

INVESTIGATING HOW DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES CAN BE USED BY SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

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Keywords

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This perspective article investigates digital marketing strategies for South African higher education institutions and aims to give guidance on how higher education institutions in South Africa can use digital marketing strategies and the benefits of using these digital marketing strategies. The article adopts an interpretative approach to existing literature on digital marketing strategies. This approach helps to understand how higher education institutions can use digital marketing strategies and how they could benefit from using these strategies. Utilising digital marketing strategies is important for higher education institution's growth. This article emphasises the need to intensify the understanding and the use of digital marketing strategies and the role that these strategies can play in shaping and positioning higher education institutions to develop and be competitive. This perspective article calls for the use of digital marketing strategies by higher education institution marketing managers to attract prospective students and retain current students. Considering students' expectations and rivalry among higher education institutions, novel practical ways - through the adaptation of market-oriented instruments as well as business mechanisms in higher education - are required. This article highlights the importance of digital marketing strategies in higher education institutions and the need to investigate the role of digital marketing strategies in HEIs. There are many digital marketing strategies that are used by businesses but are currently not being used by HEIs. The institutions need to be made aware of these digital marketing strategies and how they can be beneficial to them. This perspective article highlights the benefits that HEIs can gain from using digital marketing strategies. It with a proposed framework of HEIs' digital marketing strategies and benefits.

1. Introduction

According to Harbi and Ali (2022), digital marketing is about putting all marketing efforts on mobile apps, computers, tablets and other mobile devices using the internet to attract potential customers. Digital marketing is characterised by the words "internet marketing", "digital marketing" and "web marketing". Jain (2019) states that one of the most significant benefits of digital marketing is the democratisation of information, which is customised, targeted, and easily accessible on a scale that was confined to a simple application of electronic technology to marketing but also able to advance with emerging developments in information as well as communication technology tools and platforms (Krishen et al., 202). Every marketer in the world is increasingly aware of the advantages of using the internet in marketing efforts (Popa, Tarca, & Sasu, 2016). Marketing experts are also aware that digital marketing tools can provide marketers with the opportunity to produce innovative and fascinating new techniques (Popa, et. al, 2016). With more professionals studying this field, the significance of digital marketing strategies for institutions of higher education is being increasingly emphasised (Popa, et. al, 2016).

The emergence of internet businesses, which offer services tailored specifically for higher education institutions, shows that digital marketing and digital promotion for such institutions are recognised as being important (Peter & Dalla Vecchia 2021). According to Momen, Sultana and Haque (2020), internet-based marketing communication has been an important element for organisations to build brand image and brand equity. Higher education is no exception. Education is a key factor in the development of a society (Durkin, McKenna, & Cummins, 2012). Mishina and Pace (2021) note that higher education institutions have to improve and develop their marketing strategies. As such, digital marketing is identified as one of the most powerful tools in promoting education services. In recent years the competition between higher educational institutions in recruiting students has significantly increased (Mishina & Pace 2021). According to Mishina and Pace (2021), contemporary research indicates that students' choice of higher educational institutions is influenced by digital media. Higher education marketing specialists should develop stronger and more consistent communication strategies to establish more valuable relationships with prospective students (Del Rocío Bonilla, Perea, del Olmo & Corrons, 2020). Higher education institutions need to know not only what their communication messages should be but also how to deal with an increasingly elusive user (Del Rocío Bonilla, Perea, del Olmo & Corrons 2020). John and De Villiers (2022) indicate that higher education providers should commit themselves to customer-centric service-oriented tactics and actions. These must earn customers' trust and build loyalty from their marketing practices.

Colleges should adopt marketing into their strategic plan if they want to survive and succeed in the competitive environment (Alexa, Alexa, & Stoica, 2012). Higher educational institutions around the world can establish brand awareness and market their education services on a local and international

