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## Brand Marketing Communication Strategies for Public Universities: The Case of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on brand marketing communication strategies for different types of public universities. The study sought to ascertain how the traditional university, comprehensive and university of technology use their diversity to position and differentiate their postgraduate qualifications. The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing an exploratory technique to gather data from three research managers and two marketing personnel through semi-structured interviews. NVIVO version 12 was used to organise the data that emerged from the interviews; thereafter, the data was interpreted through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the traditional university's good reputation including research rankings, course reputation, and alumni, are used for brand marketing communication strategies. Interestingly, the University of Technology uses university rankings and its network with industries and other foreign universities. Furthermore, the findings elucidate that a comprehensive university uses its mission and slogans. In light of these findings, it appears that there is no succinct brand marketing communication strategy for positioning master's and doctorate qualifications at the three public universities. These findings have implications in relation to the brand communication strategies that are adopted to market these universities. It is recommended that a coherent approach in marketing an institution of higher learning is informed by the distinctness of its offerings.

**Keywords:** brand communication; brand marketing communication; public universities; comprehensive university; postgraduate qualifications

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### Introduction

Globally, universities adopt different approaches in how they approach marketing and brand communication strategies. The phenomenon of persuasive brand communication is considered a critical pillar in the successful marketing efforts of higher education institutions globally (Mogaji et al., 2020). However, there is inadequate scholarly literature dealing with the use of brand marketing communication to position postgraduate qualifications at different types of universities in South Africa. Studies addressing

branding in higher education focus on understanding university branding, social media branding and brand image and do not cover how brand communication influences prospective master's and doctorate students' decision-making when selecting a postgraduate university. Literature indicates that there is a lack of clear conceptualisation or framework for branding and marketing initiatives within higher education (Farinloye et al., 2020) because the concept of branding is not fully understood in the African higher education sector (Mwebisa & Maringe, 2020). Although many scholars have explored higher education branding and marketing communication strategies for the undergraduate segment, there is lack of streamlined brand communication and marketing communication theories for the African postgraduate university segment. Mogaji et al. (2020) warn that international university marketing strategies have a marginal contribution to the marketisation of higher education in Africa. It is, therefore, essential to understand the use of brand marketing communication for public universities in an African context.

The National Planning Commission (NPC), whose National Development Plan (NDP) document became government policy, proposed that by 2030, over 25% of enrolments should be at postgraduate level, and there should be more than 5,000 doctoral graduates per year. The National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030 goal to increase master's and doctorate qualifications at South African universities created a complex competition for the three types of public universities. Universities are expected to differentiate themselves from other institutions through communication messages highlighting qualification differentiation, mission differentiation, performance and self-differentiation, and other support structures (DHET, 2014). Similarly, it is essential that "universities identify or create particular areas that are uniquely their own, and through a well-developed marketing system that showcases that uniqueness (Kieu et al., 2020: 233)". Therefore, it can be reasoned that each type of university must clearly understand its mission, purpose, goals, niche areas and brand attributes to facilitate brand communication. Though branding is an established sub-discipline in the higher education literature (Broucker et al., 2021), there are limited empirical studies focussing on brand communication as a marketing strategy for promoting postgraduate qualifications. The lack of clear brand marketing communication strategies for encouraging prospective students to enrol for postgraduates' qualifications and the absence of empirical studies in this area is problematic. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct an empirical study to understand how the traditional university, university of technology and comprehensive university use their diversity and areas of specialisation to differentiate and position their postgraduate qualifications. In this context, understanding how brand marketing communication is used to position masters and doctorate qualifications at a traditional university, university of technology and comprehensive university in KwaZulu-Natal province is essential.

The subsequent section delves into the literature that underpins the branding of the Higher Education Sector. The paper starts by exploring the South African higher education postgraduate landscape and goes on to review the literature on brand marketing communication for universities. Thereafter, the methodological approaches and the details about the data are presented, followed by the discussion of results, their implications, and the recommendations for future studies.

## **Literature review**

Higher Education Act 101 considers any post-school institution providing higher education, whether it's a university, Technikon, college or a subdivision of the three, as a role player in higher education (Department of Education, 1997). The former Minister of Education, announced the government's proposal to restructure the South African higher education sector. The South African government viewed the merger as an important step for restructuring. The restructuring and mergers resulted in forming three types of universities: 'traditional' research-focused universities, universities of technology, and new 'comprehensive' universities. The public higher education sector in South Africa has 12 traditional universities, six universities of technology, six comprehensive universities and two institutes (Council on Higher Education, 2018). The different types of universities are all designed to be research and teaching universities which offer programmes from the undergraduate level to the doctorate level (Council on Higher Education, 2022).

