Relationship marketing as foundation for fostering loyal alumni: The case of a TVET college in the Western Cape

AM MATTHYSEN

orcid.orgc/0000-0003-2683-695X

Thesis accepted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Economic and Management Sciences with Marketing Management at the North-West University

Promoter: Prof M Potgieter
Co-promoter: Prof AM Litheko

Examination: April 2025
Student number: 24895989

DECLARATION

I, Anna Maria Matthysen, declare that this thesis submitted for the degree (Doctor of Philosophy in Economic and Management Sciences with Marketing Management) at the North-West University is my original work and has not been submitted previously to any other institution of higher education. I further declare that all sources cited or quoted are indicated and acknowledged in a comprehensive list of references.



AM MATTHYSEN

March 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To God, to Whom all praise is due. I sincerely thank my Creator, God Almighty, for giving me the ability, enduring patience, and persistence to complete this study.

I acknowledge my promoter, Prof M Potgieter, for his positive attitude, patience, advice, encouragement, guidance, loyal support, and ‘sterkte daar’.

Prof AM Litheko, your kindness, encouragement, and wise counsel have been invaluable to me.

Prof Volition and Dr Enwereji, thank you for your expert assistance with the statistical analysis and processes involved in the study.

Zeldine, your big smile, kindness, and dedication to completing the technical tasks have not gone unnoticed. Thank you for your invaluable contribution.

All my ‘maatjes’ – your presence has been more than support; it has been integral to my journey. Thank you for being next to me.

Thank you, Steyn, Milan, Danelle, Jannis, and Ivan, for being there.

The North-West University and the Banking SETA for financial support.

All participants for their willingness to participate in this study.

ABSTRACT

The significance of cultivating loyal alumni is gaining increasing recognition in higher education institutions due to the extensive benefits it provides. Existing research has consistently demonstrated that relationship marketing strategies are critical for establishing and maintaining long-term connections with stakeholders. However, despite the recognized potential of relationship marketing, few empirical studies have examined its efficacy in fostering alumni loyalty.

The primary objective of this study was to develop a proposed framework that can be implemented by the management of TVET colleges and HEIs to cultivate a strong bond with alumni, thereby facilitating their sustained investment in community development for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

This study investigated the fundamental dimensions required to establish an effective alumni relationship model that promotes a mutually beneficial connection between alumni and their alma mater. It aims to encourage alumni to become committed advocates, loyal supporters, and active contributors to institutional growth and community well-being. A mixed-methods design was employed, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate alumni relationship marketing in a college setting. Semi-structured interviews conducted with management, marketing teams, and former students (n=19) provided in-depth insights, while a survey questionnaire administered to current students (n=486) gathered quantitative data. Triangulation was achieved using multiple data sources, methods, and analysts to ensure validity. The proposed framework was subsequently developed from the data collected, informed by the nuanced perspectives and insights shared by participants regarding the study's subject matter.

Significant relationships between alumni, relationship marketing, and alumni loyalty were revealed in the findings. However, contrary to expectations, no significant correlation was identified between community engagement and alumni loyalty, nor between alumni loyalty and community engagement. The community engagement construct showed robust standalone efficacy, but its predictive power was not substantiated within the proposed model. The nonzero correlation indicates a potential contributory role of community engagement in fostering alumni loyalty, warranting further investigation into underlying factors that may contribute to this lack of association.

The executive team and management are obliged to champion community engagement as a core value, educate students on its principles and practices, highlighting its benefits for personal development, institutional growth, and community well-being. This study's findings lay the groundwork for future inquiry, unveiling promising avenues for further research and investigation.

In conclusion, the study asserts that relationship marketing provides a foundational and essential framework for HEIs to develop, strengthen, and sustain enduring relationships with alumni, ultimately fostering a culture of loyalty, engagement, and lifelong affiliation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 PRÉCISING 1

1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Background to the study 1
1.3 Problem statement 3
1.4 Paradigmatic perspective 4
1.4.1 Research traditions 5
1.4.2 Research philosophies 6
1.4.3 Theoretical assumptions 6
1.4.3.1 Research approaches 7
1.4.3.2 Theories 7
1.4.4 Methodological assumptions 9
1.5 Research aim and objectives 9
1.5.1 Research aim 9
1.5.2 Research objectives 10
1.5.3 Conceptual model and hypothesis development 10
1.5.3.1 Hypothesis development 13
1.5.4 Study contribution 18
1.5.5 Study design 18
1.6 Research methodology 19
1.6.1 Study context 19
1.6.2 Research universe 19
1.6.2.1 Research populations 20
1.6.2.2 Sampling 21
1.6.2.2.1 Sampling technique 22
1.6.2.2.2 Sampling size 22
1.6.2.2.3 Inclusion criteria 23
1.6.2.2.4 Exclusion criteria 23
1.6.3 Recruitment of participants 23
1.6.4 Process of obtaining Informed consent 24
1.6.5 Data collection 25
1.6.5.1 Data collection tools 25
1.7 Validity and reliability 26
1.7.1 Validity 26
1.7.2 Reliability 26
1.8 Ethical considerations 27
1.8.1 Permission and informed consent 27
1.8.2 Anonymity 27
1.8.3 Confidentiality 28
1.9 Study exposition 28

