundation guiding the study, the qualitative research design adopted, and the rationale for selecting specific methods of data collection and analysis. The chapter begins by introducing the interpretivist paradigm, which underpins the study's focus on understanding the subjective experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of students, staff, and marketing personnel regarding the use of social media in the universities' communication and branding efforts. The interpretivist approach is well-suited to exploring complex human behaviours and meanings within specific social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It allows the researcher to capture in-depth insights that quantitative methods may overlook. Following the research paradigm, the chapter details the qualitative design, study location, target population, and sampling techniques. This chapter also discusses ethical considerations and the measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

4.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm serves as an overarching philosophical framework that informs how researchers perceive reality (ontology), what they accept as knowledge (epistemology), and the methodological approaches they employ to investigate phenomena (Cresswell, 2020). It essentially represents a set of shared beliefs and practices that shape how scientific inquiry is conducted (Creswell, 2020). Understanding and selecting a suitable research paradigm is critical, as it underpins every aspect of the research process, from formulating research questions to data collection and interpretation. As highlighted by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), paradigms not only determine the nature of knowledge to be pursued, but also guide the researcher in choosing appropriate tools and strategies for data analysis.

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There are four widely recognised research paradigms in the social sciences: positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism, and critical realism (Davis & Roblyer, 2020). Each paradigm is rooted in distinct philosophical traditions and supports specific methodological choices. Positivism is grounded in the principles of the natural sciences and assumes that reality is objective, observable, and measurable (Bryman, 2018). Researchers adopting this paradigm aim to identify causal relationships through empirical evidence and statistical analysis, typically using quantitative methods. According to Collis and Hussey (2021), positivist research seeks to produce generalisable findings and often employs experiments or surveys with large sample sizes to enhance reliability and validity.

In contrast, interpretivism rejects the notion of an objective reality, asserting instead that reality is socially constructed and subjective. Interpretivist researchers strive to understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social phenomena (Creswell, 2020). This paradigm is particularly suitable for exploring complex human behaviours, experiences, and cultural contexts, often through qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and thematic analysis (Bryman, 2021). The interpretivist approach promotes rich, contextual understanding, making it ideal for studies that require depth rather than breadth (Tracy, 2020).

Pragmatism offers a more flexible and practical approach by embracing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, depending on what best addresses the research problem (Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2018). Pragmatists argue that the choice of methods should be driven by the research questions rather than by strict adherence to a particular philosophical stance (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). Morgan (2022) supports this view, and suggests that pragmatism bridges the divide between opposing paradigms and is particularly advantageous in applied research settings where real-world problem-solving is prioritised.

Critical realism posits that while reality exists independently of human perceptions, our understanding of it is inevitably influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts (Daniels, 2023). This paradigm seeks to uncover the underlying mechanisms and structures that shape observable events, and this is often through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Bhaskar (2020) and Danermark et al. (2022)

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argue that critical realism is especially suitable for studying complex social issues, as it allows researchers to explore both agency and structure.

4.2.1 Interpretivism

The research paradigm underpinning this study is interpretivism, as it provides a suitable philosophical framework for investigating the role of social media in enhancing marketing services at the University of Venda, the focus of the study. Interpretivism is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to explore human behaviour, subjective experiences, and the meanings individuals ascribe to social interactions within specific contexts (Cohen et al., 2018). This paradigm recognises that reality is socially constructed and that individuals understand and interpret the world around them in diverse ways. Given that the present study seeks to examine the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of students, university staff, and marketing personnel towards the use of social media in university marketing, consequently interpretivism offers an ideal lens through which to view the research problem.

A key reason for adopting an interpretivist paradigm is its emphasis on generating rich, nuanced, and detailed insights directly from the perspectives of participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Unlike positivist paradigms that prioritise objectivity and measurable variables, interpretivism values depth over breadth and focuses on the meanings that people attach to their lived experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2019). This is particularly relevant to the current research, which aims not to quantify social media usage but rather to understand the subjective views and attitudes of stakeholders towards its effectiveness as a marketing tool. Interpretivism facilitates the exploration of personal and collective narratives, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of social media's role in the academic marketing landscape.

The research methodology chosen under the interpretivist paradigm is qualitative in nature, relying on methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. These data collection methods are well-aligned with interpretivist assumptions because they allow participants to express their thoughts, experiences, and opinions freely, without being confined by rigid survey structures. Through these interactions, the researcher can probe deeper into the participants' reasoning, attitudes, and interpretations, which may reveal underlying factors influencing their

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engagement with social media platforms. Denzin and Lincoln (2019) argue that qualitative research within the interpretivist tradition is essential for gaining contextual and situational knowledge that cannot be captured through quantitative approaches alone.

Another advantage of the interpretivist paradigm is its recognition of multiple realities and diverse interpretations of the same phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2019). In the context of this study, students, administrative staff, and marketing professionals may have varied, and sometimes conflicting, views on the effectiveness of social media in disseminating university information and promoting institutional identity. For example, some students may find social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram helpful for receiving timely university updates, while others may perceive them as disorganised or irrelevant. Marketing staff might view social media as a cost-effective and powerful communication channel, yet still encounter challenges such as limited digital skills, budget constraints, or institutional bureaucracy. In adopting an interpretivist stance, the research embraces these differences rather than seeking to eliminate them, thus enabling a more authentic and inclusive portrayal of the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2019).

The interpretivist paradigm aligns well with the intended method of data analysis, namely, thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an established technique within qualitative research that involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2017). It enables the researcher to move beyond mere description and begin to explain the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations that participants use when talking about social media and university marketing. The iterative and flexible nature of thematic analysis complements the interpretivist focus on depth and context, allowing the researcher to revise and refine emerging themes as deeper insights are uncovered during analysis. This analytical approach ensures that participants' voices are represented accurately, and that the resulting themes reflect the lived experiences of those involved in or affected by university marketing efforts.

The interpretivist paradigm permits the consideration of socio-cultural and institutional factors that may influence social media practices at institutions of higher education, such as the University of Venda, in the context of the study. These may include

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language preferences, digital literacy levels, access to technology, and organisational policies regarding communication. Understanding how these contextual elements shape the use and perception of social media marketing is essential for formulating meaningful and sustainable strategies. By engaging with participants through a culturally sensitive and dialogic process, the researcher can better appreciate the unique challenges and opportunities faced by the university in its effort to modernise its marketing approach.

Interpretivism supports reflexivity, which requires the researcher to remain aware of their own values, assumptions, and potential influence on the research process (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). In studies involving interpretive inquiry, the researcher is not seen as a detached observer, but rather as an active participant who co-constructs meaning with the respondents (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This self-awareness enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in the participants' experiences rather than being imposed by the researcher’s biases.

The choice of interpretivism as the guiding research paradigm is both deliberate and justified. Its emphasis on understanding subjective meanings, accommodating multiple realities, and exploring social contexts, and provides a strong foundation for investigating how social media can be utilised more effectively for marketing purposes at the University of Venda. By using qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews for data collection, combined with thematic analysis in data analysis, the study yielded in-depth insights into the diverse experiences and perspectives of university stakeholders. Ultimately, the interpretivist paradigm enhances the relevance, richness, and applicability of the research findings in addressing the complex dynamics of digital communication in higher education.

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate for exploring and interpreting individuals’ perspectives, experiences, and attitudes in depth (Creswell, 2020). A qualitative approach is concerned with understanding social phenomena from the viewpoint of participants, focusing on meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences within specific contexts. In this study, the qualitative approach was suitable because it enabled the researcher to examine how social

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media is utilised by students and staff at the University of Venda, as well as how these users perceive its effectiveness, challenges, and potential for improving communication and marketing practices.

The qualitative approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding human behaviour through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). This approach allowed the researcher to explore behavioural patterns, motivations, and contextual dynamics related to social media use, which could not be adequately captured through quantitative methods. By engaging participants through semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to probe deeper into their lived experiences and generate rich, descriptive data.

4.3.1 Research design

Within the qualitative research approach, this study employed a case study research design, focusing specifically on the University of Venda as the unit of analysis. The case study design was appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system within its real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021). This design enabled the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of how social media is used within a specific institutional setting, taking into account contextual factors such as institutional culture, digital literacy, and access to technology.

The flexibility of the qualitative case study design permitted the emergence of unexpected themes and patterns during data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021). This adaptability is particularly important when investigating a dynamic and evolving phenomenon such as social media, where usage trends and technological platforms are constantly changing. Furthermore, the design supports a holistic understanding of the phenomenon by examining not only what is happening, but also why it is happening and how it is experienced by different stakeholders (Flick, 2020).

Another strength of this design lies in its capacity to provide a platform for participants to express their views authentically. This aligns with the principles of qualitative inquiry, which prioritise participants' voices and seek to minimise researcher bias by allowing findings to emerge from the data (Silverman, 2021). As such, the research design enabled the study to capture the realities and expectations of both students and staff

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regarding the role of social media in university communication and marketing. The combination of a qualitative research approach and a case study design allowed the study to generate in-depth, contextually grounded insights into the use of social media at the University of Venda, thereby addressing the research objectives effectively.

4.4 STUDY LOCATION

This study was conducted at the University of Venda, situated in Thohoyandou within the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The university was purposefully selected as the research site based on its relevance to the research problem and its suitability as a case for examining the use of social media as a marketing tool in higher education. The institution accommodates a large and diverse population of students, as well as academic and administrative staff who interact with institutional communication and marketing systems on a regular basis. This makes it an appropriate setting for generating empirical insights into how social media is used and experienced within a university environment.

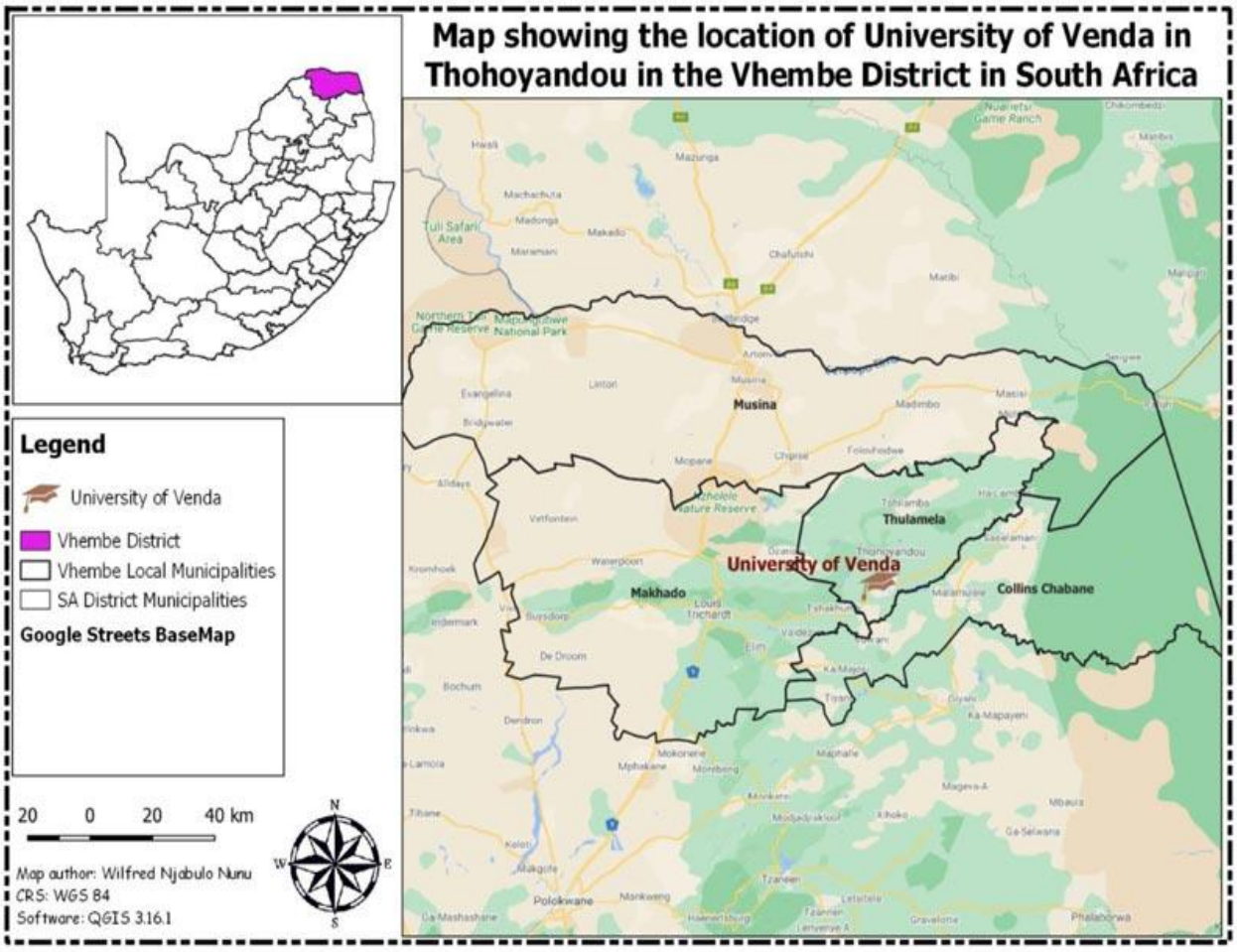
The selection of the University of Venda is further justified by its institutional characteristics, which reflect both opportunities and challenges associated with higher education marketing. Established in 1982, the university is recognised for promoting inclusive access to tertiary education, particularly for students from historically disadvantaged and underserved communities (Makgopa & Moeng, 2020). This demographic profile is significant for the study because it allows for the examination of how marketing strategies, including social media, function in contexts where students may have varying levels of digital access, literacy, and engagement. In addition, the University of Venda provides a context where both traditional and digital marketing methods are actively used, making it suitable for analysing the integration of these approaches. The institution's communication environment presents observable challenges, such as delays in information dissemination, uneven access to digital platforms, and varying levels of engagement with official communication channels. These conditions offer a practical basis for investigating the effectiveness of social media in addressing communication gaps and improving stakeholder engagement within the university.

The choice of this institution is also supported by the need to generate context-specific knowledge. While South Africa has multiple universities, many existing studies on

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higher education marketing tend to focus on well-resourced, urban institutions. By selecting the University of Venda, the study responds to a gap in empirical research by focusing on a setting that presents distinct structural and communicative dynamics. This enables the study to contribute nuanced insights into how social media marketing operates within such an institutional context and how it can be improved. The accessibility of the research site and the researcher's familiarity with the institutional environment facilitated effective data collection and participant engagement. Therefore, the selection of the University of Venda is not only contextually relevant but also methodologically justified, as it provides a suitable and information-rich setting for addressing the research objectives (Kekana & Baloyi, 2021; Letseka & Maile, 2018; KPMG, 2021).

Figure 4.1: Map showing location of the University of Venda



(Source: Vhembe District IDP 2023-2026)

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4.5 TARGET POPULATION

The target population for this study comprised students, staff members, and marketing personnel at the University of Venda. These groups were purposively selected because of their direct involvement with the university's social media platforms and their participation in marketing-related activities. Each group plays a unique role in both the creation and reception of the university's digital communication strategies, thereby offering valuable insights into their effectiveness, challenges, and areas for improvement.

Students represent the largest and most active audience of the university's marketing efforts. This category includes undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time, and full-time students. Undergraduate students often rely on social media to access information about registration, academic timetables, events, and campus activities (Gwala, 2020). Postgraduate students, on the other hand, frequently use social media for research updates, academic networking, and professional development opportunities (Harper & Lopez, 2022). Part-time students tend to engage more through digital platforms because of limited on-campus presence, making them a critical group for assessing the accessibility and inclusiveness of university communication (Parker & Singh, 2023). Full-time students, meanwhile, interact regularly with online marketing content, giving them direct exposure to the university's ongoing campaigns. Collectively, these student subgroups provide diverse perspectives on how effectively the university's social media communication addresses their distinct academic and social needs.