level using digital marketing (Mishina & Pace 2021). Higher competition and a changing social context are two significant factors that have led public and private higher education institutions to become more aggressive and business oriented (Alexa, et. al, 2012). Higher education has emerged as one of the leading sectors around the world that use Google Ads to direct people to institution websites (Peter and Dalla Vecchia, 2021). Although they understand the potential of these channels to connect with and attract new students, higher education institutions are among the organisations that are growing more eager to use social media as a marketing instrument (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). When compared with other conventional marketing strategies used in higher education marketing, Constantinides and Stagno (2011) contend that whereas prospective students' use of social media is incredibly high, social networks have a relatively minor effect on choosing a particular topic of study and educational institution. Education institutions are looking for different strategies to offer their programs to engage potential students (Harbi & Ali 2022). Digital marketing can help education institutions to target prospective students, enrol students, engage students, provide placements, design curricula, communicate with students, offer career counselling, and develop alumni contacts (Harbi & Ali 2022). Many people believe that higher education is the major avenue for improving the lives of previously under-represented communities (Dennin, Schultz, Feig, Finkelstein, Greenhoot, Hildreth & Miller, 2017). Nonetheless, higher education institutions are competing for students while confronting several expectations on how to adapt to a fast-changing world (Roy, 2016). Considering students' expectations and rivalry among higher education institutions, novel practical ways through adaptation of market-oriented mechanisms - as well as business mechanisms in higher education - are required (Azizi, 2020). It is based on this background that this study aim to investigate how digital marketing strategies can be used by higher education institutions of South Africa.

2. Literature Review

2.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Higher education institutions' existence in the market indicates that it is evolving in a highly difficult environment that is always changing (Casap, 2018). For students, choosing an institution to pursue is still a difficult task (Nuseir & El Refae, 2022). In the early 20th century, higher education institutions focused more on education quality than marketing their programmes to potential students (Lund and Wang, 2020). In order to be relevant locally and globally competitive, higher education institutions need to become more marketing oriented (Wiese, 2008). Higher education institutions will have to assess and reassess marketing strategies aimed at attracting quality first year students (Wiese, 2008). Higher education institutions are forced to focus on restructuring and repositioning themselves, build a strong brand, communicate their image and sustain their position to ensure a competitive advantage

(Wiese 2008). Ebewo and Sirayi (2018) believe that South Africa's higher education system has developed beyond its fragmented, blinkered, elite, and irregular apartheid heritage in recent years. South African higher education institutions have followed specific methodologies, which can be viewed as monotonous, in inducing students to apply to their respective institutions (Matli, Tlapana & Hawkins-Mofokeng, 2021).

Until the 1990s, attracting the correct number of students - or the right mix of students - was not a priority because state funding was frequently granted with insignificant reporting requirements other than academic success. This implies a continuous stream of income to fund operations (Council on Higher Education, 2016). This, however, has shifted in recent years (Matli et al., 2021). Mergers of higher education institutions can be considered as part of South Africa's post-apartheid transition (Matli et al., 2021). The post-apartheid era has been characterised by a major restructuring of the higher education landscape in South Africa (Wiese et al., 2009). Although the new equitable South African government attempted to oblige two unmistakable ideas of change: the attempt to rebuild advanced education to develop worldwide intensity further a market-driven approach from one perspective (Gray & Czerniewicz, 2018).

The South African government had difficulty implementing one of its key development principles, with the goal to reform higher education to boost global competitiveness a market-driven approach (Gray & Czerniewicz, 2018). These problems suggest the future of education institutions will have to keep spending on adequate resources, competencies, and capabilities to control themselves among increasing competition in difficult socio-economic environments and marketing strategies (Camilleri, 2020).

HEIs are searching for cutting-edge and powerful marketing strategies. Competition among institutions is compelling them to adopt competitive marketing strategies (Nuseir & El Refae 2022). Higher education financing sources are contracting slightly as competition for college enrolment rises, and management's responsibility for implementing successful programmes is growing (Tucker & Au, 2019). Therefore, the HEI marketing managers must plan and coordinate their promotional operations (Camilleri, 2020). According to Sessa (2014), it is critical for higher education organisations not solely to integrate social media into their plan, but also to employ this instrument strategically to engage new generations of students. Technology not only makes information easy to acquire but it also enables people to communicate digital (Kusumawati et al., 2014). In this regard, internet-based tools and technology can be quite helpful (Kumar & Nanda, 2019). These characteristics of the marketing environment impose a systematic preoccupation on the institution for information adjustment, received data-processing and analysis to substantiate the optimal decisions properly that are related to the market (Casap, 2018). The paper focuses on understanding various aspects of the information support in education institutions' decision-making process (Casap, 2018). Determining the nature and extent of guidance in education marketing is the goal of this study (Casap, 2018).