In South Africa, traditional universities offer bachelor's degrees, with strong research capacity and a large intake of postgraduate students, while universities of technology are vocationally oriented institutions that award higher certificates, diplomas, and degrees in technology and have some postgraduate and research capacity. On the other hand, comprehensive universities offer both bachelor's and technology qualifications and a focus on teaching, research, and postgraduate studies (Council on Higher Education, 2000; Konyana, 2013). The traditional universities are often expected to focus more on knowledge production through research and

graduating postgraduates (Council on Higher Education, 2022), whilst the other types of universities are expected to contribute significantly to skills development, social development, research output and developmental needs of the country. The different types of universities have various postgraduate niches at masters and doctorate levels (Council for Higher Education, 2022). These postgraduate qualifications are integral to differentiating these universities from their competitors. The province of KwaZulu-Natal is home to two universities of technology, one traditional university and one comprehensive university. It is worth mentioning that one university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal did not offer postgraduate studies at the time of undertaking this study. Importantly, the diverse types of universities are expected to contribute significantly to research output through increased masters and doctorate degrees (National Planning Commission, 2012). DHET (2018) postulates that universities' postgraduate enrolment in KwaZulu-Natal is highly skewed, with the traditional universities with the highest number of master's and doctorate students followed by comprehensive universities and technology universities. It is argued that most African universities do not focus on what makes them unique (Kieu et al., 2020), and the lack of proper brand communication and positioning strategies may be one of the reasons for skewed enrolments at the postgraduate level at KwaZulu-Natal public universities. Therefore, the significance of brand marketing communication for universities cannot be overemphasised as a key factor that sets these universities apart.

Brand marketing communication is an organisation's effort to be able to communicate its brand to consumers through the purchase of commercial messages in paid, earned, and owned media to deliver persuasive and impactful statements about the university (Mogaji et al., 2020 and Septiana et al., 2022). Brand communication makes use of websites, student brochures and social media to disseminate the brand (Broucker et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that brand communication for universities is essential for promoting postgraduate qualifications. A brand is created through a branding process (Mwebisa and Maringe, 2020). A synergy between brand proposition and faculty activities (research, curricular, and community engagements) is important in strengthening brand development (Kieu et al., 2020). Branding is strategic as it aims to attach value to university identification. Building brand awareness involves telling the target market who you are and what you offer (Mlambo, 2017). Successful marketing efforts require that each of the different university types create a distinct brand positioning strategy. An effective brand strategy encourages prospective students to trust the university (Hanover Research, 2014). Literature indicates that brand reputation can be maintained through transparent identity and image (Kiraka 2020). A university can emphasise its purpose, history, location, student niche, public ethos, and the reputation it has earned over time through branding (Abina, Ajayi and Lawal, 2020). However, most studies cover higher education branding in general without a focus on how university branding can be used to position postgraduate qualifications. Positioning is essential in differentiating the university brand image with the image of other universities (Tien et al. 2021). Although branding at universities is used as a differentiating tool between competitors' products and services (Mogaji et al., 2020), there is insufficient evidence on how branding is used to differentiate postgraduate qualifications of different types of universities.

Kieu et al. (2020:233) explain that "developing the university's brand requires building and communicating a unique proposition that ensures the sustainability of the brand identity and its implication of targeted outcomes (e.g. increasing enrolment, attracting high quality and diverse students, securing funds, etc)." Nevertheless, there is not enough literature and evidence to show how public universities communicate their unique proposition to attract prospective postgraduates. Literature indicates that well-developed brand identity helps in relationship building and creates a marketing value during recruitment initiatives (Cant and van Heerden 2017). Koekemoer (2020) explains that key issues around integrated marketing communication includes building brand equity, creating brand trust, and building affection for the brand. An integrated marketing communication programme is used to communicate university activities such as university life, research activities, brand values, student experience, university outputs as well as contribution to society (Davies 2020 and Ndofirepi et al., 2020) to create customer expectations (Mudzanani, 2018). Similarly, communication about the university's research resources, libraries, potential supervisors, accommodation, and cultural integration is essential (Konyana, 2022) in building brand image and the reputation of the university's postgraduate programmes. The function of integrated marketing communication is to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact through a detailed strategy that assesses the strategic roles of a range of communication disciplines such as general advertising, personal selling, public relations publicity, sales promotion, direct marketing, sponsorship, and internet marketing (Hinson, 2020; Koekemoer 2020). However, a gap in literature was identified pertaining to the use of integrated marketing communication in brand positioning.