Staff members constituted another key group and included academic, administrative, and support (labourer) personnel. Academic staff, such as lecturers and researchers, are often involved in promoting departmental activities, research outputs, and academic programmes through social media. Their insights revealed how effectively marketing efforts align with the institution's teaching and research goals. Administrative staff, such as officers in student affairs, admissions, and finance, engage with social media as part of service delivery, information dissemination, and internal communication. Their experiences helped assess how social media supports operational efficiency and stakeholder engagement. Labourers or general support staff, though less involved in content creation, are nonetheless recipients of institutional communication. Their perspectives can provide important information on

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whether social media strategies are inclusive and whether internal communication reaches all levels of the university community.

Marketing personnel form the third group and are directly responsible for designing, executing, and evaluating the university's marketing strategies. This category includes staff from the Marketing and Communications Directorate, social media managers, public relations officers, and individuals who oversee branding and media relations. Their role involves setting strategic objectives, managing institutional reputation, monitoring engagement analytics, and ensuring message consistency across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (X), LinkedIn, TikTok, and the university's official website. These individuals possess expert knowledge of marketing practices, making their inclusion crucial for understanding not only how strategies are implemented, but also how feedback from students and staff informs future campaigns.

By involving these three main groups and their subcategories, the study covers a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the university's marketing ecosystem. It captured perspectives from both the senders (marketing personnel and staff) and the receivers (students), which supports data triangulation and enhances the reliability and validity of the findings (Saunders et al., 2019). The diversity within this population reflects the multiple layers of interaction within the university, and this allows the study to explore how social media marketing affects various stakeholders differently. The selection of this target population is further justified by the growing emphasis on stakeholder engagement in higher education marketing. Universities in South Africa, as in many parts of the world, increasingly use social media platforms not only for promotion but also for two-way communication, community building, and service delivery. Engaging students, staff, and marketing personnel as participants ensures a holistic examination of how digital communication influences perceptions, participation, and institutional reputation.

4.6 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

This study employed purposive sampling as the primary technique to select participants who possess specific knowledge, experience, or involvement related to the research topic. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, is widely recognised in qualitative research for its strategic approach in

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choosing individuals who can provide rich and relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015). This technique was deemed appropriate because the study required participants who are actively engaged with or affected by the use of social media within the university context. Therefore, participants were not selected randomly but based on clearly defined criteria aligned with the research objectives, ensuring that only information-rich cases were included.

The study population comprised members of the university community, specifically drawn from three principal groups: students, academic staff, and administrative staff. These categories were selected because of their direct interaction with institutional communication and marketing processes. However, within these groups, specific inclusion criteria were applied. Student participants were required to be registered at the university and actively using at least one social media platform associated with institutional communication. Academic staff were selected based on their involvement in teaching, student communication, or departmental dissemination of information. Administrative staff were chosen from departments directly linked to communication, marketing, or student services. Participants who did not actively engage with university communication platforms or lacked relevant experience with social media use were excluded to maintain the relevance and quality of the data.

A total of 15 participants was purposively selected from these groups to participate in individual interviews. The sample size aligns with recommendations from qualitative research methodology literature, which suggests that smaller, carefully selected samples are effective for generating detailed and nuanced insights (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). The selection ensured representation across the three categories, allowing the study to capture diverse but relevant perspectives rather than assuming homogeneity within the university population. Data saturation was used as a guiding principle, whereby sampling continued until no new themes or insights emerged (Saunders et al., 2018). This confirms that the chosen sample size was sufficient to achieve depth and completeness in the findings.

Purposive sampling also facilitated in-depth engagement with participants, allowing flexibility in exploring individual experiences and viewpoints through semi-structured interviews. This approach enabled the researcher to probe responses and obtain detailed explanations regarding how social media is used, perceived, and experienced

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within the institution (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The deliberate selection of participants ensured that the data collected was not only relevant but also reflective of real experiences within the institutional setting.

Purposive sampling was particularly suitable for this study due to the structured nature of the university environment, where individuals occupy distinct roles with varying levels of interaction with social media and institutional communication systems (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). By selecting participants based on their roles and experiences, the study avoided the limitations associated with random or convenience sampling, such as the inclusion of participants with limited or no relevant knowledge. While alternative methods such as quota sampling could have ensured proportional representation, purposive sampling was more appropriate for identifying participants with specific expertise and experiences aligned with the study objectives.

In recent years, purposive sampling has been increasingly applied in studies addressing complex social and organisational issues, particularly where understanding the subjective experiences of different stakeholders is essential (Robinson, 2021; Smith & Noble, 2022). Its application in this study therefore enhances the credibility, relevance, and depth of the findings by ensuring that participants were deliberately selected based on their ability to provide meaningful insights into the use of social media within the university context.

4.7 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The primary data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews (herein also referred to as interviews) are a widely accepted qualitative research technique that enables the researcher to collect rich, detailed data by engaging participants in guided but flexible conversations (Bryman, 2018). This method allows for a combination of pre-determined questions and the opportunity to explore emerging topics through follow-up queries, thus providing deeper insights into the participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes.

In the context of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing personnel, as well as with students and staff members, to gather comprehensive perspectives on the use of social media for marketing purposes. The inclusion of marketing professionals aimed to uncover the practical challenges and successes

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encountered in implementing social media strategies. Their insights provided an operational understanding of the tools, tactics, and platforms utilised, as well as the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in engaging target audiences.

Simultaneously, interviewing students and staff afforded the researcher a broader view of the user experience and reception of the university's social media platforms. This approach recognises that effective social media marketing is not solely dependent on the strategies devised by marketers, but also on how these efforts are perceived and engaged with by the intended audience (Robinson, 2021). By capturing the experiences and opinions of these two distinct groups, the study offers a holistic understanding of social media's role within the university setting.

The flexibility inherent in semi-structured interviews is particularly advantageous when dealing with complex social phenomena such as social media marketing. Unlike structured interviews or surveys, semi-structured interviews provide room for participants to express their thoughts more freely, facilitating the emergence of unexpected themes and insights (Qu & Dumay, 2011). This adaptability is crucial when exploring areas where participants' experiences may vary widely or where new issues may arise during the data collection process. The use of semi-structured interviews aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding human behaviour and social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). By engaging participants in meaningful dialogue, the researcher was able to capture the nuances and complexities of their social media experiences that would likely be missed by purely quantitative methods.

4.7.1 Digital ethnography

In addition to semi-structured interviews, digital ethnography also referred to as social media ethnography was employed to observe and analyse the actual activities on the university's social media platforms. Digital ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves studying online communities, content, and interactions to understand social behaviours, cultural practices, and communication patterns in a digital context (Murthy, 2008; Pink et al., 2016). By observing posts, comments, likes, shares, and overall engagement on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok, the researcher can gather objective evidence of how marketing content is received and interacted with. This method complemented the semi-structured

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interviews by capturing the practical, real-world behaviours of users, which may differ from what participants report in interviews. For instance, while an interviewee described a post as engaging, ethnographic observation could verify the actual level of interaction and participation. Digital ethnography also assisted in enabling the identification of trends, patterns, and challenges in social media communication that might not have emerged through self-reporting alone (Pink et al., 2016). By combining semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography, the study achieved triangulation, enhancing the validity and depth of the findings. Interviews usually provide subjective insights into perceptions and attitudes, while social media ethnography offers objective observations of online behaviour. Together, these methods ensured a holistic understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of social media marketing strategies at the University of Venda.

4.8 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected during the research was subjected to rigorous analysis through the application of thematic analysis, a widely recognised qualitative analytical approach. Thematic analysis was particularly suitable for this study as it allowed for the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of patterns and themes that emerge from participants' responses (Clarke and Braun, 2017). This method facilitates an in-depth understanding of the complex qualitative data by breaking down interview transcripts into meaningful units of information, which can then be coded and categorised into overarching themes that capture the essence of the participants' perspectives.

Thematic analysis involves several key stages. Initially, the researcher immersed himself in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain familiarity and a holistic view of the information. This repeated engagement with the data was essential for ensuring that subtle nuances and latent meanings within the participants' accounts were not overlooked. Following this familiarisation phase, the researcher generated initial codes that succinctly labelled significant features of the data relevant to the research questions. These codes serve as the foundational building blocks for theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

When coding was complete, the researcher engaged in a rigorous review process to collate codes into potential themes, which were then examined for coherence,

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consistency, and distinctiveness. Themes be refined by revisiting the data to ensure that they accurately reflect the participants lived experiences and the research objectives. For instance, key themes that included the effectiveness of social media as a communication tool, the challenges faced by users in navigating digital platforms, and participants' recommendations for enhancing social media use. This phase was iterative and involved combining, splitting, or discarding themes to maintain clarity and depth of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Thematic analysis is advantageous for its flexibility and adaptability across a range of research contexts (Nowell et al., 2017). It does not require adherence to a particular theoretical framework, which allowed the researcher to interpret data in a way that is grounded in the participants' realities. This inductive approach is particularly valuable in exploratory studies where the aim is to generate rich, descriptive insights rather than test preconceived hypotheses (Nowell et al., 2017).

To enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of the data analysis, the researcher employed strategies such as peer debriefing and member checking. Peer debriefing involves discussing emerging themes and interpretations with fellow researchers or supervisors to challenge biases and assumptions, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking, on the other hand, entails sharing the preliminary findings with participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the themes identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such validation techniques are essential to ensure that the analysis remains true to the participants' intended meanings and to avoid researcher imposition.

It is also crucial to acknowledge potential challenges inherent in thematic analysis. One such challenge was the risk of oversimplification, where complex and context-specific experiences could be reduced to broad themes, potentially losing important subtleties (Braun and Clarke, 2022). To mitigate this, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the analysis process, documenting decisions, reflections, and emerging questions. Reflexivity encourages the researcher to remain critically aware of their influence on data interpretation and to actively consider alternative perspectives (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Given the rapid evolution of social media platforms and digital communication technologies, it is imperative that the data analysis process remains sensitive to the

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dynamic and context-dependent nature of participants' experiences. Recent studies highlight the importance of capturing not only the content but also the affective and relational dimensions of social media use (Huang et al., 2022; Smith and Anderson, 2021). Therefore, the researcher paid particular attention to emotional expressions, interpersonal interactions, and the sociocultural context embedded within participants' narratives.

Thematic analysis offered a robust and flexible framework for analysing qualitative data in this study. By systematically identifying and interpreting patterns within the interview transcripts, the researcher aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of social media, the challenges encountered by users, and possible avenues for improvement. Through careful coding, theme development, and validation strategies, the analysis will strive to produce trustworthy and meaningful findings that can inform both academic discourse and practical interventions.

4.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research is fundamental to establishing the credibility and reliability of the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unlike quantitative research, where validity and reliability are often demonstrated through statistical measures, qualitative research relies on different criteria to assess the quality and rigour of the inquiry. Trustworthiness encompasses several interrelated concepts including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, all of which contribute to the overall integrity of the research process and outcomes, which will be addressed in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.9.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the data and the interpretations drawn from it (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). To enhance credibility in this study, multiple strategies were employed. Prolonged engagement with participants was ensured through in-depth interviews, allowing the researcher to build rapport and obtain rich, detailed data. This extensive interaction helped foster trust and encourages participants to share more nuanced and authentic experiences. Triangulation was applied by comparing data from different sources, such as interviews and possibly observational notes, to cross-validate findings. Triangulation

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reduces the likelihood of researcher bias and enhances the depth and breadth of understanding (Fusch et al., 2018). Also, member checking was utilised, whereby preliminary interpretations and themes were shared with participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences. This collaborative process not only validates the findings but also empowers participants by involving them in the research process (Fusch et al., 2018).

4.9.2 Transferability

Transferability concerns the extent to which the findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts or settings (Kumar, 2019). Although qualitative studies are typically context-specific, providing thick, rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, and processes allows readers to assess the applicability of the findings to their own environments (Polit and Beck, 2021). In this study, detailed contextual information about the participants' demographics, social environment, and the particular characteristics of the social media platforms examined was provided. By furnishing such comprehensive descriptions, other researchers or practitioners may judge the relevance of the findings to similar populations or contexts, thereby enhancing the practical utility of the study.

4.9.3 Dependability

Dependability addresses the consistency and stability of the research process over time (Nowell et al., 2017). To promote dependability, the researcher maintained an audit trail documenting all phases of the research, including data collection procedures, coding frameworks, theme development, and reflexive notes. This transparent record enables external reviewers to trace the decision-making process and verify that the research methods were applied systematically and logically (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher engaged in peer debriefing sessions, presenting emerging themes and interpretations to colleagues and supervisors to obtain constructive feedback and challenge assumptions. Such critical scrutiny fostered methodological rigour and mitigated subjective bias.

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4.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants' responses rather than researcher predispositions or interests (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). To achieve confirmability, the researcher practised reflexivity by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the study. This journal documented personal reflections, methodological decisions, and potential biases that may influence data collection and analysis. Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research as it promotes self-awareness and transparency, allowing the researcher to critically evaluate their positionality and its impact on the study (Berger, 2015). Confirmability is supported by triangulation and member checking, which serve as checks on researcher subjectivity.

In addition to these core criteria, ethical considerations also underpin the trustworthiness of the study. Ethical conduct ensures that the research respects participants' rights, dignity, and confidentiality, thereby fostering an environment conducive to honest and open dialogue (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants, clearly outlining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. By upholding these ethical standards, the researcher promotes participant trust and facilitates the collection of genuine and meaningful data (Orb et al., 2001).

Recent scholarship emphasises the growing importance of incorporating digital reflexivity when conducting qualitative research in online or technologically mediated environments (Gray et al., 2021). Given that this study explores social media use, the researcher was attentive to the influence of digital contexts on participants' narratives and the analysis process. This included consideration of how platform-specific affordances, privacy concerns, and online identity management had the potential of shaping the data and interpretations. The trustworthiness of this study was achieved through deliberate and comprehensive strategies encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. By rigorously applying these principles, the research provided a credible, dependable, and ethically sound contribution to understanding the role and challenges of social media within the study context.

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4.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was guided by fundamental ethical research principles designed to protect the rights, dignity, and welfare of all participants. Ethical research practice is essential in ensuring that studies are carried out responsibly and that participants are not exposed to harm or undue pressure (Johnson & Christensen, L. (2020).). The researcher sought approval from the University of Venda's Research Ethics Committee before commencing data collection, demonstrating adherence to institutional and national ethical protocols. Ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, minimisation of harm, voluntary participation, and academic integrity will be prioritised throughout the research process.

4.10.1 Permission to conduct the study

Permission to conduct research involves acquiring authorisation from the appropriate institutions before initiating fieldwork. This is an essential first step that ensures the study is compliant with both legal and institutional ethical standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). In this study, the researcher formally applied for ethical clearance from the University of Venda. Approval was also sought from departmental heads and other relevant authorities within the university to access participants, including students, administrative staff, and marketing personnel. This step affirmed the legitimacy of the research and reinforced the commitment to conducting the study in an ethically sound and legally permissible manner. According to Flick (2020), obtaining gatekeeper approval also ensures respect for institutional autonomy and building trust with participants.

4.10.2 Informed consent

Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research and requires that participants are given comprehensive information about the study before agreeing to participate (Bryman, 2018). It includes clear explanations of the study’s purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the rights of participants, including the right to withdraw at any time. This study adopted a transparent approach by providing each participant with an information sheet and consent form. The researcher verbally explained the research process and allowed potential participants to ask questions before deciding whether to participate. Participants signed consent forms to indicate

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their voluntary agreement. This practice promotes respect for individual autonomy and aligns with recommendations from the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021) for ethical research conduct.

4.10.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are fundamental to protecting participants' privacy. Confidentiality refers to the secure handling of data and the commitment not to disclose participants' identities, while anonymity ensures that personal identifiers are removed or disguised (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). In this study, all data was treated with strict confidentiality. Real names and identifying details were not used in any reports or publications. Pseudonyms or unique codes were assigned to each participant, and all digital data was stored in encrypted, password-protected files. Paper documents were locked in secure storage accessible only to the researcher. According to Tracy (2020), protecting participants' identities not only upholds ethical standards but also fosters honest and open responses, particularly in qualitative studies.