CHAPTER 2 MARKETING AND RELATIONSHIP MARKETING 30

2.1 Introduction 30
2.2 The discipline marketing 30
2.2.1 Definition of marketing 33
2.3 Strategic planning 33
2.3.1 Business-wide strategic planning 34
2.3.2 Marketing strategy 34
2.4 The marketing process 35

2.5 Types of marketing 37
2.5.1 Relationship marketing 37
2.5.1.1 What is relationship marketing? 38
2.5.1.2 The origins of relationship marketing 39
2.5.1.3 Relationship marketing described 40
2.5.1.4 Relationship marketing's benefits to consumers 41
2.5.1.5 Dimensions of relationship marketing 42
2.5.2 Consumer relationship marketing 51
2.5.2.1 Origins of consumer relationship marketing 52
2.5.2.2 Description of consumer relationship marketing 55
2.5.2.3 Consumer relationship marketing benefits 56
2.5.3 Social media marketing 58
2.5.3.1 Origin of social media marketing 60
2.5.3.2 Social media marketing described 61
2.5.3.3 Social media marketing benefits 62
2.6 Summary 64

CHAPTER 3 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, ALUMNI AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 65

3.1 Introduction 65
3.2 The higher education landscape 65
3.2.1 Emerging adulthood 66
3.2.2 Higher education authorities 66
3.2.3 Higher education industry trends 68
3.2.4 Overview of a TVET college: Northlink College 71
3.3 Alumni 73
3.3.1 Definition of alumni 73
3.3.2 Alumni associations 74
3.3.3 Alumni relations 76
3.3.4 The role of alumni 78
3.3.5 Alumni giving behaviour 80
3.3.6 Using alumni as a marketing tool for brand identification 82
3.3.7 Engaging alumni through social media 84
3.4 Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship 88
3.4.1 Student experiences 88
3.4.2 Identity and brand 89
3.4.3 Culture and values 90
3.4.4 Financial support 91
3.5 Relationship marketing, higher education institutions and alumni 92
3.6 Social responsibility 96
3.7 Community engagement 97
3.7.1 Stakeholders' interest in community engagement 101
3.7.2 Stakeholders perceptions towards community engagement 103
3.7.3 Attitude towards helping others 104
3.7.4 Attitude towards charitable businesses 107
3.8 Summary 110

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 112

4.1 Introduction 112
4.2 Marketing research 112
4.2.1 Importance of marketing research 113
4.2.2 Marketing research process 113

4.3 Paradigmatic perspective 116
4.4 Philosophical stances 118
4.4.1 Positivism 119
4.4.2 Post-positivism 120
4.4.3 Interpretivism 120
4.4.4 Critical realism 121
4.4.5 Postmodernism 121
4.4.6 Pragmatism 122
4.5 Research approaches 123
4.5.1 Deductive approach 123
4.5.2 Inductive approach 124
4.6 Research strategies 125
4.7 Research methods 129
4.7.1 Qualitative method 130
4.7.2 Quantitative method 132
4.7.3 Mixed-methods research 134
4.8 Research methodology 138
4.8.1 Non-empirical research 139
4.8.1.1 Literature review 140
4.8.1.2 Document analysis 140
4.8.2 Empirical research 141
4.9 Qualitative component – data collection process 142
4.9.1 Interviews 143
4.9.2 Qualitative research instrument 145
4.9.2.1 Validity and reliability of research instruments 146
4.9.2.2 Interview guide 147
4.9.2.3 Recruitment of participants 150
4.9.2.4 Conducting the interview 151
4.9.3 Research population 152
4.9.3.1 Sampling 152
4.9.3.2 Sampling techniques 153
4.9.3.3 Sample size 154
4.9.3.4 Sample frame 156
4.9.4 Qualitative data analysis 156
4.10 Quantitative component: data collection process 158
4.10.1 Surveys 160
4.10.2 Quantitative research instrument 160
4.10.2.1 Validity and reliability of research instruments 160
4.10.2.2 Questionnaires 161
4.10.2.3 Questionnaire design 163
4.10.2.4 Scales 167
4.10.3 Research population 168
4.10.3.1 Sampling 169
4.10.3.2 Quantitative sampling techniques 169
4.10.3.3 Sample size 169
4.10.3.4 Sample frame 170
4.10.3.5 Quantitative data-collection process 170
4.10.3.5.1 Fieldwork 170
4.10.3.6 Quantitative data preparation 171
4.10.4 Quantitative data analysis 173
4.10.4.1 Descriptive statistics 173
4.10.4.2 Inferential statistics 173
4.11 Triangulation 174
4.12 Ethical considerations 175