The use of both personal communication and mass communication is significant in brand communication. Therefore, universities need to understand the postgraduate market and identify relevant marketing communication mix elements for communicating brand messages to the internal and external public. Hinson (2020) suggests that marketing communication activities must be of high quality and be measurable. Thus, once a brand marketing communication strategy has been developed, each university should be able to measure its effectiveness and impact. A study by Sikubwabo et al. (2020) assert that communication strategies have an influence on enrolment at universities. It is for this reason that more studies addressing brand marketing communication strategies are essential in higher education marketing as there is currently insufficient literature in the African context.

## **Methodology**

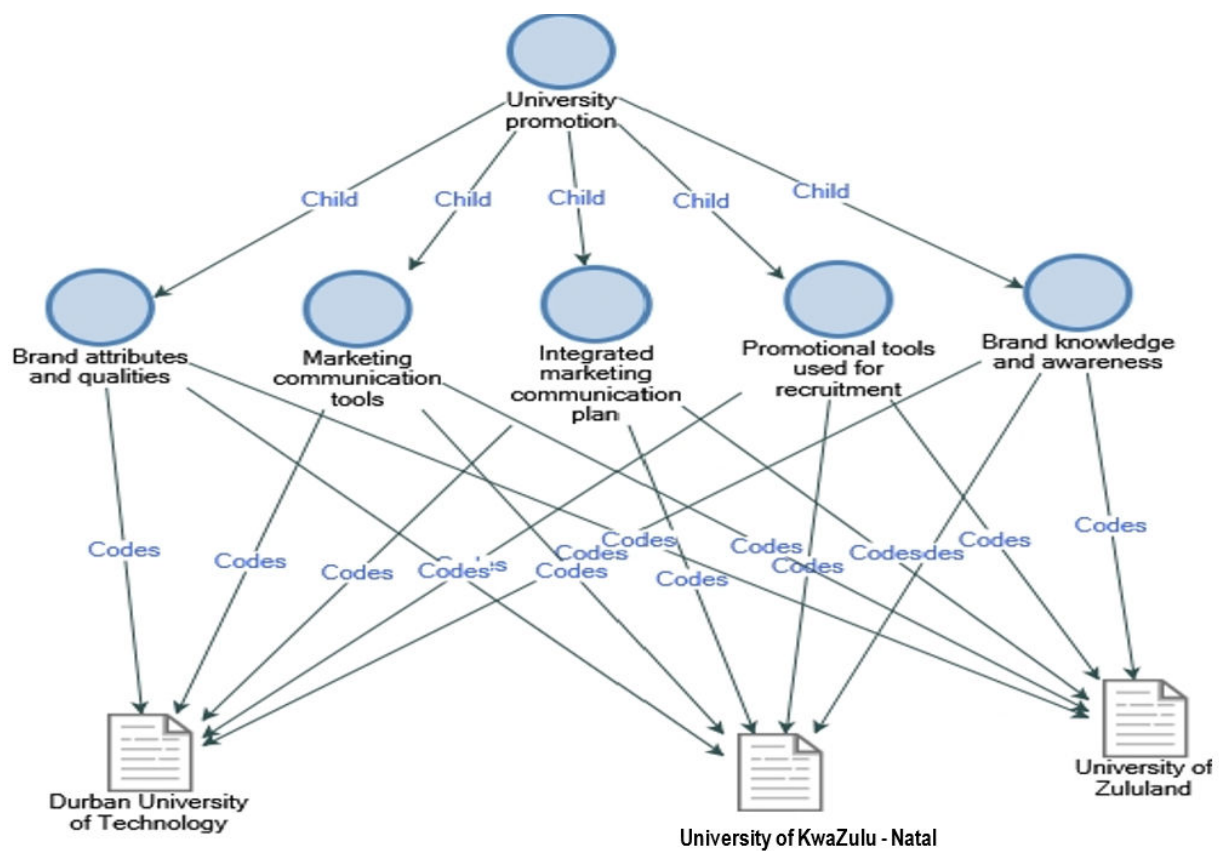
In an endeavour to comprehend the intricacies of brand marketing communication for universities, the study adopted exploratory research to enable the researcher to elicit detailed information from participants regarding a problem (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Interpretivism approach was adopted as it is concerned with qualitative research and allows the researcher to study a natural environment phenomenon to understand humans' roles with organisational complexities (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). An exploratory research design was deemed a suitable approach as the phenomenon of brand marketing communication related explicitly to the positioning of postgraduate qualifications at the Universities in Kwazulu-Natal. The researcher used cluster sampling to choose the province of study and public universities that offer postgraduate degrees to serve as representative samples. Clusters consist of different participants held in the target population (Harrison et al., 2016). The province of KwaZulu-Natal was selected due to the fact that universities in the same geographical location were deemed to be significant in providing relevant data with regard to the differentiation strategies adopted by the universities and providing an in-depth comparison of brand marketing communication strategies used by the different types of institutions. The clusters serve as a small-scale representation of the traditional universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology.