4.10.4 Minimising harm

Researchers have an ethical duty to minimise any potential harm physical, emotional, or psychological that participants might face during the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2019). Harm may arise from the nature of the questions asked or the way findings are reported. This study avoided sensitive or invasive questions and was designed to ensure participants did not feel coerced or uncomfortable at any point. The interview schedule was carefully reviewed to avoid emotionally distressing content, and participants were reminded that they could skip any question they did not wish to answer. According to Israel (2022), anticipating and mitigating risks is critical in upholding the principle of non-maleficence. Should any participant experience discomfort, support mechanisms were available through university counselling services.

4.10.5 Voluntary participation and withdrawal rights

Voluntary participation is integral to ethical research and means that individuals take part by choice without any form of coercion (Cresswell, 2020). Participants must also

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be informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, with no negative consequences (McQuail, 2019). This study ensured that all participants were fully aware that their involvement was voluntary and that their decision to participate or withdraw did not affect them adversely in any way. Participants were not pressured into continuing if they feel uneasy. This ethical standard ensures respect for autonomy and aligns with the principles outlined by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2021).

4.10.6 Plagiarism and attribution

Academic integrity is a crucial aspect of ethical research, and plagiarism using another person's work without appropriate acknowledgment is considered a serious breach of this integrity. Attribution involves correctly citing sources to give credit to original authors (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). In this study, all literature, theories, data, and quotations were properly referenced using in-text citations and a complete reference list in accordance with the prescribed academic style. This practice not only avoids plagiarism but also strengthens the credibility and scholarly value of the research. As noted by Resnik (2021), ethical scholarship depends heavily on honest representation of intellectual property.

4.10.7 Data management and protection

In line with current data protection legislation such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the researcher ensured that all data is handled responsibly (Johnson & Christensen). Secure digital platforms were used for data storage, and only the researcher had access to the raw data. Data was retained only for the necessary duration and will be dispose securely after the research and related publications are done. According to Johnson and Christensen (2020), effective data protection not only ensures compliance with legal obligations but also builds participants' confidence in the research process.

4.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One limitation of the study was the sample size, which may not have represented the entire university population. However, the use of interviews in qualitative methods

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provided rich and detailed insights that were valuable for understanding the topic (Cresswell, 2020). The social media ethnography also supplemented the primary data collection method, namely, semi-structured interviews. Another limitation was that the study focused on only one university; therefore, the findings may not have been applicable to other institutions, depending on the classification of universities in South Africa or elsewhere. Nevertheless, the study shed light on the use of social media platforms at a university (as a higher education institution in the era of digital technology).

4.12 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology used to explore the role of social media as a tool for enhancing marketing services at the University of Venda. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, emphasising the subjective experiences and perspectives of stakeholders, which aligns with its qualitative research design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected students, academic staff, administrative personnel, and marketing professionals. This approach ensures rich, contextual insights into the use and perception of social media in university marketing. The research setting, the University of Venda, offers a rural-based and diverse environment that is ideal for examining institutional marketing challenges and opportunities. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, allowing for the identification and interpretation of patterns and meanings within participants' narratives (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The researcher also prioritised trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study supported by strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity. Ethical considerations were also central, with measures in place to ensure informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection. Despite limitations such as the sample size and single-site focus, the study contributed to generating in-depth, actionable insights into the strategic use of social media in higher education, particularly within under-resourced rural institutions. The next chapter presents the collected data.

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CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study on social media marketing at the University of Venda. The chapter focuses on understanding how social media can be used as a marketing tool at the University of Venda, to communicate with students, staff, and external stakeholders. The chapter further discusses the findings on how effective these platforms are in promoting university programmes, events, and achievements. Data collected from lecturers, marketing staff, and students were analysed to identify key themes, patterns, and insights. The discussion also highlights both the strengths and challenges of current social media practices, including the use of official platforms, personal or departmental initiatives, visibility of content, engagement, and communication strategies. Based on the findings of the study, this chapter also suggests strategies for improving social media marketing, such as staff training, content planning, interactivity, and feedback integration. The findings are linked to existing literature to show similarities or differences with previous studies. This chapter provides a clear understanding of how social media supports the university's communication, engagement, and marketing goals.

5.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS

This section outlines the biographical and demographic details of all categories of participants who took part in this study. The participants included lecturers, marketing staff, and students from different faculties and departments within the University of Venda. Information such as age, gender, years of experience, academic qualifications, and roles in the university is presented to provide context for understanding their perspectives and contributions to the study.

Table 5.1: Biographical Details of Participants

Participant	Participant ID	Years at University / Experience	Faculty/ Department /Role

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Lecturer	L1	12 years	Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture
Lecturer	L2	8 years	Faculty of Health Sciences
Lecturer	L3	15 years	Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law
Lecturer	L4	10 years	Faculty of Education
Lecturer	L5	7 years	Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education
Marketing Staff	M1	6 years	Marketing Coordinator
Marketing Staff	M2	5 years	Marketing Officer
Marketing Staff	M3	3 years	Communications Assistant
Marketing Staff	M4	7 years	Marketing Coordinator
Marketing Staff	M5	4 years	Social Media Manager
Student	S1	3 years	Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law – Business Administration
Student	S2	2 years	Faculty of Health Sciences – Nursing
Student	S3	4 years	Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture – Agricultural Science
Student	S4	1 year	Faculty of Education: Foundation Phase Teaching
Student	S5	5 years	Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture: Environmental Science

Table 5.1 above presents the biographical details of all participants in this study, including lecturers, marketing staff, and students at the University of Venda. In line with ethical principles, each participant is assigned a unique code, such as L1 for the first lecturer, M1 for the first marketing staff member, and S1 for the first student. The

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table indicates the number of years each participant has worked or studied at the university, along with their faculty, department, or role. Lecturers have between seven and fifteen years of experience and are drawn from faculties such as Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Faculty of Science, Engineering and Agriculture, Faculty of Health Sciences, and the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law. Marketing staff have three to seven years of experience and occupy roles including Social Media Manager and Marketing Coordinator. The s' group includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students, with study durations ranging from one to five years across faculties such as Education, Health Sciences, Science, Engineering, and Agriculture. This information provides context for understanding their perspectives and experiences with social media at the university. The following section presents a paraphrased overview of the key interview questions used in the study to illustrate the main areas explored during data collection without listing all questions in full. All the questions were based on the four objectives indicated below:

- *To identify the types of social media platforms used for marketing services at the University of Venda.*
- *To assess the effectiveness of social media in promoting events and services at the University of Venda.*
- *To determine how social media helps in communication and interaction between the university, students and the communities.*
- *To examine strategies to improve the use of social media for marketing at the University of Venda.*

Academic staff interviews focused on participants' background information, the social media platforms used by their departments, and how these platforms were applied for academic communication and marketing, (see appendix 3.1). Questions explored perceptions of the effectiveness of social media in promoting academic programmes, research, and innovation, as well as its role in improving communication with students and external stakeholders. Academic staff were also asked to suggest ways of strengthening social media use, including training needs and departmental contributions to the university's overall social media strategy.

Student interviews explored students' background information, the social media platforms they commonly used to access university information, and their views on the

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accessibility and effectiveness of these platforms (see appendix 3.2). The questions examined how social media influenced students' participation in university activities, their perceptions of the university's public image, and the role of social media in communication and information sharing. Students were also asked to suggest improvements and comment on the importance of student input in social media planning.

Administrative staff interviews focused on participants' roles and experience in marketing and communication, the platforms officially used by the university, and how platform choices were made (see appendix 3.3). Questions examined how social media effectiveness was measured, the types of content that generated engagement, and the role of social media in stakeholder communication. Challenges, resource needs, and strategies for improving the university's social media presence were also discussed. The data was organised in the themes based on the objectives as indicated below:

5.3 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THEMES

Table 5.2: Themes and sub-themes

Main Theme	**Sub-Theme 1**	**Sub-Theme 2**
Types of Social Media Platforms Used	Official university platforms (Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, YouTube)	Personal or departmental use of social media
Effectiveness of social media	Visibility of university programmes and events	Engagement with students and public (likes, comments, shares)
Communication and Interaction	Communication between staff and students	Engagement with external stakeholders and communities
Strategies for Improving Social Media Marketing	Staff training and capacity building	Content planning, interactivity, and feedback integration

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5.3.1 Theme 1: Types of social media platforms used

The first main theme that emerged from the interviews relates to the types of social media platforms that are used by the University of Venda for marketing purposes. Participants, including lecturers, marketing staff, and students, consistently highlighted that social media is a key tool for communication, information sharing, and promotion of university programmes and activities. Social media platforms serve as an accessible means to reach students, parents, and the broader community, and they facilitate the sharing of academic and non-academic information in real time. Participants emphasised that different platforms serve different purposes, depending on the audience and the nature of the content being shared.

One of the lecturers explained the importance of official platforms in reaching students effectively, stating:

> *"The university uses Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube. These platforms help us reach students and even parents with updates about programmes and events"* (L1).

This illustrates how the university has formally adopted multiple platforms to maintain visibility and engagement. A marketing staff member also confirmed the structured use of these platforms, saying:

> *"The university officially uses Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Each platform has its own purpose; some are for students, some for professional audiences"* (M4).

These responses show that official university platforms are central to information dissemination. Students also recognised the impact of these platforms on their daily interaction with university content. One student mentioned:

> *"I mostly use Facebook and WhatsApp to follow university updates. Facebook is good because the university posts information about events, applications, and news"* (S1).

Another student added:

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> *"I mostly use Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Facebook and Instagram are useful for general announcements, event promotions, and news. WhatsApp is mainly used for class groups and direct communication from lecturers"* (S2).

These responses highlight that students actively engage with the official platforms and rely on them to remain informed.

Marketing staff also highlighted the practical application of these platforms for departmental work. One participant noted:

> *"Platform choice depends on the audience, content type, and campaign goals. Instagram and Facebook are best for students, LinkedIn is for professional campaigns, and YouTube is for detailed videos"* (M5).

Another marketing staff member emphasised the importance of consistency across platforms, stating:

> *"We encourage departments to submit content in advance so the official pages remain active and professional. Coordination is key"* (M1).

These observations show that the university strategically uses multiple platforms to cater to different audiences while maintaining professional standards. From these perspectives, it is evident that social media platforms are not just informal communication tools but form an integral part of the university's marketing and communication strategy. They allow the university to reach diverse audiences effectively and ensure timely access to information. The variety of platforms ensures that both text-based, visual, and video content can be shared to engage students, staff, and external stakeholders. The importance of social media for engagement is also evident in student responses. One student reflected:

> *"I see posts almost every day, especially on Facebook and Instagram. The university shares updates on events, deadlines, achievements, and news. This frequent posting helps me plan my activities"* (S3).

From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the widespread use of social media at the University of Venda indicates a high level of acceptance of media technology within the institutional environment. TAM explains that individuals are more likely to adopt and continue using a technology when they perceive it as *useful* and

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easy to use (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In this study, lecturers, marketing staff, and students view social media platforms as effective tools for communication, information sharing, and marketing, demonstrating strong perceived usefulness. The routine and sustained use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube further suggests that these technologies are considered accessible and manageable within the university context, reflecting perceived ease of use. TAM therefore helps explain why social media has become embedded in the University of Venda's communication practices: the platforms are seen as enhancing efficiency, reach, and engagement compared to traditional communication channels. This supports TAM's assertion that when a technological environment supports usefulness and usability, acceptance and institutional integration of media technologies are more likely to occur.

Students reported that they mostly use Facebook and WhatsApp to follow university updates, noting that Facebook provides information about events, applications, and news, while WhatsApp is mainly used for class groups and direct communication from lecturers. Instagram was also mentioned as useful for general announcements and event promotions. These findings mirror studies conducted in South Africa and other countries, where platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook facilitate student engagement, peer-to-peer learning, and timely access to information (Mabuza, 2022; Park & Lee, 2020). However, a unique aspect of this study is the strong emphasis on how the university aligns specific platforms to target distinct audiences. Marketing staff highlighted that Instagram and Facebook are primarily for students, LinkedIn targets professional campaigns, and YouTube is used for detailed video content. This structured and strategic approach was less emphasised in earlier literature, showing a more deliberate planning process at the University of Venda (M1; M5).

The study also found that consistency and coordination across platforms are critical to ensuring professional standards and continuous engagement. Marketing staff indicated that content is submitted in advance to keep official pages active, which enhances credibility and reliability. This is consistent with Social Media Marketing Theory, which stresses the importance of strategic content planning, engagement, and responsiveness to audience needs (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). Students confirmed that frequent updates on events, deadlines, and achievements help them organise their activities and feel more connected to the

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university community, supporting previous findings on engagement and sense of belonging (Nkosi & Moeti, 2021; Alalwan, 2020).

5.3.2 Sub-Theme 1: Official university platforms

The first sub-theme under this main theme is the use of official university platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Participants emphasised that these platforms are officially maintained and serve as the primary channels for university announcements, marketing campaigns, and programme promotion. Some of the lecturers pointed out the formal use of these platforms for both academic and promotional purposes. One lecturer said:

> *"Facebook and Instagram are very useful for sharing information about academic programmes and events. They allow students to engage with the content and ask questions."* (L2)

Marketing staff elaborated on the purpose-specific use of each platform. One marketing officer stated:

> *"LinkedIn is ideal for professional campaigns aimed at partners and alumni, Facebook and Instagram are preferred for visual content for students, and YouTube is used for videos."* (M4)

Another participant added:

> *"X is for quick announcements, LinkedIn for professional communication, and YouTube for videos about campus life and research projects."* (M2)

These responses indicate that the university has a clear strategy for managing its social media platforms, ensuring that each platform is used appropriately to reach specific audiences. Students also confirmed their regular engagement with official platforms. One student noted:

> *"I mostly use Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Facebook is useful for reading detailed posts and event updates, Instagram is good for quick stories and visual content, and X helps me see urgent announcements"* (S3).

Another student reflected on how the official platforms allow for timely access to information, saying:

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> *"I see posts almost every day, especially on Facebook. The posts remind me of important dates and events, which helps me plan my schedule."* (S1)

These responses suggest that the official platforms are central to student engagement and information access. Marketing staff also highlighted the professional management of official platforms. One participant explained:

"Departments are encouraged to submit content in advance, so the official pages remain active and professional. This coordination is important to maintain a uniform university image." (M1)

Another staff member added:

"We monitor engagement and ensure the platforms are regularly updated with relevant content." (M5)

These insights show that official platforms are maintained with strategic intent to promote the university effectively. The discussion of official platforms illustrates that these channels form the backbone of the university's marketing strategy. They allow the institution to share accurate, timely, and structured information to students, staff, and external stakeholders. Official platforms are not only a communication tool but also a marketing mechanism that strengthens the university's public image and increases student engagement. One student highlighted this impact by saying:

> *"Facebook is the most effective because it allows detailed information and reaches a wide range of students."* (S4)

The findings from this study reveal that official university platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube, are central to the University of Venda's communication and marketing strategy. Participants consistently emphasised that these platforms are formally managed and serve distinct purposes depending on the target audience. Lecturers and marketing staff reported that Facebook and Instagram are primarily used to share academic information and visual content for students, X is reserved for quick announcements, LinkedIn targets professional audiences such as alumni and partners, and YouTube is employed to showcase videos about campus life and research activities (L2; M2; M4). This strategic allocation of

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platforms demonstrates careful planning to ensure that each channel effectively reaches its intended users.