Education is a service activity and under impact of different market conditions, the managers of educational institutions must continuously seek detection of unpredicted problems and quality of adaption to them and adaption of marketing strategies to the changing needs (Azizi 2020).

2.2. BENEFITS OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

Marketing has gone through major changes (Alvermann & Sanders, 2019) and the internet has played a key role in this revolution (Suleiman, Muhammad, Yahaya, Adamu and Sabo, 2020). Change is unavoidable as emerging communication technologies have fostered an increasingly competitive environment in which a marketing-oriented, edge-to-down, centralised approach gives way to a customer-oriented, complementary mechanism in which customers are the priority (Joung, Jung, Ko, & Kim, 2019).

According to Risteska (2023), marketers have responded to this vital change by increasing their use of digital marketing channels and effective digital marketing strategies to ensure their marketing efforts are more likely to reach customers and will, in turn, lead to significant commercial benefits. Christina, Fenni and Roselina (2019) note that one of the paid or subscription television companies in Indonesia makes an integrated marketing communication plans using the internet a tool for promoting its product. Digital marketing is unique in its ability to get public attention quicker (Christina, Fenni & Roselina, 2019). Risteska (2023) states that consumer buying behaviour is greatly influenced by the interaction of consumers with digital marketing. This type of marketing is not only giving information to the customer but also to customer candidates (Christina, Fenni and Roselina, 2019). The benefits of using digital marketing strategies are explained in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Benefits of digital marketing strategies for HEIs

Empowering effect	The introduction of online marketing is not just about empowering new businesses but it also has an impact on existing businesses because the internet can help businesses penetrate the market (Suleiman et al., 2020). In reality, the internet provides a type of democratised world in which marketing has been restructured to give even upcoming businesses a fair chance of selling and branding their goods on a much greater scale (Clement, 2020). The Internet created unprecedented opportunities for upcoming businesses to participate in national and international marketing campaigns that were previously impossible to achieve owing to the massive number of resources required (Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Digital marketing is a valuable tool for HEIs to increase their market share and competitiveness.
Elimination of geographic barriers	One of the main benefits of digital marketing is that it removes all geographic constraints from the buying and selling process (Clement,

	<p>2020). The internet has thus limitless global scope at extremely low speeds (Clement, 2020). Global exposure was once the exclusionary realm of large multinationals because of the high cost of traditional advertising. The advent of cost-effective internet technology has enabled businesses to experience this kind of scope (Suleiman et al., 2020). HEIs will be able to attract international students without having to be located internationally.</p>
24-hour / seven days availability	<p>The Internet can now deliver relevant information to clients 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Shopping on the Internet would be more convenient because you don't have to leave home, visit different shops and take responsibility for comparing different goods and costs (Clement, 2020). The buyers will do their shopping from the comfort of their own home even more effectively, which saves a lot of time and money (Suleiman et al., 2020). Within the HEI set-up, the information about the HEIs is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which means that advertising and marketing do not have to take place at a particular time.</p>
Cost-effectiveness	<p>Digital marketing is cost-effective and can accomplish its goals at a fraction of the cost (Clement, 2020). For example, it is clear that the cost of setting up an ad digitally is far lower than placing an advertisement in a journal or a public notice (Suleiman et al., 2020). The price of virtual presence is considerably lower in networking with other companies and communicating with customers. As a result, internet marketing allows businesses to retain their income and quality, which is highly appreciated by businesses because online marketing techniques do not need substantial assets (Clement, 2020). HEIs will find digital marketing to be cost-effective and capable of achieving their objectives at a significantly lower cost.</p>
Trackability	<p>Digital marketing's trackability is one of its further advantages (Clement, 2020). The websites of companies allows the calculation of anything that happens within the company. It is therefore easy to calculate the times of clicks that a specific advertisement is placed here as well as the amount of traffic on the site (Clement, 2020). It allows the marketer the opportunity to track and appreciate their actions by tracking the number of users on their website (Joung et al., 2018). The websites can also allow businesses the opportunity to know whether or not their advertising is effective and the type of consumers who are interested in their goods and where and how they are (Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Website log analysis and real-time</p>