University marketing personnel and research managers in various faculties and schools were in the best position to explain to the researcher how brand marketing communication is used to position masters and doctorate qualifications. The research managers and marketing personnel were able to explain the brand marketing communication strategies currently used to attract prospective postgraduate students and provide information on strategic initiatives that guide postgraduate education marketing in their respective universities. Baker et al. (2018) indicate that there is 'no magic number' for qualitative studies that should determine the number of interviews. In fact, a sample size in phenomenology involves a range of three to ten participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Therefore, for this study, the researchers interviewed three research managers and two marketing personnel from the selected public universities. The study adopted a qualitative technique. A pre-determined interview schedule and guiding questions were used to provide general direction for the interview and secure the type of information wanted. The interview guide was modified from previous studies that addressed similar constructs to ensure the interviews' credibility. Information during the semi-structured interviews with the selected universities' personnel was collected through a voice recorder thereby ensuring undivided attention. The respondents are presumed to give an actual account of the present conditions and experiences regarding university branding used to position postgraduate qualifications. Another point that ensured credibility was that the study subjects were people responsible for marketing universities and people in charge of postgraduate education within their faculties. The study received ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's research committee. The researcher assured participants of the confidentiality of the information and the anonymity of their identities.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse views, responses and field notes of the qualitative interviews with the aim of discovering patterns and themes. The thematic analysis focuses on identifiable patterns (themes) within the texts while minimally organising and describing data sets in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data that emerged from the interview were deductively coded with a software aid (NVIVO version 12). NVIVO software was used for advanced text searching and grouping it into similar themes or ideas. The study ensures that the themes and phrases used in the text answer the research questions (Alhojailan 2012; Hair et al. 2016; Kolb, 2018). Specific procedures were used to verify for the findings' accuracy to ensure the study's credibility.

## Findings

The results of the study are presented through a thematic analysis approach. The main theme identified is ‘university brand promotion’ include brand attributes and qualities, marketing communication tools, integrated marketing communication plan, promotional tools used for undergraduate recruitment and brand knowledge and awareness. Interrelated units of meaning were identified within the raw data and grouped into segments of related meaning. Codes were allocated to specific units or segments based on what the segment is about. After the allocation of codes, word repetition, similar phrases, patterns, relationships, sequences and differences between the units were identified to discover potential themes and sub-themes. Thereafter, the characteristics of the data were scrutinized to decide on an informative name for the theme. A detailed analysis of the theme was performed to establish what the theme says and its focus. Subthemes were identified after extensive examination of the theme. In the study, the university names were used to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The main theme explores university promotional strategies used by the selected universities for positioning postgraduate studies. Figure 1 depicts how the subthemes were extracted from the main theme and shows the link between the sub-themes and the responses of study participants from the different universities.



**Figure 1:** Map virtualisation of university promotion.

### ***Subtheme 1: Brand attributes and qualities***

Prantl and Andres (2012) point out that symbols and a combination of assets and liabilities associated with the brand form brand equity. Literature indicates that emphasis must be on the brand values and unique proposition of the specific university brand (Kieu et al., 2020) as well as university reputation. When asked which of the brand attributes (e.g. university research rankings, course rankings, the internal and external reputation of the department, accreditation and recognition by external professional bodies) do the participants think their various universities use to position postgraduate courses against competitors’ qualifications, several brand attributes were uncovered. For the DUT, it emerged that the university uses university ranking and its network with the industries and other foreign universities.

We used to use university rankings in 2008–2012, using top researchers was also done. We had partnerships with overseas universities (DUT #P3).

DUT enjoys a very strong branding position in KZN. I am not going to say nationally. However, within KZN, the institution's name alone can get students to consider positively studying with DUT. Also, we are a UOT, which may also help suggest that the type of research we produce is linked to the real world, which is a positive brand attribute (DUT #P5).

For the UKZN, the researcher extracted the university's good reputation from research rankings, course reputation, and alumni as their branding attributes. These are summarised in the excerpt below.

University has a good reputation from a research perspective. Internal reputation; what people in the department have achieved is used to position postgraduate courses. The university has its accreditation (UKZN #P1).

They probably use research rankings and course reputation and use our alumni that come through the system, which are recognisable. They can use them (alumni) to show what kinds of students come to the university (UKZN #P2).