From a Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) perspective, the strategic use of different platforms reflects an understanding of perceived usefulness. Participants' emphasis on matching platforms to specific audiences suggests that staff recognise each platform's practical value in achieving particular communication and marketing goals. This supports TAM's assertion that technologies are more likely to be adopted and sustained when users perceive them as useful and appropriate for their tasks (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The organised and formal management of platforms also reduces complexity, indirectly supporting perceived ease of use, which further encourages continued use. The findings also align closely with Social Media Marketing Theory (SMT). SMMT emphasises that effective social media marketing requires audience segmentation, platform differentiation, and strategic content alignment rather than uniform messaging across all platforms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Felix et al., 2017). The deliberate allocation of Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube for distinct purposes reflects this principle and demonstrates planned, goal-oriented social media use.

Students confirmed that they regularly engage with these platforms, noting that Facebook provides detailed updates about events and deadlines, Instagram offers quick stories and visual content, and X highlights urgent announcements (S1; S3). The platforms assist students plan their academic and extracurricular activities, fostering a sense of connection with the university. Marketing staff also highlighted the professional management of content, including advanced submissions from departments and regular monitoring of engagement to maintain consistency and a positive institutional image (M1; M5). These findings align with studies by Wang and Chen (2020), Zhang (2021), and Mangold and Faulds (2009), which underscore the importance of structured social media use for effective communication, student engagement, and brand promotion. Unlike some studies that focus solely on student interaction, this study shows a comprehensive, coordinated approach where official platforms serve both as a communication tool and a marketing mechanism, strengthening the university's public image and supporting timely access to information for diverse stakeholders.

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5.3.3 Sub-Theme 2: Personal or departmental use of social media

The second sub-theme that emerged relates to personal or departmental use of social media. While official platforms provide structured communication, participants also reported that departments and individual staff members use social media informally to share updates, academic information, and promotional content. Some lecturers described using social media to interact directly with students. One lecturer stated:

> *"I personally use WhatsApp groups to share reminders about lectures and assignments. It is faster and students respond immediately."* (L3)

Another lecturer added:

> *"We use social media to post about departmental workshops and programmes. This helps students stay informed and involved."* (L5)

These responses indicate that departmental and personal social media use complements official platforms, increasing reach and responsiveness.

Marketing staff also reflected on the flexibility of personal or departmental social media. One participant explained:

> *"Platform choice depends on the audience. Departments may post updates on Facebook or Instagram depending on the type of content they want to share."* (M5)

Another staff member added:

> *"Some departments post irregularly, but personal initiatives by staff help maintain engagement and share important news quickly."* (M4)

These insights show that while official channels are central, personal and departmental initiatives are crucial for timely communication and engagement.

Some students further highlighted the effectiveness of personal or departmental social media interactions. One student noted:

> *"WhatsApp is mainly used for class groups and direct communication from lecturers. It is easy to get information about assignments and lectures."* (S2)

Another student confirmed:

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> *"Even when posts are not frequent on official pages, departmental updates on WhatsApp and Instagram stories keep me informed."* (S4)

These observations demonstrate that students rely on both official and departmental social media for complete and timely information.

The combined use of official and personal platforms increases the reach and accessibility of university information. Lecturers and staff use personal platforms to enhance interaction, while students appreciate the immediacy and convenience. One lecturer stated:

> *"Social media allows students to ask questions and engage directly with us, which is faster than emails."* (L4)

This shows that personal or departmental use adds a dynamic layer of communication, supplementing the formal marketing strategy.

These findings reveal that the University of Venda uses a dual approach, official platforms ensure structured, consistent communication, while departmental and personal use enhances interactivity and immediacy. Both are essential in promoting university programmes, events, and academic information. As one marketing staff member highlighted:

> *"Engagement metrics like likes, comments, and shares show that both official and personal posts reach students effectively."* (M1)

The findings are largely consistent with both the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT). From a TAM perspective, the complementary use of personal, departmental, and official social media platforms suggests that lecturers and departments perceived social media as useful and easy to use for communication, which increased their willingness to adopt it (Dwivedi et al., 2021). SMT, on the other hand, explains how this use enhanced interaction and relationship-building with students through timely and informal communication. This supports Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2019) and Tess (2013), who argue that informal and decentralised social media use strengthens engagement and responsiveness. Together, the theories agree that acceptance of technology (TAM) enables effective engagement strategies (SMMT), reinforcing each other rather than operating in isolation.

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However, this study also highlights some differences compared to previous research. While Junco et al. (2019) reported that informal social media use can blur boundaries between personal and professional interactions, participants in this study emphasised maintaining a balance between professional conduct and personal engagement. This suggests that, at the University of Venda, departmental use is more structured and consciously aligned with academic objectives than has been reported in other contexts.

Students appreciated the immediacy of departmental or personal updates, echoing findings by Manca and Ranieri (2016), who note that students perceive informal social media as more responsive and accessible than traditional communication channels. At the same time, the study supports prior conclusions that a dual approach integrating formal and informal social media enhances overall communication effectiveness, engagement, and information dissemination (Strother, 2020).

5.4 MAIN THEME 2: EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The second main theme that emerged from the interviews relates to the effectiveness of social media in promoting the university's programmes, services, and activities. Participants consistently emphasised that social media is a critical tool for reaching students, staff, and external stakeholders, as well as enhancing the visibility of the University of Venda. All the categories, namely, lecturers, marketing staff, and students highlighted that the platforms enable them to share information about academic and non-academic programmes, research outputs, and campus events. The theme also highlights how social media allows interaction, which further enhances the reach and effectiveness of university communications.

One lecturer emphasised the impact of social media, saying:

> *"Social media helps students and the public know about our programmes. When we post about events, students can see and plan to attend."* (L1)

This response shows that social media is not merely a promotional tool, but a means to enhance participation and awareness of university activities. Another lecturer added:

> *"It is effective because students check social media every day. Posts about workshops, lectures, and events get immediate attention."* (L2)

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This demonstrates that regular updates ensure that students are consistently aware of university offerings.

A marketing staff member reflected on the structured approach to posting, stating:

> *"We post regularly on Facebook, Instagram, and X to ensure students and the public see our programmes. Consistent posting increases visibility and engagement."* (M3)

Similarly, a student explained:

> *"I see posts almost every day, especially on Facebook and Instagram. The university shares updates on events, deadlines, achievements, and news. This frequent posting helps me plan my activities."* (S3)

These statements reinforce the idea that frequent and consistent posts are key to effective communication and visibility. The effectiveness of social media was not only about posting information but also about how people interact with the content. One lecturer stated:

> *"Students often like, comment, and share posts about events and programmes. This helps more people see them and creates interest."* (L4)

Another student confirmed this, saying:

> *"When I see an interesting post about an event, I like it and sometimes share it with friends. This helps others know about it too."* (S1)

The ability for users to engage with posts multiplies the reach of information and strengthens the visibility of the university's programmes. Marketing staff also highlighted how engagement metrics indicate effectiveness. One participant explained:

> *"We measure effectiveness through likes, comments, shares, and views. Posts with higher engagement show that students and the public are interested."* (M5)

Another staff member added:

> *"Engagement helps us know which content works best. Videos, event photos, and announcements tend to get the most interaction."* (M1)

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These insights illustrate that social media effectiveness is closely linked to interactive participation from the audience. The findings indicate that social media is an effective tool for promoting university programmes, services, and activities, enabling wide-reaching dissemination and enhanced engagement. This aligns with Kaplan and Haenlein's view (2010), who assert that social media facilitates interactive communication, allowing organisations to reach diverse audiences rapidly. Similarly, Tess (2013) emphasised that higher education institutions benefit from social media as a mechanism to improve visibility and participation in academic and extracurricular activities.

In this study, participants highlighted that frequent and consistent posting increases awareness and encourages participation, which is consistent with observations by Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2019), who revealed that regular updates on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram improve student attention and responsiveness. The findings also confirm that interactive features like, comments, and shares amplify reach, supporting Manca and Ranieri's (2016) claim that engagement metrics are critical indicators of social media effectiveness in education contexts.

A notable difference from prior studies is the structured and strategic management of posts at the University of Venda. Whereas some literature suggests that social media use in universities can be sporadic and uncoordinated (Strother, 2020), this study shows deliberate scheduling and content curation, suggesting a professionalised approach that maximises visibility and engagement. Students' reported reliance on social media for planning activities underscores its practical effectiveness in information dissemination, echoing previous research by Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, and Meyer (2010), who argue that social media not only informs, but it also motivates active participation. Overall, the findings confirm that social media effectiveness is determined by frequency, relevance, interactivity, and strategic management, which together enhance visibility, awareness, and engagement.

5.4.1 Sub-Theme 1: Visibility of university programmes and events

The first sub-theme focuses on how social media increases the visibility of the university's programmes and events. Participants reported that social media provides a platform to share information quickly and widely, ensuring that students, staff, and

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even external audiences are aware of academic and extracurricular opportunities. One lecturer stated:

> *"Facebook and Instagram help make our programmes visible. Students can see events, workshops, and lectures clearly."* (L2)

Another lecturer added:

> *"When we post about research projects or seminars, other departments and students notice. This increases awareness across the university."* (L3)

Students also confirmed that visibility through social media influences their participation. One student noted:

> *"I mostly use Facebook and WhatsApp to follow university updates. Facebook is good because the university posts information about events, applications, and new.s"* (S1)

Another student mentioned:

> *"Instagram is very effective because I can see stories and photos from past events. This makes me want to attend."* (S4)

These responses show that social media not only informs students about upcoming events but also encourages them to participate.

Marketing staff highlighted the strategic use of visual content to increase visibility. One participant explained:

> *"We use videos, images, and posters on social media. This helps students and the public notice events and programmes quickly."* (M4)

Another staff member added:

> *"Event reminders and countdowns on Instagram stories make programmes more visible. Students often check these stories daily."* (M2)

These observations emphasise that combining visual content with frequent posts significantly improves the visibility of university programmes.

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Lecturers also noted that visibility is strengthened by using multiple platforms. One lecturer stated:

> *"We post on Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube. Different platforms reach different audiences. Parents and alumni often check Facebook, while students prefer Instagram."* (L1)

A student added:

> *"Even when I miss a post on Facebook, I might see it on Instagram or WhatsApp. Using many platforms makes sure I do not miss important events."* (S2)

These statements highlight the importance of cross-platform visibility to ensure maximum reach. In addition to general programme visibility, participants discussed visibility of academic achievements and research outputs. One lecturer remarked:

> *"Social media also highlights student achievements and research findings. This gives visibility to the work being done at the university."* (L5)

Another marketing staff member stated:

> *"We post about awards, research publications, and community projects. This increases the public's awareness of the university's contributions."* (M1)

This shows that visibility is not limited to events but extends to academic and institutional accomplishments, reinforcing the university's reputation and credibility. The findings indicate that social media significantly enhances the visibility of university programmes, events, and academic achievements. This is consistent with Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who emphasise that social media allows institutions to reach broad audiences rapidly, increasing awareness and engagement. The use of visual content, such as videos, images, and posters, was highlighted by participants as particularly effective, which aligns with Junco, Heiberger, and Loken (2019), who discovered that visual elements in posts increase user attention and interaction in higher education settings. Participants also emphasised cross-platform visibility, using Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube to target different audiences. This approach resonates with Tess (2013), who argue that employing multiple platforms ensures diverse audience coverage and improves access to institutional information. Similarly, Manca

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and Ranieri (2016) highlight that frequent posting on various channels enhances both visibility and audience engagement.

Another key observation is the use of social media to showcase academic achievements and research outputs. Prior studies support this, noting that social media serves not only as a promotional tool, but also as a medium for reputation building, highlighting institutional successes to external stakeholders (Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, & Meyer, 2010). Compared to previous research suggesting sporadic and uncoordinated social media use in universities (Strother, 2020), and the findings at the University of Venda indicate a deliberate and strategic approach. By combining visual content, consistent posting, and cross-platform dissemination, social media enhances both awareness and participation in university programmes. These strategies collectively strengthen the institution's visibility, credibility, and engagement with students, staff, and external audiences.

5.4.2 Sub-Theme 2: Engagement with students and public (likes, comments, shares)

The second sub-theme focuses on how students and the public engage with social media posts through likes, comments, and shares. Engagement was repeatedly mentioned as a key indicator of the effectiveness of social media. Participants observed that interactive content helps increase participation, spreads information more widely, and creates a sense of community. One lecturer noted:

> *"Students like, comment, and share posts about lectures, workshops, and events. This engagement spreads information quickly."* (L4)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Engagement is a good measure of interest. If students interact with posts, it shows that our programmes are being noticed."* (L3)

Students also highlighted their active role in engagement. One student stated:

> *"When I see an interesting post about an event, I like it and sometimes share it with friends. This helps others know about it too."* (S1)

Another student explained:

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> *"I comment on posts when I have questions or want to encourage other students to attend events. Social media makes communication easier."* (S2)

These responses illustrate that engagement is both a form of participation and a feedback mechanism for the university. Marketing staff emphasised that engagement metrics help guide content planning. One participant stated:

> *"Posts with high likes, comments, and shares are considered successful. We use this information to plan future content."* (M5)

Another staff member, added:

> *"Videos and photos get more engagement than plain text. Event coverage in pictures or short clips encourages students to attend."* (M1)

These insights show that engagement not only reflects effectiveness but also informs the strategy for improving content and reach. Lecturers also reflected on engagement as a tool for communication. One lecturer said:

> *"Through comments, students ask questions and give suggestions. This interaction helps us know what works and what students need."* (L2)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Engagement builds a sense of community. Students feel connected to the university when they participate online."* (L5)

These observations indicate that social media is effective not just in reaching audiences but also in creating interactive relationships that support learning and participation. Students noted that public engagement enhances their awareness and interest. One student stated:

> *"When friends like or share a post, I also notice it. Engagement helps spread information about events and programmes."* (S3)

Another student said:

> *"Comments on posts answer questions before I even ask. This makes it easier to know about events and deadlines."* (S4)

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These statements highlight that engagement contributes to peer-to-peer information sharing, further extending the reach and effectiveness of social media. Marketing staff also discussed the broader community engagement. One participant explained that:

> *"Engagement is not limited to students. Parents, alumni, and community members also like and share posts. This extends the visibility of programmes beyond campus."* (M2)

Another staff member added:

> *"Social media allows us to interact with external stakeholders. Comments and shares show interest in our research, events, and community projects."* (M4)

This shows that engagement enhances the university's image and promotes its programmes beyond immediate student audiences. Engagement through likes, comments, and shares serves as a key indicator of social media effectiveness. The combination of content visibility and active interaction creates a cycle where information is not only seen but also discussed, shared, and acted upon. One lecturer summarised this by stating:

> *"Social media is effective because students do not just see posts; they interact with them. This makes programmes more successful."* (L1)

A student also confirmed:

> *"I like and share posts because it helps my friends know about events. Engagement makes social media useful and fun."* (S5)

The findings highlight that engagement through likes, comments, and shares is a key indicator of the effectiveness of social media in higher education. Participants emphasised that interactive content increases participation, extends reach, and fosters a sense of community. This aligns with previous studies, which suggest that social media engagement functions as both a communication and participatory tool in universities (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Junco, 2014). The use of interactive posts, including videos and images, has been shown to generate higher engagement, supporting the findings that visual content encourages students to like, comment, and share (Gupta, Hans, & Sharma, 2020).

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Students' peer-to-peer interactions further extend the reach of information, which is consistent with studies by Tess (2013) and Chen, Lambert, and Guidry (2010), who established that engagement not only promotes information dissemination but also enhances social learning and collective awareness. Similarly, comments provide feedback and enables institutions to gauge student interests and tailor content strategically, and this echo Ebner, Lienhardt, Rohs, and Meyer (2010) on the feedback loop created by social media engagement.

Engagement was also noted as a mechanism to involve external stakeholders such as alumni, parents, and the broader community. This mirrors findings from Sweetser and Lariscy (2008), who reported that universities benefit from wider community interaction through social media, improving reputation and stakeholder relationships. Compared to earlier research indicating passive content consumption (Strother, 2020), the University of Venda demonstrates active engagement, suggesting that structured and visually appealing content promotes interaction. The evidence shows that likes, comments, and shares are not merely metrics but essential components of effective communication, community building, and programme promotion in higher education contexts.