	<p>profiling track the number of customers visiting each page, the position of earlier visited pages, date of access, time of browsing, length of browsing, and links followed (Clement, 2020). Trackability will allow HEI marketers the option of tracking and appreciating their actions by tracking the number of users on their websites.</p>
Personalisation	<p>Personalisation can be defined as customising products and services according to customers' previous digital purchasing history according to their preferences (Armstrong, Kotler, Harker, & Brennan, 2018). Electronic contact with customers allows comprehensive information to be gathered about the needs of each particular customer, businesses can automatically tailor the goods and services to those specific needs (Clement, 2020). Personalisation is about building consumer loyalty by creating a genuine one-to-one partnership. Knowing each person's needs and working towards achieving an objective that effectively and knowledgeably serves each client's wishes in a given context (Armstrong, Kotler, Harker, & Brennan, 2018). Thus, the company websites can be tailored to the target audience with the help of collected customer preference data, which results in interaction and creates a sense of connection between marketer and user (Clement, 2020). These are especially important since traditional marketing techniques such as mass media, television, and newspapers cannot be affected by the wishes, expectations, tastes, and preferences of their customers (Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Personalisation will allow HEIs the option of tailoring their products and services based on previous digital choices, history and preferences.</p>

Source: Authors' own work

Rising higher education institution competition has been demonstrated to generate a more market-like environment, forcing these institutions to reinvent themselves constantly in order to remain relevant to the targeted students (Matli, Tlapana & Hawkins-Mofokeng, 2021:342). Ideas about education institutions' marketing often received limited support because it was considered to undermine standards of academic quality and excellence (Lund & Wang 2020:547). The rivalry among higher education institutions for further attraction of students has increased more than ever (Azizi, 2020:45). The fundamental purpose of digital marketing is web presence, which entails a set of actions that should bring internet users to certain webpages where they may buy or acquire specific products or services (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015). Digital marketing may therefore enhance the traditional marketing idea by discovering and putting into practice fresh approaches for companies to produce, deliver, and share value to customers while still managing positive business relations with them and

other partners (Popa, 2015). Marketers all over the world have recognised the value of digital marketing and its benefits over traditional marketing (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015).

Education gives people options. Students may choose to leave their home countries and travel to another country because they believe the education is worthwhile based on how it has been marketed (Kieu, Mogaji, Mwebesa, Sarofim, Soetan & Vululleh, 2020). Thus, according to Kieu et al. (2020), students have more options and less expensive ways to attain credentials as they grow more aware of the different HEI's offerings. They may even vent their unhappiness (rightly or wrongly) on internet platforms. Higher education marketing managers must be aware of the trends that have altered the view of higher education marketing (Maringe & Gibbs, 2008; Mogaji, 2019).

Higher education marketing managers must have a well-planned, relationship-oriented marketing strategy that aims not only to attract and recruit students but also to retain current students and build strong relationships with them during and after their time at the institution (Kieu et. al, 2020). According to Bala and Verma (2018), digital marketing strategies generate interactions and build relationships with potential and existing customers based on providing useful and desired information. Further research should investigate whether South African HEIs are paying attention to institutional recognition and social media usage among their target students (Matli, Tlapana & Hawkins-Mofokeng, 2021:350). Suleiman et. al (2020) believe that digital marketing is a way to target and communicate with consumers while at the same time engaging with the most unique and intimate tool ever invented in world history.

3. DISCUSSION

The use of digital marketing strategies

This section highlights how digital marketing strategies can be used by higher education institutions. The digital marketing strategies that are beneficial for HEIs includes search engine optimisation, content marketing, social media marketing, live-streaming video platform and email marketing.

A well-known digital marketing tactic, search engine optimisation (SEO) involves building a website and building internal links in order to raise its position in search engine results pages (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Search engine optimisation is defined by Lewandowski and Kammerer (2021) as a collection of approaches and strategies used to increase website traffic through obtaining a high ranking on search engine results pages (SERPs). Web traffic science and website craftsmanship are other terms for search engine optimisation (Suleiman, Muhammad, Yahaya, Adamu, and Sabo, 2020). The significance of optimisation stems from the fact that many consumers use website traffic as a primary means of accessing the internet (Suleiman, et al., 2020). Owing to search engine optimisation strategies, a number of marketing techniques should be developed to raise the ranking of anticipated

business websites and place a specific website among highly categorised entries that are found through search engines, which will increase traffic (Suleiman et al., 2020). Owing to this technology, prospects can locate an organisation's online articles more readily (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). In addition, it is an essential element that increases the exposure and discoverability of information on search engines in conjunction with content marketing (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

According to Opreana and Vinerean (2015), content marketing is a strategic marketing approach that focuses on producing and sharing relevant, valuable, and consistent information over the internet to attract and retain a well-defined target audience. Hillebrand (2014) added that content marketing is used to interact with consumers and build relationships with them rather than merely informing them about new products and promotions (Du Plessis, 2017). This is a continuous process that should be part of the overall marketing plan, emphasising media ownership as opposed to media lending (Flanagan, 2015).