Students are approaching us. But we do explain the value of research, the importance of having a master's degree. They are not facing those dispositional barriers because they come to us. The most significant obstacle is students wanting to work (UKZN #P1).

In terms of the University of Zululand, the university's mission statement, vision and slogan are some of their brand attributes.

Mission statements, vision and slogan, which is one way of putting the university out there. Nevertheless, some faculties have their slogans and vision. However, our faculty only uses the one for the university (UNIZULU #P6).

### ***Subtheme 2: Marketing communication tools***

Universities must recognise the need for effective marketing communication (Mogaji et al., 2020). Gabrielli and Balboni (2010:276) offer a definition that recognises that marketing communication represents a voice by which an organisation can establish a conversation with consumers and other stakeholders; about their product/service offering. In terms of the university's marketing communications elements when seeking prospective postgraduate students, it emerged that the selected university had employed and still use both traditional and non-traditional media. Examples are direct emailing, advertisement, alumni, and university public relations team. For the DUT, social media platform like Facebook is used to promote the university.

Giving rise to the use of Facebook and partnering with high schools with the hope that students would continue to postgraduate programmes. Linkages through the SADEC region (DUT #P3).

Added to the above, participant 5 from the DUT noted that the university sent personal letters to sister private universities in the province to promote their programmes.

At one stage, I know letters were written personally. The faculty would access the database of B-tech students who went through the system. We have also spoken to the sister institutions/private institutions like MANCOSA. Their database was freely accessible; we sent out personalized letters signed by the dean in a very positive and inviting manner, asking them to come and join us. It was a personalized approach than the normal mass marketing approach (DUT #P5).

While the above narrative suggests that the DUT uses social media and personalised communication tool, another of the participants reveals that it was not so when the DUT first started to promote the postgraduate studies. In the participants, own words:

When we started this project, we advertised on a duration-based radio station and print advertisement, a national newspaper. Our project has been successful; as a result, we have

thrown all those promotional tools, now we get students on referrals and word of mouth. Some alumni are now our supervisors (DUT #P4).

The above statement helps explain the shift from traditional mass communication to the personalised use of alumni to promote the university postgraduate programmes. A similar concept was also uncovered from the interview with the UKZN participants. It was noted that the university uses both personal and non-personal communication tools. Also, the use of alumni and social media was noted in the interview transcript analysis.

We communicate with our internal students directly, it is informal and may be the university also makes use of various communication platforms to communicate with them, but we are not involved in that. With regards to alumni, the university communicates with them about our programmes using various forms; non personal communication like advertising, and more personalised communication like text messages. They have a data base of alumni; Public Relations is responsible for sending information about postgraduate opportunities that are available. As a school, personalised communication is used with former students and internal students. We communicate with them on one-on-one basis. The Public Relations department of the university uses social media; we have social pages (UKZN #P1).

For the traditional mass media communication tool, participant 2 noted the following:

I have heard a couple of radio advertisements; they also send emails to our alumni. I have not seen billboards. I used to see some adverts on newspapers, once in a while. But not enough to catch my eye. If you send emails, be specific to say attention to undergraduate students / postgraduate students. Students learn through emails about seminars and workshops (UKZN #P2).

The above suggests that emails and personal communication are more effective in gaining students' attention than traditional mass communication. However, for the University of Zululand, it was uncovered that the alumni structures are not as active as those of the DUT and UKZN. As such, the university relies on traditional media. It was revealed that the university owns a television station through which the programmes and courses were promoted. This, however, was applicable in the past. At present, the University of Zululand relies on leaflets and brochures to promote its programmes.

Alumni structures are not active. University used to have a television station that is now called 1KZN. When it was still called Bay television, we used to talk and advertise our programmes and courses there. The university also uses leaflets and brochures (UNIZULU #P6).

### ***Subtheme 3: Integrated marketing communication plan***

Marketing communications must be integrated to reach prospective students and other stakeholders at African universities (Kieu et al., 2020). When asked if the university has a properly integrated marketing communication plan to recruit postgraduate students as part of its strategic plan, several responses were recorded. For example, while one of the DUT participants vehemently claimed that the DUT has no proper integrated marketing communication plan, another colleague interviewed thinks there is but highly fragmented, which clouded its usefulness.

No, DUT does not have a properly integrated marketing communication plan; each faculty does its own thing. I am not even aware of what is happening in the faculty. There were supposed to be more interactions on Twitter to create awareness (DUT #P3).

I think the approach has been fragmented. I think this has been clouded because there is a tension between attracting the right students and opening access to all sundry. This, to a point, has complicated matters. However, our mass marketing approach has played a significant role; however, we have not synchronized it in an ideal manner (DUT #P5).