5.5 THEME 3: COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION

The third main theme that emerged from the interviews is communication and interaction. This theme highlights the role of social media in enhancing dialogue, collaboration, and connectivity between different university stakeholders, including staff, students, and external partners. Participants consistently reported that social media has become an essential channel for immediate communication, facilitating interaction that was previously limited to face-to-face meetings or formal emails. Lecturers, marketing staff, and students emphasised that social media not only allows for sharing information but also promotes engagement, discussion, and collaboration.

One lecturer stated:

> *"Social media has really improved how I communicate with students. They can ask questions in real time, and I can respond quickly. It is much faster than emails or office hours."* (L1)

Another lecturer added:

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> *"WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages make communication easier. Students do not have to come to my office for every question. They post their queries, and we respond immediately."* (L3)

These statements highlight that social media has bridged gaps between staff and students, providing an efficient way to share information and address concerns.

A marketing staff member reflected on the role of social media in facilitating communication, stating:

> *"We use social media to interact with students and staff. Posts are not just for informing; they allow for questions, clarifications, and discussions."* (M2)

Another participant added:

> *"When departments post updates, students often comment or send messages for more details. This two-way communication helps us know what they need."* (M4)

These responses show that interaction through social media goes beyond one-way communication and encourages active participation. Students confirmed the benefits of using social media to communicate with staff. One student explained:

> *"I can ask my lecturer questions on WhatsApp or Facebook. They usually reply quickly, which makes it easy to understand assignments and deadlines."* (S1)

Another student said:

> *"Social media makes it easier to reach staff. I do not have to wait to see them in class or office hours. Everything is faster."* (S2)

These responses demonstrate that social media provides immediacy and convenience in communication, which supports learning and academic success. Marketing staff also noted that social media facilitates communication at the departmental level. One participant explained:

> *"We coordinate with different faculties to ensure updates reach students. Social media helps departments communicate announcements and programme information efficiently."* (M1)

Another staff member added:

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> *"Social media also allows staff to interact with each other. They share ideas, plan events, and provide updates through groups and official pages."* (M3)

These statements show that social media improves internal communication within the university, ensuring all staff members are informed and coordinated.

5.5.1 Sub-Theme 1: Communication between staff and students

The first sub-theme focuses on communication between staff and students. Participants emphasised that social media allows students to communicate with lecturers, advisors, and departmental staff in a more flexible and responsive way. One lecturer said:

> *"Students ask questions about lectures, assignments, and events on Facebook or WhatsApp. This helps them understand better and participate more actively."* (L4)

Another lecturer explained:

> *"I post reminders about assignments and workshops. Students can respond or ask questions directly. It saves time and improves engagement."* (L5)

These responses illustrate that social media supports both academic and administrative communication, ensuring students are informed and supported. Students also highlighted that communication via social media reduces barriers. One student stated:

> *"I feel more comfortable asking questions on WhatsApp than in class. It is faster, and I get answers immediately."* (S3)

Another student noted:

> *"Sometimes lecturers post study tips and reminders on social media. This helps me prepare for tests and assignments."* (S4)

These observations show that social media encourages students to participate in discussions and seek clarification, which enhances learning outcomes. Marketing staff emphasised the importance of structured communication through social media. One participant stated:

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> *"We ensure that posts and messages from departments are clear and informative. This helps students understand announcements without confusion."* (M5)

Another participant added:

> *"Scheduled posts and reminders ensure students do not miss important information. Social media makes communication predictable and reliable."* (M2)

These insights show that effective communication requires planning, consistency, and clarity in posts, which contributes to the overall effectiveness of social media in connecting staff and students. Lecturers also highlighted that social media fosters engagement beyond basic communication. One lecturer said:

> *"Students can comment on posts, ask follow-up questions, and share ideas. This makes the learning experience interactive rather than just one-way."* (L2)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Sometimes students share feedback or suggestions through social media. This helps me improve lectures and teaching methods."* (L3)

These responses indicate that communication through social media is both informative and participatory, enabling continuous feedback between students and staff. Students confirmed that social media interactions improve their sense of connection with staff. One student mentioned:

> *"I feel part of the class even if I am not on campus. Social media allows me to communicate, ask questions, and participate in discussions."* (S5)

Another student stated:

> *"I can see updates from lecturers and reply to questions. It feels like we are all connected even outside class hours."* (S1)

These statements suggest that communication through social media strengthens relationships, trust, and student involvement in academic activities. From a theoretical perspective, these findings emphasise a two-way communication and relationship-building as central principles of effective engagement anchored in the Social Media Marketing Theory (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). They also reflect on the technology

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acceptance model which holds that learning is enhanced through interaction, collaboration, and active participation. The immediacy and interactivity of social media therefore supported active student engagement and knowledge co-construction, reinforcing students' involvement in academic activities (Junco, 2012). These findings indicate that social media enhances communication between staff and students by providing a flexible, immediate, and interactive channel for academic and administrative exchanges. This aligns with previous studies that highlight social media as a tool for bridging communication gaps in higher education (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Tess, 2013). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, allow students to ask questions, seek clarifications, and receive timely responses from lecturers and departmental staff, reducing traditional hierarchical and temporal barriers (Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012). The immediacy of communication fosters active participation and engagement, supporting constructivist learning approaches where students take an active role in knowledge co-construction (Junco, 2012).

The literature emphasises that social media promotes a sense of connectedness and community between students and staff. Studies have revealed that platforms enabling interactive communication enhance students' perceptions of support and accessibility of academic staff, contributing to higher satisfaction and improved learning outcomes (Selwyn, 2016; Madge et al., 2009). Structured use of social media, including scheduled posts, reminders, and clear messaging, has been shown to reduce confusion and improve information retention among students, echoing the study's findings on the importance of clarity and consistency (McCorkindale, 2016).

5.5.2 Sub-Theme 2: Engagement with external stakeholders and communities

The second sub-theme focuses on how social media enables the university to engage with external stakeholders, including parents, alumni, and community partners. Participants reported that social media is an effective way to keep these groups informed about university activities and initiatives. One lecturer stated:

> *"Social media helps us reach beyond students. Parents, alumni, and local communities can see what is happening on campus."* (L1)

Another lecturer added:

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> *"We post about research projects, community programmes, and public events. Social media allows external stakeholders to follow and support these initiatives."* (L2)

Marketing staff also emphasised the importance of engagement beyond the campus. One participant said:

> *"External stakeholders like parents, sponsors, and community organisations follow our pages. Their engagement shows interest in events, programmes, and research."* (M1)

Another participant explained:

> *"Comments, likes, and shares from external audiences indicate that our content is reaching people outside the university. This helps build the university's reputation."* (M4)

These responses demonstrate that social media engagement is not limited to students but extends to the broader community. Students also noted that external engagement improves transparency and awareness. One student stated:

> *"When parents or community members like or comment on posts, it shows they know what we are doing. It makes the university more visible."* (S2)

Another student explained:

> *"I sometimes see posts shared by alumni or local businesses. This helps me learn more about opportunities and events beyond campus."* (S3)

These observations show that social media creates connections between the university and its wider network, enhancing trust, support, and collaboration. Marketing staff highlighted that social media engagement supports strategic goals. One participant said:

> *"We track how external stakeholders interact with posts. Their engagement helps us plan events and marketing campaigns that involve the community."* (M5)

Another participant added:

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> *"Sharing success stories, research highlights, and community initiatives attracts attention from partners and potential collaborators."* (M2)

These insights indicate that social media engagement strengthens institutional relationships and facilitates external partnerships. Lecturers also emphasised that social media provides a platform for community dialogue. One lecturer stated:

> *"People from the community can comment or ask questions about our programmes. We respond, which builds trust and cooperation."* (L3)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Social media allows us to showcase university events, like open days or health campaigns, to the public. Engagement shows their interest and support."* (L5)

These statements demonstrate that external interaction through social media enhances the university's visibility and creates opportunities for collaborative activities. Students further noted the motivational impact of external engagement. One student said:

> *"Seeing alumni or community members comment on posts makes me proud of the university. It encourages me to participate more in events."* (S4)

Another student stated:

> *"Engagement from outside people makes posts more interesting. I feel connected to the university and the community."* (S1)

These responses illustrate that external engagement enriches the student experience and fosters a sense of belonging. Marketing staff also highlighted that external engagement strengthens branding. One participant said:

> *"When community members, partners, and alumni share or comment on posts, it extends our reach and reinforces the university's image as active and engaged."* (M3)

Another participant added:

> *"Social media is effective for public relations. Engaging with external stakeholders ensures that the university's work is seen, appreciated, and supported."* (M4)

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These statements demonstrate that engagement with external audiences is a strategic component of social media communication and marketing. The findings indicate that social media enables universities to engage with external stakeholders, including parents, alumni, sponsors, and local communities, extending the reach of institutional communication beyond students. This aligns with research suggesting that social media platforms facilitate two-way communication and relationship-building between higher education institutions and their broader networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lovejoy et al., 2012). Through posts, shares, comments, and likes, universities can disseminate information about research outputs, community initiatives, events, and institutional achievements, promoting transparency and visibility (Tiernan et al., 2014).

Engagement with external audiences has been shown to strengthen institutional reputation, build trust, and foster collaborative opportunities (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Stieglitz et al., 2014). By actively interacting with stakeholders through comments and discussions, universities cultivate a sense of inclusion and co-participation, which enhances stakeholder support for university programmes (Jiang & Zeng, 2018). Social media engagement contributes to branding and public relations, as stakeholders' interactions amplify content reach and signal credibility to wider audiences (Sigala, 2011).

Scholarly research also emphasises that visible engagement from external parties motivates internal stakeholders, including students and staff, by reinforcing a sense of pride and community (Junco et al., 2013; Madge et al., 2009). This dual effect supports both institutional objectives and individual involvement, creating a participatory culture. While challenges such as managing feedback and ensuring content appropriateness exist, the literature consistently highlights the strategic value of social media for maintaining ongoing, interactive communication with external stakeholders and strengthening the university's visibility, partnerships, and influence.

5.6 THEME 4: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

The fourth main theme that emerged from the interviews focuses on strategies for improving social media marketing at the University of Venda. Participants across the lecturer, marketing staff, and student groups noted some weaknesses in the current implementation of social media as a marketing tool at the University of Venda. All the participants from the three categories emphasised that while social media is widely

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used, there is potential to improve its effectiveness through strategic planning, staff development, and better interaction with audiences. Social media is seen not only as a promotional tool but also as a platform for engagement, branding, and knowledge sharing. Participants suggested that improving the skills of staff, planning content carefully, and integrating feedback from students and the community could strengthen the university's social media presence.

One lecturer highlighted the need for continuous development, stating:

> *"Staff need proper training to use social media effectively. Not all lecturers know how to create engaging posts or reach students properly."* (L1)

Another lecturer added:

> *"We sometimes post irregularly because we are not trained in social media marketing. Training would help us understand the best times and ways to post."* (L2)

These responses emphasise that staff capacity is a key factor in the effectiveness of social media marketing. Marketing staff also stressed the importance of formal training and skills development. One participant said:

> *"Some staff are not confident in using social media tools. Workshops or training sessions would improve their skills and ensure consistent posting."* (M1)

Another participant explained:

> *"Training on content creation, graphics, and video editing would help departments post professional and attractive content. This would engage students more."* (M2)

These responses show that capacity building is crucial for maintaining professional and effective social media communication. Students recognised the impact of staff skills on social media quality. One student stated:

"Sometimes posts are confusing or lack details. If staff were trained, the posts could be clearer and more interesting." (S1)

Another student added:

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"Well-designed posts with videos or pictures are easier to understand and encourage students to participate in events." (S2)

These observations suggest that staff training directly affects how students perceive and engage with social media content. The findings indicate that enhancing social media marketing at universities requires strategic planning, staff capacity building, and integration of stakeholder feedback. Participants highlighted the need for formal training for lecturers and staff to improve the quality, consistency, and engagement potential of social media content. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that effective social media marketing in higher education depends not only on the platforms themselves but also on the skills and competencies of staff managing them (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Ali et al., 2020). Training equips staff with the ability to create visually appealing posts, develop engaging narratives, and schedule content strategically, which improves student interaction and institutional visibility (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017).

Literature also suggests that structured planning and content strategies enhance social media effectiveness by ensuring posts align with institutional goals and stakeholder expectations (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Stieglitz et al., 2014). By analysing engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, universities can tailor content to audience preferences, improving both reach and impact (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Junco et al., 2013). Also, student feedback serves as a valuable guide for refining communication strategies, promoting co-creation, and strengthening participatory engagement (Tiernan et al., 2014; Jiang & Zeng, 2018). The literature also emphasises that investing in multimedia content, including graphics, videos, and interactive posts, enhances comprehension and participation, particularly among younger audiences (Madge et al., 2009; Sigala, 2011). The integration of staff development, strategic planning, and responsive engagement constitutes best practice in social media marketing, supporting both institutional branding and knowledge dissemination.

5.6.1 Sub-Theme 1: Staff training and capacity building

The first sub-theme emphasises staff training and capacity building as a strategy to improve social media marketing. Participants noted that although staff are motivated

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to use social media, a lack of knowledge and skills often limits the effectiveness of posts. One lecturer said:

> *"Training sessions would help us understand which platforms work best for different audiences and how to create content that attracts attention."* (L3)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Workshops on social media would help us plan posts better and use hashtags, images, and videos properly."* (L5)

These responses indicate that formal training would equip staff with practical skills to enhance visibility and engagement. Marketing staff also confirmed that staff development is essential. One participant explained:

> *"Capacity building ensures that staff understand the university's social media strategy and can contribute effectively. Without training, posts may not meet professional standards."* (M3)

Another participant stated:

> *"We need to train lecturers on timing, frequency, and type of content. This ensures consistency and increases reach."* (M4)

These responses show that structured training can enhance professional skills and improve the overall quality of social media marketing. Students also highlighted the benefits of staff training. One student said:

> *"If staff are trained, posts would be more engaging and informative. It would make it easier for students to understand events and programmes."* (S3)

Another student added:

> *"Trained staff could make videos or stories that attract more students. It would make social media more interesting."* (S4)

These observations emphasise that staff capacity building not only improve professionalism, but also enhances student engagement and participation. Lecturers reflected on the wider benefits of training. One lecturer stated:

> *"Training would also help staff use analytics tools. We could see which posts get more attention and plan better content."* (L2)

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Another lecturer added:

> *"Understanding engagement metrics is important. Training would show us how to improve posts based on feedback and interaction."* (L4)

These statements illustrate that capacity building supports not only content creation, but also strategic planning and performance monitoring. Marketing staff also highlighted that training builds confidence. One participant said:

> *"Some staff hesitate to post because they are not confident. Training would empower them to post regularly and creatively."* (M5)

Another participant added:

> *"Workshops and tutorials on social media trends, tools, and best practices ensure staff stay updated and motivated."* (M2)

These responses demonstrate that staff development is central to improving the effectiveness of social media marketing at the university. The findings highlight that staff training and capacity building are critical for effective social media marketing in higher education. Participants emphasised that while staff are motivated to use social media, insufficient knowledge and skills hinder the creation of engaging and professional content. This aligns with research indicating that staff competency is a key determinant of social media success in universities (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Training equips staff with the technical skills to use multimedia content, hashtags, platform-specific strategies, and analytics tools, thereby enhancing visibility and audience engagement (Ali et al., 2020; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

Literature further also supports the idea that structured training fosters consistency and professionalism in social media communications. Without proper guidance, posts may lack coherence, fail to follow institutional branding, or reach the intended audience effectively (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Stieglitz et al., 2014). Also, training in analytics and engagement metrics enables staff to monitor performance, adjust content strategies, and tailor communication to audience preferences, thus supporting evidence-based decision-making (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Junco et al., 2013). In addition, capacity building enhances staff confidence and encourages creative use of social media, which improves student interaction and participation (Madge et al., 2009;

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Sigala, 2011). Trained staff can develop interactive content, including videos and stories, which not only inform students but also motivate participation and peer sharing. Overall, the literature confirms that investment in staff training is fundamental to maximising the effectiveness of social media as a tool for promotion, engagement, and institutional visibility.