Content marketing has always been a component of digital businesses' digital marketing strategies and it may be a valuable asset for any company which has a website (Vinerean, 2017). Creating a variety of content types that prospective customers enjoy - and will use it – in order to browse a website to find out more or get in touch with a marketing offer, it can turn aspirational customers into promoters. (Vinerean and Prepana, 2015). Although there are some parallels between social media marketing and content marketing, their methods, objectives, and centres of attention differ (Du Plessis, 2017).

Digital social networks can be used to promote their websites, goods, or services and reach a much larger audience than they might have been able to with more conventional methods (Weinberg, 2009; Du Plessis, 2017). One of the biggest changes in human contact was brought about by the interest and utility dynamics captured by digital social networks (Popa, 2015). This information is very helpful for marketers and internet marketing tactics (Opreana, & Vinerean, 2015).

The ability to work together and co-create products and campaigns with customers is another important part of social media and how it affects marketing (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Constantinides (2014) proposes two possible approaches to social media marketing: a proactive approach that sees social media as a means of studying customer responses and a passive approach that sees social media as a means of studying consumer reactions, such as through marketing environment analysis (Popa, 2015). Using social media as a direct marketing and PR channel, a tool for product customisation, a forum for client interaction, and a source of value creation and new ideas for product development and refinement are all part of the second active strategy (Popa, 2015). Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X, to mention a few, collect a lot of data (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

Digital businesses that integrate real-time social interaction such as text-and-video chat rooms with live-streaming are known as live-streaming marketing (Cai & Wohn, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2014). It

differs in certain ways from conventional offline and online trade while sharing some similarities as well (Wongkitrungrueng, Dehouche & Assarut, 2020). Customers can watch the seller's responses and interactions with a product in real time through live-streaming, even while they are physically apart (Wongkitrungrueng, et al., 2020). Wongkitrungrueng, et al. (2020) and Bründl et al. (2017) claim that purchasers see a seller's identity – as well as verbal and non-verbal behaviours - contribute to the feeling of instantaneous, synchronous touch. Sellers can communicate with a large number of purchasers at once when they react in writing. Similar to a direct sales event, a live broadcast featuring a prominent number of interested customers can influence consumer decisions and lighten the buying experience (Bründl et al., 2017). There are several accessible live-streaming video networks, according to Gilbert (2019); some of the more popular ones are closely related to social networking sites and include Facebook Live, Instagram Live, Periscope, Vimeo Live, and YouTube Live.