For the UKZN response, the two participants admitted to having little knowledge of the university's integrated marketing plan but infer that those at the university's public relations department may be responsible for such plans.

For it to be an integrated marketing plan, it should come from the Public Relations department. They are responsible for university marketing, as schools, we do not have an integrated marketing communication plan (UKZN #P1).

Marketing at university is sometimes taken by Public Relations managers from different schools (UKZN #P2)

Similarly, the participant from the University of Zululand denied knowledge of any integrating communication plan but hinted that the university has its prospectus, which is available online.

Not that I know. The university has prospectus; these are the documents, which mostly talk about postgraduate programmes. The university prospectus is also available online (UNIZULU #P6).

#### ***Subtheme 4: Promotional tools used for undergraduate recruitment***

This subtheme sought to answer the question that states, “To what extent can the promotional tools used for recruitment of first-year students apply to the recruitment of postgraduate students?”

In responding to the question, the DUT participants indicated that undergraduate promotional tools cannot be used for postgraduate recruitment. Firstly, participants indicated that both groups of students belong to different segments. Secondly, participants intimated that there are limited supervisors to accommodate postgraduate supervision at the DUT.

It is fine like this; we do not need any extra recruitment drive because we do not have the capacity. After all, the requirement to supervise postgraduate degrees is a PhD. South Africa, as a whole, does not have enough PhDs. I would not say we must adopt these promotional tools since the recruitment process dynamics and the capacity are different (DUT #P3).

No, there has been differentiation. We refer to two different segments; undergraduates essentially are school leavers, so the approach is quite different. For instance, we have the CAO, which plays a significant role in recruitment. Postgraduate has been trickier. Undergraduate is a given, there is high demand than supply, and because of this, we have a luxury of being complacent and still achieve our targets. We have a reversal of the situation with postgraduate degrees where the two target markets' supply and demand are different (DUT #P4).

The UKZN participants, however, present a different view to that of the DUT. Participants stated that the university adapts similar promotional tools as the undergraduate for postgraduate except direct emails and text messages.

All the ones mentioned, except direct emails and text messages, because we do not use those (UKZN #P2).

The University of Zululand participants who noted the following also shared similar opinion of the UKZN participants:

We do print advertising, university brochures, prospectus, newsletters and exhibitions. We also have electronic advertisements (UNIZULU #P6).

#### ***Subtheme 5: Brand knowledge and awareness***

University branding exercise adds the market value of brand recognition to recruit students and faculty (Drori et al., 2013). A brand's power lies in its exposure and ability to meet and satisfy customer needs and expectations. Thus, brand recognition is an essential ingredient in promoting university services. African universities compete for prospective students; therefore, it becomes essential that they take responsibility for the brand in this era of globalisation (Kieu et al., 2020). This subtheme aims to gauge the participants' view on how brand recognition, particularly public knowledge, creates awareness about postgraduate programmes.

The response generated from the DUT respondents suggests that there is limited awareness of the DUT brand. Whilst the university has made progress, particularly in the use of successful alumni to promote the university, the university is still not at the same standard as other established international universities.

Having travelled to other countries like Switzerland, we are not yet up there on the world map with other universities. Roadshows to Swaziland were done last year. Brand ambassadors go around, using alumni who have graduated in the field, mainly maritime females occupying big positions. In these regards, there has been some success in moving the brand forward (DUT #P3).

In terms of the UKZN, the researcher uncovered that both the internal and international students are aware of the UZN brand.

Indeed, internal students and those who have studied with us are aware. International students are also aware, so there is brand awareness. They are aware that the university offers research-based masters and PhD and you can do them anywhere in the world (UKZN #P1).

Other colleagues express reservations about the UKZN brand awareness. The participant pointed out the university's low postgraduate enrolment as evidence of a brand awareness challenge to buttress his position. The participants, therefore, call for more awareness of the postgraduate programmes. The participant proposes that the university follow up on students, check those who are unemployed and invite them to apply for postgraduate study.

As stated previously, our postgraduate enrolments were low last year. Perhaps we need to do some programmes between January and April When students are still waiting for the graduations to create more awareness. The university must push applications until after graduations. It must also make use of the graduation lists to make a follow up with students, check those who are not employed, invite them to apply (UKZN #P2).

According to the statement extracted from the University of Zululand participant, internal branding is essential. There was, however, no indication of the branding modalities the university use to create awareness. However, the participant posit that employees should be enthusiastic about their institution, which may suggest that the university employees should promote the knowledge and awareness of the brand.