5.6.2 Sub-Theme 2: Content planning, interactivity, and feedback integration

The second sub-theme focuses on content planning, interactivity, and feedback integration. Participants indicated that well-planned content, interactive posts, and the inclusion of feedback from students and stakeholders are critical to improving social media marketing. One lecturer stated:

> *"Content must be planned in advance. Random posts are not effective. Scheduled posts with clear objectives reach more students."* (L1)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Interactive posts, like polls or quizzes, engage students better than plain announcements."* (L3)

These responses show that planning and interactivity increase engagement and participation. Marketing staff also emphasised the importance of content planning. One participant explained:

> *"We develop a calendar of posts to ensure regular and timely updates. This helps departments stay consistent and relevant."* (M1)

Another participant stated:

> *"Content should be diverse, including videos, posters, infographics, and stories. Variety attracts different audiences and encourages interaction."* (M4)

These observations suggest that planning content strategically increases visibility and enhances engagement with students and external audiences. Students also highlighted that interactive and well-planned content encourages participation. One student said:

> *"When the university posts videos, quizzes, or questions, I am more likely to engage. It makes social media fun and informative."* (S1)

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Another student added:

> *"Good posts with pictures or short videos help me understand what is happening. I like, comment, and share more when content is interesting."* (S2)

These statements show that the type and quality of content directly affect student interaction and reach. This view complements the notion of information overload raised earlier, which can result in an unintended consequence of being a deterrent of such posted content. Participants also highlighted the value of integrating feedback. One lecturer stated that:

> *"We often get suggestions from students on the type of posts they want. Incorporating their feedback makes content more relevant and engaging."* (L2)

Another lecturer added:

> *"Comments and reactions on posts give us an idea of what works and what does not. This feedback should guide future posts."* (L5)

Marketing staff confirmed this, stating:

> *"Feedback integration is key. Student and staff opinions help improve content planning and make posts more effective."* (M3)

These responses indicate that feedback allows social media strategies to evolve in line with audience preferences. Marketing staff also reflected on the importance of interactivity. One participant explained:

> *"Posts that ask questions or encourage participation get more engagement. Students feel involved and pay more attention to university updates."* (M5)

Another participant added:

> *"Using polls, contests, or interactive stories helps reach more students and increases visibility for programmes and events."* (M2)

These insights show that combining content planning with interactivity is essential to strengthening social media marketing. Students confirmed that interactive content enhances their engagement. One student stated:

> *"I like posts that ask for opinions or involve quizzes. I feel part of the university community and share more with friends."* (S3)

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Another student added:

> *"Interactive posts are better than just announcements. I pay attention, comment, and participate more when content is creative."* (S4)

These statements demonstrate that interactivity improves participation and ensures that social media reaches a wider audience. The combination of staff training and capacity building with strategic content planning, interactivity, and feedback integration emerged as the most effective strategy for improving social media marketing at the University of Venda. Participants consistently highlighted that improving staff skills, designing engaging content, and responding to audience feedback ensures that social media is not only informative but also interactive and attractive to students and stakeholders.

The findings align with existing literature emphasising that strategic content planning enhances the effectiveness of social media in higher education. Well-structured and scheduled posts have been shown to increase visibility and engagement, allowing institutions to reach diverse student audiences efficiently (Manca & Ranieri, 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2017). Interactive content, such as polls, quizzes, or multimedia posts, is widely recognised as a key factor in promoting active participation and sustaining audience interest (Tess, 2013; Aparicio et al., 2020). This again corresponds with the current study's observation that creative and engaging posts elicit higher levels of student interaction, suggesting that interactivity is crucial for promoting awareness and participation in university programmes.

The integration of feedback into social media strategies has been highlighted in prior studies as essential for tailoring content to audience preferences, improving relevance, and fostering a sense of community (Junco, 2012; Alalwan et al., 2017). The findings of this study at the University of Venda support this view, showing that audience reactions and suggestions can guide future content planning. However, while much of the literature focuses on student engagement, this study also highlights the importance of incorporating feedback from broader stakeholders, such as alumni and community partners, which is less emphasised in previous research. These findings reinforce the importance of combining structured content planning, interactive features, and feedback mechanisms to strengthen social media marketing, demonstrating consistency with international best practices while extending understanding to include

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external stakeholder engagement. The section below presents and discusses data from social media ethnography.

5.7 PRESENTATION OF DATA FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION FROM SOCIAL MEDIA ETHNOGRAPHY

This section presents the second set of data findings from the social media ethnography of the study, focusing on observations on how social media is used by the University of Venda as a marketing and communication tool. Ethnographic analysis allows the study to observe and interpret naturally occurring social media content, interactions, and public responses within their real-life context (Creswell, 2020). Unlike only getting the views from the participants, social media ethnography afforded the researcher the space to observe genuine engagements and interactions in the social media platforms used at the University of Venda by the three categories of participants, namely lecturers, students, marketing staff, and even the entire university community. These findings are drawn from observations from selected social media posts, videos, and online engagements shared on the official University of Venda platforms. These digital materials provide insight into how the institution presents itself, communicates with stakeholders, and engages with students and the broader public.

This section analyses visual and textual content to understand how institutional identity, branding, and outreach are constructed through social media. Attention is given to how messages are framed, how audiences respond, and how these interactions reflect broader issues of marketing, reputation, access, and trust in higher education. As alluded to earlier, social media ethnographic findings also highlight actual participation and the role of social media in supporting student engagement, public participation, and institutional visibility. This section links observed social media practices to the purpose of the study by demonstrating how social media platforms function as deliberate and strategic marketing tools within a South African higher education context.

Figure 4.1 below provides visual context to the study by illustrating an example of community engagement and environmental awareness activities associated with the University of Venda.

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Figure 5.1: Participants in the University of Venda "clean up awareness campaign"



(Source: University of Venda Facebook Page)

Visual content, including photos and images, plays a critical role in social media marketing for universities. According to Social Media Marketing Theory, visual content enhances engagement by attracting attention, facilitating comprehension, and fostering emotional connections with audiences (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Visuals are particularly effective in storytelling, demonstrating institutional activities, and projecting an authentic image of university life (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2017). Empirical studies confirm that students respond more positively to short, visually appealing posts with clear messages, such as photos of events, campus life, and community initiatives, which increase awareness and participation (Lee & Cooper, 2022; Andersen & Muller, 2023).

In the African higher education context, the adoption of digital visual content is shaped by structural and technological challenges. Factors such as the digital divide, limited internet connectivity, and high data costs can limit the reach and impact of online images (Makgopa & Moeng, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Consequently, universities

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may complement online visuals with traditional methods, including printed materials and community outreach, to ensure that messages reach rural or digitally underserved populations.

The findings are partially supported by the two theoretical frameworks, although each addresses the issue from a different angle. From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the university's use of Facebook for branding and visibility suggests that social media was perceived as both useful and easy to use for communication and marketing purposes (Lee & Cooper, 2022). TAM supports the shift toward digital platforms by explaining why institutions and users adopt social media; however, it is largely silent on how branding and public perceptions are strategically constructed once adoption has occurred.

In contrast, Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) more directly supports these findings. SMMT emphasises the strategic use of social media platforms to build institutional visibility, by extension through visuals, photos and related images, to engage audiences, and shape public perception through interactive communication and content sharing (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The use of Facebook to promote institutional messages and enhance competitiveness aligns closely with SMMT's focus on branding, engagement, and relationship-building. Together, the theories explain both the acceptance of social media as a communication tool (TAM) and its strategic use for marketing and branding (SMMT), although branding is more explicitly addressed within SMMT.

The findings further suggest that video-based content plays a significant role in attracting attention and shaping perceptions of the institution. Through visual elements and concise messaging, the university appears to present itself as active, relevant, and responsive to student needs. This alignment comes primarily from Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) and related digital marketing scholarship. SMMT argues that social media is most effective when organisations use content that encourages interaction, emotional connection, and relationship-building rather than one-way information sharing (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Visual storytelling through images and videos supports this principle by making institutional messages more engaging, relatable, and memorable. Studies grounded in SMMT show that visual content attracts more attention, generates higher levels of likes, shares, and comments, and

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strengthens brand perception because it communicates values and experiences rather than abstract information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017).

From a higher education perspective, visual storytelling allows universities to showcase campus life, student participation, and community engagement, which helps audiences emotionally connect with the institution. While the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) does not directly address storytelling, it indirectly supports its use by suggesting that visually rich and easily interpretable content enhances perceived usefulness and ease of use, increasing user engagement with social media platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Therefore, the emphasis on visual storytelling originates mainly from SMMT, with TAM providing indirect support through technology acceptance principles. The use of Facebook as a marketing platform also suggests an intentional focus on reaching prospective students who rely heavily on social media for information about higher education opportunities. The findings therefore indicate that social media is not used incidentally, but as a deliberate marketing strategy aimed at increasing institutional awareness and student interest.

At the same time, the findings reveal that social media marketing at the University of Venda extends beyond promotional communication. Public responses associated with the video highlight how social media functions as a space where students and other stakeholders' express satisfaction, concerns, and frustrations. This interaction suggests that marketing messages are closely evaluated against lived experiences within the institution (Green & Morrison, 2023). When expectations created by marketing content are not matched by institutional realities, social media becomes a platform for critique. These findings indicate that social media marketing in higher education is inseparable from issues of service delivery, communication efficiency, and institutional trust.

The findings also suggest that social media marketing exposes universities to increased public scrutiny. The University of Venda's online presence allows stakeholders to directly engage with institutional content, which can either strengthen or weaken the university's public image. This highlights the dual nature of social media as both a marketing opportunity and a reputational risk. Effective marketing on social media, therefore, requires not only creative content, but also consistent follow-up,

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responsiveness, and alignment between communication and practice. The findings indicate that universities that fail to manage this alignment may experience reputational challenges despite active online engagement.

In addition, the findings point to the role of social media marketing in supporting access and transformation in higher education. By using a widely accessible platform such as Facebook, the University of Venda is able to reach learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including those in rural areas who may have limited access to traditional marketing channels. This suggests that social media marketing has the potential to support inclusive recruitment practices by reducing information barriers. However, the findings also indicate that access to information alone is insufficient if communication lacks clarity or does not address the practical concerns of recipients, particularly students. Social media marketing must therefore be informative, transparent, and responsive in order to be effective.

The findings are strongly supported by both Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT) and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), as well as by existing literature on higher education marketing. From an SMMT perspective, social media is understood as a strategic space where organisations actively construct their brand identity through ongoing interaction, storytelling, and engagement with audiences (Harper & Lopez, 2022). The way the University of Venda presents itself online reflects this principle, as institutional posts, images, and videos communicate values, priorities, and organisational culture. SMMT argues that when institutions consistently manage their social media presence, they are more likely to build trust, credibility, and long-term relationships with stakeholders (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). This supports the finding that social media marketing should be treated as a core strategic function rather than a peripheral activity.

TAM complements this by explaining why stakeholders engage with institutional social media content. When social media platforms are perceived as useful and easy to use, users are more likely to interact with and form perceptions based on the content they encounter (Dwivedi et al., 2021). However, both theory and literature caution that social media also carries reputational risks. SMMT highlights that social media is a two-way communication space, meaning that negative comments, complaints, or misinformation can quickly circulate and damage institutional reputation if not

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managed effectively (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Chugh and Ruhi (2022) note that unaddressed negative feedback can erode public trust, whereas timely and transparent responses can mitigate reputational harm. These findings therefore reinforce the need for universities to strategically manage social media to protect and strengthen institutional identity and reputation.

Figure 5.2: Minister Khumbudzo Ntshavheni engaging the University of Venda community on the finalisation of broadcasting digital migration



(Source: University of Venda Facebook Page, 2022)

Figure 5.2 illustrates a public lecture hosted at the University of Venda in August 2022, which was later shared on the university's official social media platforms to extend its reach beyond the physical venue. The image captures a well-attended session, indicating strong interest from students, staff, and community members in the topic of Broadcasting Digital Migration. When the lecture was posted online, it generated notable engagement in the form of likes, shares, comments, and feedback, reflecting positive audience reception.

The high number of likes suggested approval and interest in both the speaker and the subject matter, while shares indicated that viewers considered the content relevant enough to distribute within their own networks. Comments further revealed active engagement, with users expressing appreciation for the opportunity to access important national policy discussions within a university setting and also within the country, South Africa at large. Some comments reflected pride in the university's ability

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to host high-profile public engagements, reinforcing a positive institutional image. Feedback from online users also showed that social media allowed individuals who could not attend the event in person to participate virtually by asking questions and sharing opinions.

However, as with many public discussions, a small number of critical, questioning and even negative comments were also evident, highlighting differing views on policy issues. While such comments pose reputational risks if unmanaged, they also demonstrate the interactive nature of social media. However, the online reception of the lecture illustrates how social media amplified institutional visibility, encouraged public dialogue, and positioned the University of Venda as an active space for national discourse.

The University of Venda, as a higher education institution, played a crucial role in facilitating engagement with this national initiative. The video of the public engagement, as shared on the University of Venda's official social media platforms, demonstrates how institutional events are transformed into interactive digital artefacts through social media marketing. The online version of the lecture attracted visible engagement through likes, shares, comments, and viewer feedback, indicating active audience participation beyond the physical campus. Likes functioned as quick indicators of approval and visibility, while shares extended the reach of the content to wider networks, amplifying the university's digital presence. Comments enabled two-way interaction, allowing viewers to express opinions, ask questions, and respond to one another, thereby shifting communication from one-directional broadcasting to participatory engagement. This supports the view that social media facilitates dialogic communication and co-presence between institutions and audiences (Omondi & Kipkoech, 2024). At the same time, the presence of both supportive and critical comments reflects the openness of social media spaces, where institutional messaging is subject to public scrutiny. Such visibility enhances engagement, but also introduces reputational risk if negative feedback is not strategically managed, reinforcing the need for deliberate and responsive social media governance in higher education.

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Figure 5.3: Using social media to market university outreach and access to higher education

University of Venda reached out to the Eastern Cape UNIVEN's Marketing, Branding, and Communication team recently participated in career expos organised by Funda Afrika, in collaboration with the University of Fort Hare and Lovedale TVET College (Madonsela & Ncube, 2025). The events were held at Vulihlanga High School in Butterworth and Umzuvukile High School in Mooiplaas rural areas outside East London in the Eastern Cape Province. UNIVEN officials engaged with learners, offering career guidance and sharing details about the University's academic programmes, admission requirements, and funding options, empowering them to make informed choices about their future.

#UNIVENLeadsTheFuture #CreatingFutureLeaders



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(Source: University of Venda Facebook Page)

The image (also post) can be interpreted using the two theoretical frameworks adopted in this study. From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the University of Venda's use of social media reflects a perception that these platforms are both useful and easy to use for marketing and communication purposes. When audiences interact with the post through likes, comments, and shares, it suggests acceptance of the platform as a credible and effective source of institutional information, supporting Davis's (1989) view that perceived usefulness and ease of use influence continued engagement with technology.

From the standpoint of Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT), the post demonstrates how social media is strategically used to build institutional visibility, communicate values, and engage stakeholders through interactive content (Browne & Tanaka, 2021). SMMT emphasises relationship-building and two-way communication, which is evident in the audience's online participation and engagements. Interestingly, these engagements reveal genuine expressions sometimes coupled with first languages. The expression, "*Am sure they enjoyed themselves na Magwengwelele*

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Takalani T-squared Thabo," it reflects excitement and authenticity. According to the SMMT, this such engagements enhance institutional branding and marketing in higher education.