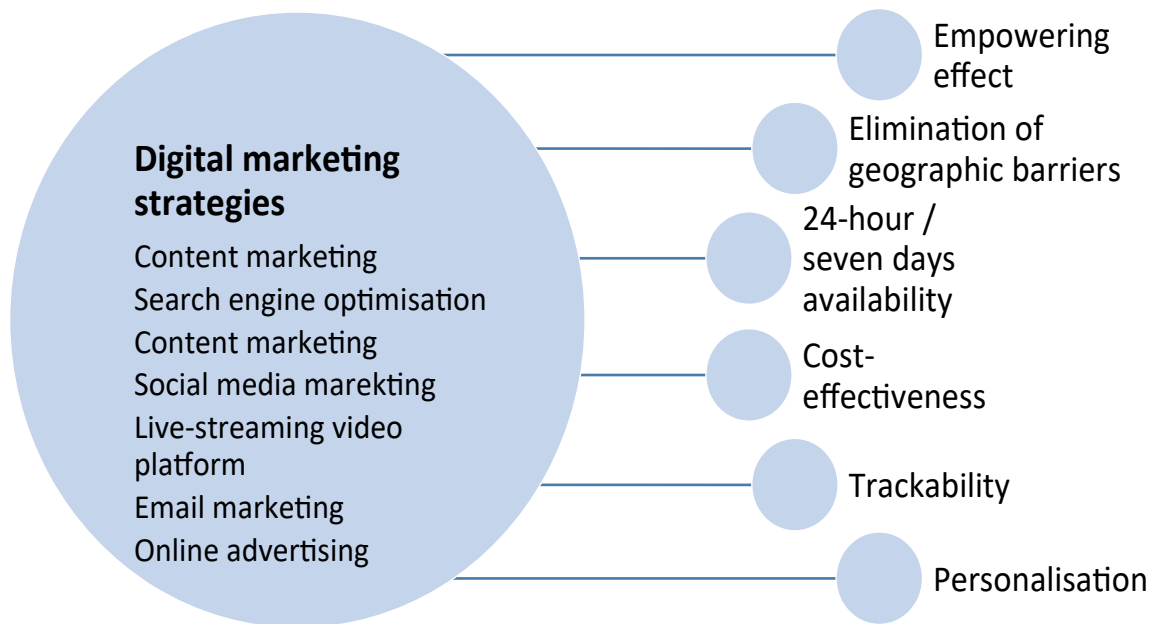
When a business communicates with a customer on the outside, it usually uses email marketing to increase demand for the product or brand. Email marketing frequently targets customers who are on a mailing list (Chaffey and Chadwick, 2012). Email can be used as a promotional tool to engage consumers with the content sent in it (Christina, Fenni, & Roselina, 2019). According to a 2011 DMA research (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012), email marketing is one of the most popular digital marketing techniques, which is employed in 79% of direct marketing initiatives. Promotional email offers may point the recipient to the website for more details (Christina et al., 2019). Determining who to target and why to target them is the first stage in creating an email marketing strategy (Lahdenkauppi, 2021). It is imperative to give email marketing campaign some thought. The plan needs to start with goals that are well defined. Email marketing plan objectives can include things such as building relationships with customers, increasing sales, or increasing brand exposure. Email newsletters, digests, transactional emails, lead nurturing emails, sponsorship emails, and dedicated mail are among the email marketing formats listed (Gorgieva, 2012).

Online advertising is used to post commercial messages on both sites and is arguably the most well-known strategy for drawing internet users (Suleiman, Muhammad, Yahaya Adamu, and Sabo, 2020). The main goal of online advertising, such as that of traditional marketing campaigns and other forms of advertising marketing, is to increase sales and brand recognition (Suleiman, et al., 2020). Internet connectivity is necessary to see advertisements on a computer screen, according to Suleiman, Muhammad, Yahaya, Adamu and Sabo (2020). The authors define the term 'online market' as "planned messages placed on the Web to access search-engines and directories of third-party websites". Businesses should think about investing in online advertising as more people shop online (Nizam & Jaafar, 2018). Firms must first understand the characteristics of online customers' attitudes towards online advertising before implementing these new marketing methods as small firms that can facilitate digital purchases may have a competitive edge (Nizam & Jaafar, 2018). Furthermore, by

passing laws that restrict data usage and safeguard consumers' rights and interests, the government can effectively control how online advertising is delivered to consumers (Nizam & Jaafar, 2018).

Figure 1.1 shows the proposed framework for HEIs' digital marketing strategies with their benefits. This figure shows the digital marketing strategies that could be used by HEIs and how they can benefit from using these digital marketing strategies.

Figure 1.1: Framework for HEIs' digital marketing strategies and benefits of the strategies



Source: Authors' own work

4. CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions need to establish a stable presence in each of their target markets by focusing on student perceptions and marketing strategies. Higher education marketers ought to consider the political, administrative, institutional, cultural and social together with economic and education limitations. To attract potential students and retain existing students, there should be a strong alignment between the institution's aims and marketing plan. When positioning themselves within the market, the institutions must focus on the qualities or characteristics that help them stand out from competitors and other higher education institutions. Higher education institutions need to adapt to the expectations of society, the labour market, and students' requirements, wants, and preferences and tailor-make their digital marketing to meet the needs of their students. Higher education institutions need to be aware of which market area offers the best chance of achieving the objectives of the institution. A market-oriented strategy is necessary for higher education institutions to survive and thrive given all of the constantly changing opportunities and challenges that the field

faces on a local and global scale. Higher education institutions need to add value, please students, combine all organisational operations and marketing initiatives, optimise the institution's long-term success, and support society's general well-being.

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