Internal branding is essential because employees should be motivated and enthusiastic when talking about their university wherever they are (UNIZULU #P6).

## **Discussion**

The information obtained from this study provides information on how the different public universities communicate their institutions' brand attributes, position and differentiation to the university's internal and external public. Though neither of the participants from the respective universities understood the university brand communication plan for positioning postgraduate studies, two of the three universities used brand positioning strategies that reflected their university type. This finding affirms the argument that even higher education institutions with strong unique brands find it challenging to communicate their brands in certain communication channels (Broucker et al., 2021). The traditional university participants agreed that the university's brand name, staff members' achievements, internal reputation, research culture and top-tier status were used to attract postgraduate students. University reputation was cited as an influential factor when deciding where to enrol at the postgraduate level (Adefulu et al., 2020), which aligns with what the traditional university is currently practising. People often pay attention to recognisable brands' messages and may ignore those of uncommon brands. Mahlangu (2019) underscores that prestige and reputation influence students' decision to enrol at a particular university. Consequently, traditional universities are more likely to be able to position their postgraduate qualifications compared to other types of universities. This is necessitated by the fact that they are associated with research and a higher number of graduates at the postgraduate level. A strong brand reputation is argued to result in tangible and intangible benefits for universities (Kiraka 2020).

The academic program offering's reputation and the type of research carried out by the university were some of the brand attributes used to position postgraduate qualifications at a university of technology. Therefore,

universities should communicate a clear message about what makes them unique (Kieu et al., 2020) by explaining the benefits of enrolling for postgraduate qualifications at a university of technology. Though the University of Technology's postgraduate qualifications are still not widely recognisable, the DUT understands the importance of differentiating the type of research done by the University of Technology to position their postgraduate qualifications. A positive image and brand recognition play a vital role in reducing the perceived risk associated with intangibility (Strydom, 2014; Berndt & Boshoff, 2018), particularly for a university of technology that is unknown for its research capacity. The comprehensive university indicated that its mission statement, vision and slogan are some of its brand attributes. However, since comprehensive universities are still not extensively known for research, relying on mission statements and vision can be considered unprogressive, limiting, and less impactful. Kieu et al. (2020) affirm that a university brand is not just a name and a logo. A study by Broucker et al. (2021) revealed that university communication in other documents diverges from the mission statement. The implication of using only the mission statement and the vision to position postgraduates is that the university will not be able to compete successfully with other universities due to the lack of positioning strategy. In addition, the lack of a brand marketing communication strategy will impact university development as the postgraduate segment has the potential to generate revenue for universities. In a study conducted by the findings indicate that most Nigerian universities do not have an appropriate positioning strategy due to the failure to explain who the target market for the university is, what the position of the university is, the purpose of the university brand and which universities do they compete with. It can, therefore, be argued that the comprehensive university cannot explain the purpose of the university brand, hence the inability to properly position itself. Septiana et al. (2022) believe that developing a brand personality is essential in building the brand's attractiveness in the eyes of consumers.

Moreover, the current study found that the different types of universities use traditional and non-traditional communication tools to recruit and promote the institutions. The implication of using traditional communication tools is that they reach an irrelevant audience that is not the target market for the university. A few participants from UKZN acknowledged using exhibitions as marketing communication tools for postgraduate studies. Educational events are effective because they allow universities to demonstrate the uniqueness of their postgraduate qualifications and highlight the benefits embedded in them. The findings show that traditional universities do not view personalised communication (text messages, emails, calls, and letters) as a relevant communication strategy for the postgraduate segment, even though this strategy has been used to a certain extent. On the other hand, results in an international study show that telemarketing has an impact on brand image (Nasib et al., 2022). Arguably, traditional universities are deemed to be more research-orientated in their approach to academia. Consequently, they can attract more applicants at the postgraduate level without having to go through extensive brand promotion. On the other hand, the University of Technology once used the personalised communication approach but abandoned it, while the comprehensive university relied on graduate students returning to the university. It can be argued that KwaZulu-Natal universities do not embrace the new ways of communicating to graduates evaluating their options on whether to study or seek employment. Surprisingly, the universities do not seem to understand that potential postgraduates are genuinely not familiar with the structure of postgraduate qualifications and therefore require interactive occasions like open days, exhibitions, seminars and conferences as well as direct response and interactive marketing (text messages, emails and calls). It can be reasoned that the lack of investment in an integrated brand marketing communication strategy poses a challenge to the university's endeavour to position its postgraduate qualification based on its distinct features uniquely.