From a social media ethnography (SME) perspective, the post provides insight into how audiences interact with the University of Venda's official social media platforms and how meaning is constructed through digital engagement rather than through the content alone (Makgopa & Moeng, 2020). SME focuses on observing naturally occurring interactions such as likes, comments, shares, emojis, and patterns of participation to understand how users interpret and respond to institutional messages within their everyday digital environments (Wang, Liu & Evans, 2021). In this context, the engagement surrounding the post reflects how the university's messaging is received, negotiated, and validated by its online audience.

The visible audience interactions suggest that the university's official social media platforms function as legitimate and trusted spaces for communication. Through the lenses of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), such engagement can again be interpreted as evidence of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989). Audience members' willingness to engage digitally indicates that they view the platform as a useful source of information and an accessible channel for interaction. TAM, however, remains largely silent on the qualitative meanings of likes, comments, or shares; it explains why users accept and continue using the platform, but not how cultural meanings or identities are constructed through interaction. This is where SME becomes analytically valuable.

From the perspective of Social Media Marketing Theory (SMMT), audience engagement represents more than passive consumption; it reflects relationship-building and two-way communication between the institution and its stakeholders (McQuail, 2019). SMMT emphasises interaction, dialogue, and participation as central to effective social media marketing. The presence of audience responses whether supportive, inquisitive, or critical demonstrates that the university's official platform is not merely broadcasting information, but they facilitate engagement within a shared digital space. SME allows the study to examine these interactions as social practices that shape institutional reputation and public perception (Rodríguez & Miro-Llinares, 2022).

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Importantly, SME highlights that engagement is not neutral. The positive comments and endorsements strengthen institutional credibility and reinforce brand identity. SMMT acknowledges that social media exposes organisations to public scrutiny and loss of message control (Ahmad & Hashim, 2020). Through SME, such negative interactions can be observed as part of the broader communicative ecology of official platforms. These comments may question institutional claims, highlight unmet expectations, or express dissatisfaction, thereby challenging the curated institutional image. TAM does not explicitly address reputational risk or negative feedback, indicating a theoretical limitation when interpreting audience resistance or critique.

The use of an official institutional platform is significant in SME. Unlike informal or personal accounts, official pages carry institutional authority and symbolic power. Audience engagement on these platforms, therefore, contributes directly to the public construction of institutional identity. SMMT supports this by viewing social media as an extension of organisational branding and marketing strategy (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2017). SME complements SMMT by enabling close observation of how audiences accept, reinterpret, or contest these branding efforts through interaction.

Visual engagement such as reactions to images, tagging, and sharing also plays a role in how meaning circulates. While SMMT recognises engagement as essential, it does not fully theorise how visual cues are culturally interpreted across different social contexts (Chao, 2021). SME fills this gap by situating engagement within the lived digital experiences of users, particularly within South African higher education contexts where social media is a key access point for institutional information.

5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 4 presented the data findings of the study, focusing on the use and effectiveness of social media at the University of Venda. The chapter began with the biographical details of participants, including lecturers, marketing staff, and students, to provide context for their perspectives. The main themes that emerged from the data included official university platforms, personal and departmental use of social media, the effectiveness of social media, engagement with students and external stakeholders, and strategies for improving social media marketing. The findings show that official platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube are strategically used to share information, promote programmes, and enhance visibility.

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The Social Media Ethnography analysis demonstrates that the University of Venda's official social media platforms function as active digital spaces where institutional communication, marketing, and audience interaction intersect. The observed engagement patterns, including likes, comments, shares, and feedback, indicate varying levels of participation, interest, and interpretation by online audiences. These interactions reveal how social media contributes to the visibility of university events, academic programmes, and institutional achievements, while simultaneously shaping public perception and institutional identity. The findings further suggest that effective social media use depends on strategic content planning, staff capacity, consistent interaction, and the integration of audience feedback. Collectively, the SME section highlights social media as a central and dynamic tool for communication and marketing in higher education, benefiting students, staff, and external stakeholders within the contemporary digital environment.

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CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a summary of the study, drawing together the main findings discussed in the previous chapter. It also provides conclusions based on the analysis, as well as recommendations for the study on exploring the use of social media as a marketing tool in institutions of higher learning in South Africa, using the University of Venda as a case study. The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on how the research objectives were achieved and to highlight key insights regarding the role of social media as a tool for communication, marketing, and engagement within the University of Venda context. Furthermore, the chapter examines the study's limitations and outlines the broader implications for university management, marketing teams, and policy development in higher education institutions. Based on these limitations, the chapter also proposes areas for future research.

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY FINDINGS

This section focuses on the discussion of the key themes that emerged from the study, and it links them with existing literature to identify similarities, differences, and gaps. This section provides an in-depth analysis of the findings, demonstrating how the study aligns with or diverges from previous research. The discussion seeks to show the relevance of the study in the broader academic context and highlight areas where the literature supports or challenges the findings. It also identifies gaps in the existing knowledge that the study addressed, contributing new insights to the field.

This discussion is structured according to the main themes that emerged during data analysis. Each theme is examined critically, with reference to contemporary studies and theoretical perspectives. By integrating findings with literature, this section demonstrates how the study extends current understanding, reinforces established concepts, or identifies areas for improvement in practice. The aim was to provide a comprehensive interpretation that is both reflective and analytical, rather than merely descriptive. In addition, the discussion considers the implications of the findings for

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policy, practice, and future research. It highlights how the findings can inform decision-making, improve institutional practices, and contribute to knowledge development. By engaging critically with the literature, this section ensures that the study is situated within the academic discourse, and that its contributions are clearly articulated. This introduction therefore sets the stage for a detailed and structured discussion of the study's findings in relation to scholarly work.

6.2.1 Types of social media platforms used in higher education

The study found that universities increasingly rely on multiple social media platforms to communicate and market their services. The finding is strongly supported by existing literature, which shows that higher education institutions globally have shifted towards digital platforms as primary communication tools (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Researchers argue that universities no longer depend only on official websites or printed materials, but instead use social media to reach audiences quickly and directly (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

Facebook and Instagram are widely recognised in the literature as the most effective platforms for reaching students because they support visual content and interactive communication (Peruta and Shields, 2017). Studies indicate that these platforms allow universities to present academic programmes, events, and campus life in a way that is attractive and easy to understand (Tess, 2013). This supports the finding that these platforms are central to student-focused communication.

The findings indicated that LinkedIn is mainly used for professional engagement, alumni relations, and industry partnerships rather than for direct student recruitment. Participants viewed the platform as important for strengthening the university's professional image, sharing research achievements, and maintaining relationships with external stakeholders. Similarly, the findings show that YouTube plays a significant role in hosting video content that enhances institutional visibility and provides detailed information about academic programmes, research activities, and the university's identity. Video-based content was perceived as particularly effective in communicating complex information and showcasing the university's strengths in a more engaging and accessible manner.

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Further, the findings indicate that WhatsApp is widely used as a practical communication tool, particularly because of its low data requirements and ease of use. Participants highlighted that the platform supports quick academic communication, announcements, and peer interaction, especially in contexts where students experience connectivity and cost challenges. These findings suggest that the choice of social media platforms is shaped not only by marketing objectives but also by socio-economic realities. The study further reveals that using multiple social media platforms enables the university to reach diverse audiences more effectively. However, the findings also reveal that without clear coordination and an overarching strategy, the use of multiple platforms may result in fragmented or inconsistent messaging. This underscores the importance of structured and well-managed social media practices within the institution.

6.2.2 Effectiveness of social media in promoting university programmes and services

The study established that social media plays a significant role in increasing the visibility of university programmes, events, and services. This is consistent with literature that identifies social media as a powerful marketing and communication tool in higher education (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011). Social media allows institutions to share information instantly with large audiences, which increases awareness and participation.

Visibility is a central concept in digital marketing literature. Studies show that frequent and clear social media posts increase the likelihood that audiences will notice and remember institutional messages (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Visual content, such as images and videos, has been found to attract more attention than text-based content, particularly among younger users (Sabate et al., 2014). This explains why social media is more effective than traditional posters or emails in many contexts.

Engagement is also widely discussed as a measure of effectiveness. Likes, comments, and shares are recognised as indicators that content is reaching and resonating with audiences (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013). Literature shows that engagement not only reflects interest but also extends the reach of content, as shared posts appear in new networks (Kietzmann et al., 2011). This supports the idea that social media effectiveness is linked to interaction rather than one-way communication.

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Research further shows that engagement data can guide content planning and strategic decision-making (Romero-Hall et al., 2024). Universities that analyse engagement metrics are better able to identify what type of content works best and adjust their strategies accordingly. This aligns with the study's finding that social media effectiveness depends on both visibility and interaction.

However, some studies have warned that high engagement does not always translate directly into outcomes such as enrolment (Peruta and Shields, 2017). This suggests that while social media is effective for awareness and participation, it should be integrated with broader marketing strategies to achieve long-term goals.

6.2.3 Communication and interaction between the university and stakeholders

The study highlighted that social media improves communication between staff and students, as well as engagement with external stakeholders such as communities, parents, and alumni. This finding aligns with research that describes social media as a tool for two-way communication rather than one-directional information sharing (Kent and Taylor, 2016).

Literature shows that social media reduces communication barriers by allowing faster, more informal interaction between students and staff (Junco, 2012). This form of communication supports academic guidance, reminders, and clarification outside traditional classroom settings. It also promotes a sense of connection and belonging, which is important for student success (Tess, 2013).

Engagement with external stakeholders is also supported by research on stakeholder theory in higher education. Studies indicate that universities use social media to maintain relationships with alumni, community organisations, and industry partners (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013). This engagement enhances institutional reputation and supports collaboration, funding opportunities, and community outreach.

Transparency is another benefit highlighted in the literature. Social media allows universities to show their activities openly, which builds trust and accountability (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012). This is particularly important in public institutions where stakeholders expect openness and responsiveness. However, scholars caution that effective communication requires clear policies and moderation to prevent misinformation and misinterpretation (Manca and Ranieri, 2017). This suggests that

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while social media enhances interaction, it must be managed responsibly to maintain credibility.

6.2.4 Strategies for improving social media marketing in higher education

The study identified staff training, content planning, interactivity, and feedback integration as key strategies for improving social media marketing. These findings are strongly supported by the literature on digital marketing and organisational communication. Research shows that many academic staff lack formal training in social media marketing, which limits the quality and consistency of content (Strother, 2020). Training programmes improve staff confidence, creativity, and understanding of platform-specific strategies (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). This supports the need for capacity building within universities.

Content planning is widely recognised as essential for effective social media use. Literature recommends the use of content calendars to ensure regular, timely, and purposeful posting (Sabate et al., 2014). Planned content supports institutional branding and prevents irregular or reactive posting. Interactivity is also emphasised in the literature as a key driver of engagement. Posts that encourage participation, such as questions or interactive features, create stronger connections with audiences (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Feedback integration allows institutions to adapt content based on audience needs, which improves relevance and trust (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012).

6.3 CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore the use and effectiveness of social media as a marketing and communication tool at the University of Venda. The findings reveal that social media is a central component of the university's communication strategy, serving multiple purposes, including increasing visibility of programmes and events, engaging students and external stakeholders, facilitating communication, and enhancing the institution's public image. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and YouTube were identified as critical tools for reaching diverse audiences, with each platform serving specific purposes aligned with the university's strategic objectives.

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This study highlights that official university platforms are essential for structured communication and ensuring a consistent public image. These platforms enable the university to disseminate information widely and in a timely manner, supporting both academic and administrative processes. In addition, the findings demonstrate that personal or departmental use of social media complements official channels by providing more immediate, interactive, and context-specific communication. This dual approach enhances student engagement and strengthens relationships between staff and learners, and it confirms the importance of social media as both an informational and participatory medium.

The effectiveness of social media was evident in terms of increased visibility, interaction, and participation. Engagement through likes, comments, and shares was shown to amplify reach, foster a sense of community, and facilitate peer-to-peer information sharing. Social media also allowed students, staff, and external stakeholders to interact meaningfully, enabling feedback and continuous improvement of communication strategies. The study further revealed that strategic content planning, interactivity, and responsiveness to feedback are key determinants of effective social media use. Well-planned posts that combine visual elements, interactive features, and timely information enhance engagement and encourage student participation in academic and extracurricular activities.

The research also underscores the critical role of staff capacity and training. Limitations in skills and knowledge can reduce the effectiveness of social media initiatives, while structured training and capacity-building programmes empower staff to create high-quality, engaging, and strategically aligned content. Developing staff competence ensures that social media activities are consistent, professional, and responsive to audience needs, which is essential for achieving the university's communication and marketing objectives.

In conclusion, social media has become an indispensable tool for the University of Venda, providing a platform for communication, marketing, engagement, and community building. The integration of official and personal channels, coupled with strategic planning, interactivity, and continuous feedback maximises the effectiveness of social media marketing. To maintain and enhance this effectiveness, the university must prioritise staff development, ensure consistent content planning, and actively

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incorporate feedback from students and external stakeholders. Social media is not only a communication medium but also a strategic instrument that strengthens the university's visibility, engagement, and reputation in the higher education landscape.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and supported by relevant literature, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the use of social media in promoting the University of Venda's programmes, services, and engagement with students and external stakeholders. These recommendations address areas such as staff capacity, content strategy, audience engagement, policy development, and monitoring effectiveness.

6.4.1 Staff Training and Capacity Development

The study revealed that staff often lack sufficient knowledge and skills to maximise the potential of social media. To address this, it is recommended that the university implement structured training programmes for academic and administrative staff. Training should include content creation, visual design, video production, analytics, and platform-specific best practices. Capacity building enhances professional confidence and ensures the production of consistent, high-quality content (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Strother, 2020). Staff training would also enable the strategic use of hashtags, interactive posts, and professional branding, aligning with the study finding that staff skills directly influence the quality of posts and student engagement. Regular workshops and refresher sessions can ensure staff remain updated on emerging trends and tools in social media marketing.

6.4.2 Strategic content planning and scheduling

The findings emphasise the importance of planning content to improve visibility and engagement. It is recommended that the university adopt a structured content calendar that schedules posts for all official social media platforms. Literature indicates that pre-planned, consistent, and purposeful posting increases audience reach and ensures alignment with institutional objectives (Sabate et al., 2014; Peruta and Shields, 2017). The content calendar should account for academic calendars, programme promotions, event announcements, research outputs, and community

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initiatives. Content should also be diverse, including images, videos, infographics, and interactive materials, as research demonstrates that visual and interactive content attracts more engagement than plain text (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013). This strategic approach will reduce ad hoc posting, maintain consistency, and enhance the professional image of the university.

6.4.3 Enhancing audience engagement through interactivity

The study highlighted that engagement through likes, comments, and shares significantly improves the effectiveness of social media. It is recommended that the university design posts that encourage participation, such as polls, quizzes, discussion prompts, and interactive stories. Literature confirms that interactivity not only increases user engagement but also strengthens a sense of belonging and connection among students and other stakeholders (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Tess, 2013). Additionally, integrating mechanisms for feedback allows the university to understand audience preferences and tailor content to their interests, as observed in the study. Engaging content should also consider external stakeholders, including parents, alumni, and community partners, to strengthen institutional relationships and reputation.

6.4.4 Developing social media policies and guidelines

Another recommendation is the establishment of clear social media policies and guidelines. The study identified inconsistencies in posts across departments and occasional delays in information dissemination. Literature highlights that formal policies ensure consistent messaging, protect institutional reputation, and provide guidance on ethical and professional social media use (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012; Manca and Ranieri, 2017). Policies should define roles and responsibilities, outline acceptable behaviour, provide approval procedures for official content, and establish monitoring protocols. A clear framework will ensure that staff posts are professional, reliable, and aligned with university objectives, while also mitigating risks such as misinformation, inappropriate content, or conflicts with institutional values.

6.4.5 Monitoring and evaluating social media effectiveness

Finally, the study revealed the importance of measuring the effectiveness of social media strategies. It is recommended that the university implement systematic

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monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track engagement, reach, and impact. Literature indicates that metrics such as likes, shares, comments, video views, and click-through rates provide valuable insights into audience interaction and content performance (Romero-Hall et al., 2024; Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013). Analytics should inform content adjustments, posting schedules, and engagement strategies to maximise reach and effectiveness. Regular evaluation reports will enable continuous improvement and evidence-based decision-making. Combining quantitative metrics with qualitative feedback, such as surveys or focus groups, will provide a comprehensive understanding of social media performance and its contribution to university objectives.