The findings from the study showed gaps in brand communication practices targeted to the priority groups for postgraduate qualifications. These inconsistencies identified in the study strengthen the contention that universities use ambiguous communication in their message content to reach a broad audience (Broucker et al., 2021). The study's findings concur with the criticism of universities' marketing, which claims that marketing communication strategies are low and lack professionalism and diversity. This assertion resonates with the argument presented by (Nwedu, 2019). In light of the findings of the study the researcher will unpack the implications and recommendations. The university niche areas and specialisation provide the opportunity to make a clear differentiation of the type of research conducted by the various types of universities. Brand attributes have various effects/impacts on different students. Therefore, universities need to understand which brand characteristics appeal to graduate students. Brand value is considered as one of the vital for positioning postgraduate degrees. It is hotly debated that successful university alumni and university resources are also useful in creating the university's brand image. Continuous improvement of brand positioning techniques is beneficial for postgraduate student recruitment. Thus, brand value will assist managers in leveraging postgraduate programmes.

Therefore, universities must ensure that their course reputations, research rankings, and staff achievements are visible in their marketing communication material. Additionally, university managers need to realise that brand communication should be a coordinated university effort that involves all university stakeholders. Universities should first attempt to generate a positive image of the institution among its internal customers (Algarni & Talib, 2014) to ensure that they talk about the brand vision and values and what it means to be part of the institution. Internal clients will always be the first to communicate brand identity and sell the brand to potential students and investors.

Brand marketing communication needs to fulfil a more strategic role in any university. Brand marketing communication must be linked to the university type and its research niche areas. Moreover, universities must determine the objectives of marketing university qualifications to carefully integrate and coordinate the marketing of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications with the optimum objective of achieving university marketing goals. Universities need to create strategic image campaigns that go beyond brand names, slogans and mission statements. Higher education institutions must also ensure that they raise awareness of student achievements, research facilities, academic successes, and commercialising research projects' success. In a highly diverse postgraduate education market, brand awareness and prominence must be promoted to ensure that they appeal to talented graduates. Brand awareness can be built through social media platforms, traditional mass media, partnerships, and university events. Subsequently, measuring brand awareness is also crucial for universities and can be used as a yardstick to measure product knowledge. University managers need to communicate brand attributes that graduates want and value. Lastly, there must be precise identification and communication of the student's benefits when enrolling at a particular university. Job opportunities created by university research areas must be in the prospectus and other marketing communication tools.

## **Conclusion**

Positioning of postgraduate qualifications through brand communication is still under-researched in the South African higher education sector. Brand marketing communication is a critical component of increasing masters and doctorate enrolments at different types of public universities. Therefore, universities need to formulate a clear brand marketing communication strategy that will reflect the brand attributes and values of the different university types and must be underpinned by the uniqueness of the institutional offering. Most importantly, public universities should develop clear positioning strategies for masters and doctoral qualifications to reflect the university of technology, traditional university and comprehensive university. The findings of this study indicate that public universities do not pay much attention to brand marketing communication for the postgraduate segment. On the other hand, the study limitation is that it encompasses only one university of technology, one comprehensive university and one traditional university located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal out of the six universities of technology, six comprehensive universities and 12 traditional universities in South Africa.

The study provides valuable insight into the need to improve brand marketing communication to ensure that there is proper positioning of the postgraduate qualifications, particularly for the comprehensive university and the university of technology, which are not widely known for research. The research also makes a significant contribution with empirical data in the area (postgraduate segment), where Adefulu et al. (2020) believe more studies are needed because postgraduate marketing is poorly researched in Africa. The study fills the gap concerning brand communication and highlights its importance in positioning postgraduate qualifications. It was proposed that more studies are needed on the role of communication channels in higher education branding (Broucker et al., 2021), and the current study provides empirical data on the appropriate communication channels for brand positioning. Thus, the study expands brand communication literature for the South African higher education sector and makes a significant contribution in the area where research is needed with regard to postgraduate marketing in an African context. The findings of the study may serve as guidelines for a follow-up study that will cover public and private institutions around South Africa. Furthermore, future research may consider a comparative study between predominantly white universities and marginalised universities to grasp the nuances around brand communication for the South African public universities.

## **Declarations**

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** This article examines the brand marketing communication strategies for public universities: The Case of KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Through taking the interdisciplinary approach, the study underscores how brand marketing communication strategies

for public universities play a catalytic role in promoting the universities within the domain of higher education sector. The study makes a significant contribution in relation to the brand communication strategies that are adopted to market higher education institutions. However, a coherent approach in marketing an institution of higher learning is informed by the distinctness of its offerings. Thus, a holistic approach is required in this context, wherein the different stakeholders in the university adopt brand communication strategies in a collaborative manner.

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**Availability of Data:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

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