6.5 AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research should explore the long-term impact of social media marketing on student enrolment, retention, and academic engagement at the University of Venda. Studies could examine the effectiveness of different types of interactive content and platform-specific strategies in reaching diverse student and stakeholder groups. Comparative research across South African universities may provide insights into best practices and contextual challenges. Additionally, investigating the role of analytics and feedback integration in shaping content strategy could further enhance the understanding of social media effectiveness in higher education.

6.6 STUDY LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

This study was subject to a few limitations that may have influenced the findings. Firstly, the research was conducted solely at the University of Venda, which limits the generalisability of the results to other universities or higher education institutions with different contexts, cultures, or technological capacities. Secondly, the study relied primarily on qualitative data from interviews, which the researcher had to treat carefully to address bias, and subjective interpretations, as alluded to in Chapter 3. The study's focus on staff, marketing personnel, and students may also exclude the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as alumni, parents, or external community members, whose insights could provide additional understanding of social media marketing effectiveness.

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Delimitations were deliberately applied to maintain focus and feasibility. The study concentrated on the use and effectiveness of social media platforms officially and personally used within the university context. Only participants actively engaged with the university's social media were included. This study examined specific aspects of social media marketing visibility, engagement, communication, and strategies for improvement while excluding other digital marketing tools such as email campaigns or websites. These delimitations ensured a focused and in-depth exploration of the research objectives.

6.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 5 presented a comprehensive summary of the study findings, conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and implications regarding the use of social media as a marketing tool at the University of Venda. The chapter synthesised key findings from the data analysis, highlighting that social media plays a vital role in enhancing visibility, communication, and engagement between the university and its stakeholders. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, and X were found to serve distinct but complementary marketing and communication functions. The findings further revealed that effective social media marketing depends on strategic content planning, interactivity, feedback integration, and staff capacity development. The chapter concluded that social media is an indispensable strategic tool for university marketing and engagement. Practical recommendations were proposed to strengthen staff training, content coordination, policy development, and performance monitoring. The chapter also acknowledged study limitations related to scope and methodology and identified areas for future research to expand understanding of social media marketing in higher education.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH ETHICS TRAINING CERTIFICATES



TRREE

Zertifikat
Certificat
Certificado
Certificate

Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale
Promoting the highest ethical standards in the protection of biomedical research participants

Certificat de formation - Training Certificate

Ce document atteste que - this document certifies that

Takalani Thabo

a complété avec succès - has successfully completed

Module 1 (2023) - Introduction to Research Ethics

du programme de formation TRREE en évaluation éthique de la recherche
of the TRREE training programme in research ethics evaluation

Release Date: 2025/09/30
CID : 9pk7UL8mn4

Professeur Dominique Sprumont
Coordinateur TRREE Coordinator

APPROVED BY SIWF FMH ISFM
Programmes de formation continue (2 crédits)
Continuing Education Programs (2 credits)

HKU Med LKS Faculty of Medicine Clinical Trials Centre 香港大學臨床試驗中心

Ce programme est soutenu par - This program is supported by :
European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) (www.edctp.org) - Swiss National Science Foundation (www.snf.ch) - Canadian Institutes of Health Research (http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/2891.html) - Swiss Academy of Medical Science (SAMS/ASSM/SAMW) (www.samw.ch) - Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (www.kfpe.ch)

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Module 2 (2023) - Research Ethics Evaluation

du programme de formation TRREE en évaluation éthique de la recherche
of the TRREE training programme in research ethics evaluation

Release Date: 2025/09/30
CID : fbkkhLNED

Professeur Dominique Sprumont
Coordinateur TRREE Coordinator

APPROVED BY SIWF FMH ISFM
Programmes de formation continue (2 crédits)
Continuing Education Programs (2 credits)

HKU Med LKS Faculty of Medicine
Clinical Trials Centre
香港大學臨床試驗中心

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Promouvoir les plus hauts standards éthiques dans la protection des participants à la recherche biomédicale
Promoting the highest ethical standards in the protection of biomedical research participants

Certificat de formation - Training Certificate

Ce document atteste que - this document certifies that

Takalani Thabo

a complété avec succès - has successfully completed

Module 3 (2023) - Informed Consent

du programme de formation TRREE en évaluation éthique de la recherche
of the TRREE training programme in research ethics evaluation

Release Date: 2025/09/30
CID : igA7mjoAuv

Professeur Dominique Sprumont
Coordinateur TRREE Coordinator

APPROVED BY SIWF FMH ISFM
Programmes de formation continue (2 crédits)
Continuing Education Programs (2 credits)

HKU Med LKS Faculty of Medicine Clinical Trials Centre 香港大學臨床試驗中心

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APPENDIX 3: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Appendix 3.1: Interview Questions for Academic Staff

Section	Interview Questions
A. Biographical Information	1. How many years have you been working at the University of Venda? 2. Which faculty or department do you belong to?
B. Types of Social Media Platforms Used	3. Which social media platforms does your department use to share academic or promotional information? 4. How do you personally use social media for academic or marketing purposes? 5. Which platform do you find most suitable for reaching students or potential applicants?
C. Effectiveness of Social Media	6. Do you believe social media enhances the visibility of university academic programmes? 7. How effective do you think social media is in promoting research and innovation at the university? 8. How do students respond to academic or departmental updates posted on social media?
D. Communication and Interaction	9. How has social media improved communication between staff and students? 10. Does social media help you engage with the broader community or industry partners?
E. Strategies for Improvement	11. What do you think could be done to improve the use of social media for marketing academic programmes? 12. Would you support staff training on effective social media marketing techniques? 13. How can academic departments contribute to the university's overall social media strategy?

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Appendix 3.2: Interview Questions for Students

Section	Interview Questions
A. Biographical Information	1. How long have you been studying at the University of Venda? 2. Which faculty or department are you currently enrolled in?
B. Types of Social Media Platforms Used	3. Which social media platforms do you mostly use to follow university updates? 4. How often do you see posts or adverts from the University of Venda on social media? 5. Which platform do you think is most effective in promoting university events or programmes? 6. Do you think the university's social media pages are easy to use and access?
C. Effectiveness of Social Media	7. How do social media posts influence your decision to attend university events or activities? 8. In your opinion, are social media promotions more effective than posters or emails? 9. Do you think social media improves the university's public image among students?
D. Communication and Interaction	10. How does social media help you communicate with university staff or marketing teams? 11. In what ways does social media help you stay informed about academic and non-academic matters?
E. Strategies for Improvement	12. What improvements would you suggest for the university's social media marketing? 13. Do you think student opinions should be considered when planning social media content?

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Appendix 3.3: Interview Questions for Administrative Staff

Section	Interview Questions
A. Biographical Information	1. What is your current role within the university administration or marketing department? 2. How long have you been involved in marketing or communication activities at the university?
B. Types of Social Media Platforms Used	3. Which social media platforms are officially used by the University of Venda for marketing? 4. What factors influence your choice of platforms for different campaigns? 5. How consistent are social media updates across various departments?
C. Effectiveness of Social Media	6. How do you measure the effectiveness of social media marketing at the university? 7. Have social media campaigns led to noticeable improvements in student enrolment or event participation? 8. What type of content (videos, posters, stories) attracts the most engagement?
D. Communication and Interaction	9. How does social media help in building relationships with students and the public? 10. In what ways has social media improved the university's communication with external stakeholders such as communities or partners?
E. Strategies for Improvement	11. What challenges do you face when managing the university's social media platforms? 12. Do you believe there is a need for a dedicated social media management team? 13. What strategies could make the university's social media presence stronger and more engaging? 14. How can feedback from students and staff be integrated into the university's marketing strategy?

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APPENDIX 4: LETTER OF PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Mr. Takalani Thabo
Student Number: 23009806
Department of English, Media Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education
University of Venda
Email: Takalani.Thabo@univen.ac.za
Date: 14 August 2025

Dr Takalani Dzaga
University of Venda
Thohoyandou
South Africa

Dear Dr. Dzaga

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO COLLECT DATA FOR A MASTER'S STUDY

I am writing to respectfully request permission to collect data for my Master of Arts in Media Studies research study titled *"Exploring the Use of Social Media Platforms as a Marketing Tool in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda."*

© University of Venda

The purpose of the study is to examine how social media platforms are used as marketing tools at the University of Venda, and to assess their effectiveness in promoting university programmes, services, and communication with students and other stakeholders. The study also seeks to identify challenges and propose strategies for improving social media marketing practices within the institution.

The study will adopt a qualitative research approach. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with selected students, academic staff, and marketing personnel. Participation in the study will be voluntary, and all ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, will be strictly observed. No participant will be compelled to take part, and participants will have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Ethical clearance will be obtained from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee before data collection begins. Permission will also be sought from relevant departments where participants will be identified.
I kindly request your permission to conduct this study and to collect data within the University of Venda. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to knowledge on social media marketing in higher education and may assist the university in improving its communication and marketing strategies.
Your support and approval of this request will be highly appreciated.
Yours sincerely

Takalani Thabo
Master of Arts in Media Studies Candidate
University of Venda

APPENDIX 5: PERMISSION TO COLLECT DATA

University of Venda
Department of English, Media Studies and Linguistics
Private Bag X5050

© University of Venda

Thohoyandou, 0950
South Africa

Date: 28 August 2025

Mr. Takalani Thabo
Student Number: 23009806
Department of English, Media Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education
University of Venda

Dear Mr. Thabo

RE: PERMISSION TO COLLECT DATA FOR MASTER'S RESEARCH STUDY

The above matter refers.

Permission is hereby granted for you to collect data for your Master of Arts in Media Studies research study titled *"Exploring the Use of Social Media Platforms as a Marketing Tool in Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda."*

This permission is granted on the understanding that all ethical requirements of the University of Venda are strictly adhered to. You are required to obtain ethical clearance from the University of Venda Research Ethics Committee prior to commencing data collection. Participation by respondents must be voluntary, and informed consent must be obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants must be maintained at all times.

You are further advised to ensure that data collection does not disrupt normal academic or administrative activities of the university. Access to participants should be arranged at times that are convenient to them and in consultation with relevant departmental authorities where necessary.

The University of Venda will not be held responsible for any risks arising from the conduct of the study. A copy of the final research report is kindly requested for record and academic purposes upon completion of the study.

We wish you well in your research.

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Yours sincerely

Dr Takalani Dzaga
University of Venda

© University of Venda

APPENDIX 6: TURNITIN REPORT

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APPENDIX 7: ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

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APPENDIX 8: INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

UNIVEN Informed Consent

Appendix B

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Title of the Research Study : Exploring social media as a tool for improving Marketing Services at the University of Venda

Principal Investigator/s/ researcher : Takalani Thabo

Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s : Dr. M Mabika
Dr. T Nodoba

Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:

Outline of the Procedures : (*Responsibilities of the participant, consultation/interview/survey details, venue details, inclusion/exclusion criteria, explanation of tools and measurement outcomes, any follow-ups, any placebo or no treatment, how much time required of participant, what is expected of participants, randomization/ group allocation*)

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to explore the use of social media platforms as tools for enhancing marketing services at the University of Venda. The study aims to understand current practices, identify challenges, and examine opportunities for improving the effectiveness of social media in promoting the university's activities and services. The findings will provide valuable insights to inform strategies that can strengthen the university's communication and marketing efforts.

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Participation involves two main activities: semi-structured interviews and observation of the university's social media platforms (digital ethnography). You will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, either in person at a designated university venue or online via a secure platform, depending on your preference. The questions will focus on your experiences, perceptions, and views regarding the use of social media for marketing at the University of Venda.

Inclusion criteria include being a student, academic staff member, or marketing personnel at the University of Venda who actively engages with the university's social media platforms. Exclusion criteria include individuals not associated with the university or those who do not use social media for academic or marketing purposes.

No placebo or treatment will be involved. Interviews will be conducted once, with no mandatory follow-ups, although participants may be contacted for clarification if needed. The researcher will also conduct digital ethnography for a period from June 2024 to June 2025 to observe social media engagement patterns.

Risks or Discomforts to the Participant: (*Description of foreseeable risks or discomforts to for participants if applicable e.g. Transient muscle pain, VBAI, post-needle soreness, other adverse reactions, etc.)*
There are no significant risks involved in this study. Some participants may feel slight discomfort when discussing challenges or critiques related to social media practices, but no physical or psychological harm is anticipated.

Benefits : (*To the participant and to the researcher/s e.g. Publications*)
Reason/s why the Participant May Be Withdrawn from the Study: (*Non-compliance, illness, adverse reactions, etc. Need to state that there will be no adverse consequences for the participant should they choose to withdraw)*
Participants may benefit indirectly by contributing to improvements in the university's marketing strategies. The researcher will benefit from obtaining rich, qualitative data that informs the study, which may result in publications or reports contributing to academic knowledge.
Remuneration : (*Will the participant receive any monetary or other types of remuneration?)*
Participants will not receive any monetary or material compensation for participating in this study.
Costs of the Study : (*Will the participant be expected to cover any costs towards the study?)*
Participants will not incur any costs by taking part in this study.
Confidentiality : (*Description of the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained and how will this be maintained*)
All information provided will be treated confidentially. Your responses will be anonymized, and no personal identifiers will be included in publications or reports. Data will be securely stored and accessible only to the research team.
Research-related Injury : (*What will happen should there be a research-related injury or adverse reaction? Will there be any compensation*?)

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No research-related injuries are anticipated. If any unforeseen discomfort occurs, participants can contact the researcher or supervisor for assistance. There is no formal compensation scheme, as the study does not involve medical or physical procedures.

Persons to Contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:
(Supervisor and details) Please contact the researcher (tel no. 082 804 1174), University Research Ethics Committee Secretariat on 015 962 9058 / Vanecia.Khoza@univen.ac.za

Complaints can be reported to the University Research Ethics Committee Secretariat on 015 962 9058 / Vanecia.Khoza@univen.ac.za or Whistle blowing Ethics Hotline Tollfree Telephone number: 0800212755 Email.univenhotline@tipoffs.com

General:
Potential participants must be assured that participation is voluntary and the approximate number of participants to be included should be disclosed. A copy of the information letter should be issued to participants. The information letter and consent form must be translated and provided in the primary spoken language of the research population

CONSENT

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, (*name of researcher*), about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: _,
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (*Participant Letter of Information*) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerized system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

Full Name of Participant Date Time Signature

I, …… …… ……
……..

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(*Name of researcher*) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully

Informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

Full Name of Researcher



Takalani Thabo **02/10/2025**

…… Date…… Signature……

Full Name of Witness (If applicable)

…… Date …… Signature……..

Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)

…… Date…… Signature……

Please note the following:

Research details must be provided in a clear, simple and culturally appropriate manner and prospective participants should be helped to arrive at an informed decision by use of appropriate language (grade 10 level- use Flesch Reading Ease Scores on Microsoft Word), selecting of a non-threatening environment for interaction and the availability of peer counseling (Department of Health, 2004)

If the potential participant is unable to read/illiterate, then a right thumb print is required and an impartial witness, who is literate and knows the participant e.g. parent, sibling, friend, pastor, etc. should verify in writing, duly signed that informed verbal consent was obtained (Department of Health, 2004).

If anyone makes a mistake completing this document e.g. a wrong date or spelling mistake, a new document has to be completed. The incomplete original document has to be kept in the participant's file and not thrown away, and copies thereof must be issued to the participant.

References:



Department of Health: 2004. *Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Structures and Processes*

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http://www.doh.gov.za/docs/factsheets/guidelines/ethnics/

Department of Health. 2006. *South African Good Clinical Practice Guidelines*. 2nd Ed. Available at:

http://www.nhrec.org.za/?page_id=14.

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