4.13 Summary 176

CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH RESULTS 177

5.1 Introduction 177
5.2 Qualitative data analysis and presentation 178
5.2.1 Demographic descriptors 180
5.2.2 Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship 182
5.2.2.1 Participants' view of students' experiences 183
5.2.2.2 Participants' perceptions of the brand and identity of Northlink College 185
5.2.2.3 Participants' perception of the values and culture of Northlink College 187
5.2.2.4 Participants' perception of financial support 188
5.2.3 Relationship marketing dimensions 190
5.2.3.1 Participants' perception of trust 190
5.2.3.2 Participants' perception of commitment 191
5.2.3.3 Participants' perception of satisfaction 192
5.2.3.4 Participants' perception of loyalty 193
5.2.4 Community engagement 194
5.2.4.1 Stakeholders' interest in community engagement 194
5.2.4.2 Stakeholders' perceptions of CE 195
5.2.5 Synthesis of the qualitative results 196
5.3 Quantitative data analysis and presentation 198
5.3.1 Demographic descriptors 198
5.3.1.1 Gender 201
5.3.1.2 Age 201
5.3.1.3 Preferred form of communication 202
5.3.1.4 Study level 203
5.3.1.5 Field of study 203
5.3.1.6 Enrolment type and funding 204
5.3.1.7 Reason for choosing this TVET college 204
5.3.2 Constructs reliability and validity tests 205
5.3.2.1 Reliability 205
5.3.2.2 Validity 206
5.3.2.3 Structural equation model (SEM) 208
5.3.3 Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship 209
5.3.4 Relationship marketing dimensions 212
5.3.5 Community engagement 215
5.3.5.1 Stakeholders' interest in community engagement 215
5.3.5.2 Stakeholders' perception of community engagement 215
5.3.6 Correlation of variables: Spearman's rank coefficient 216
5.3.7 Testing of hypotheses 219
5.3.8 Relationships between demographic variables and the constructs under study 221
5.3.9 Cross-tabulations 223
5.4 Triangulation 225
5.4.1 Different components influencing the composition of a long-term relationship 226
5.4.1.1 Student experience 226
5.4.1.2 Brand and identity 226
5.4.1.3 Culture and values 227
5.4.1.4 Financial support 227
5.4.2 Relationship marketing dimensions 227
5.4.2.1 Trust 228
5.4.2.2 Commitment 228
5.4.2.3 Satisfaction 228

5.5 Alumni loyalty 229
5.6 Community engagement 230
5.6.1 Stakeholders' interests in community engagement 230
5.6.2 Stakeholders perceptions of community engagement 230
5 7 Summary 231

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 232

6.1 Introduction 232
6.2 Consolidation of findings 233
6.3 Proposed model 238
6.4 Recommendations 241
6.4.1 Transitions 241
6.4.1.1 School to college 242
6.4.1.2 College to working environment 242
6.4.2 Orientation 243
6.4.2.1 Culture and values 244
6.4.2.2 Student support services 244
6.4.2.3 Extracurricular activities 245
6.4.3 Mentorship 246
6.4.4 Management support 247
6.4.5 Brand and identity 248
6.5 Contributions of this study 249
6.6 Limitations 251
6.7 Recommendations for future studies 251
6.8 Conclusion 252

ANNEXURE A: ETHICS CLEARANCE 285

ANNEXURE B: INTERVIEW GUIDE 286

ANNEXURE C: SURVEY 290

ANNEXURE D: ENGLISH EDITING CERTIFICATE 296

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Northlink College FET students 21
Table 1.2: Student demographic profile 2022 21

Table 2.1: Transaction marketing vs relationship marketing 32
Table 2.2: Description of marketing 33
Table 2.3. Definitions of relationship marketing 41
Table 2.4: Dimensions of relationship marketing identified in the marketing literature 43
Table 2.5: Relationship marketing applied in different sectors 44
Table 2.6: Trust described 45
Table 2.7: Commitment described 47
Table 2.8: Satisfaction described 50
Table 2.9: Descriptions of consumer relationship marketing 55
Table 2.10: Social media marketing described 61

Table 3.1: Northlink College: Vision, mission and values 72
Table 3.2: Programmes offered by Northlink College 72

Table 4 1: Description of marketing research 113
Table 4.2: Steps in the research process 114
Table 4.3: Five major research philosophies 118
Table 4.4: Differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods 129
Table 4.5: Dimensions used in the qualitative method 148
Table 4.6: Description of probability sampling techniques 153
Table 4.7: Description of non-probability sampling techniques 154
Table 4:8: Participants' profile criteria 156
Table 4.9: Itemised scales used in the quantitative method 165
Table 4.10: Projected students in South Africa 169

Table 5.1: Demographic descriptors of the qualitative participants 181
Table 5.2: The main themes 182
Table 5.3: Qualitative data analysis: concurrences and contradictions 197
Table 5.4: Demographic descriptors of participants 199
Table 5.5: Construct reliability test results 205
Table 5.6: Confirmatory factor analysis 206
Table 5.7: Goodness-of-fit tests 209
Table 5.8: Summary of components 211
Table 5.9: Spearman's rank coefficient 218
Table 5.10: Relationships between demographic variables and constructs 221
Table 5.11: An association between gender and the constructs under study 223
Table 5.12: Cross-tabulation: Gender versus culture and values 224
Table 5.13: Cross-tabulation: Gender versus community engagement 224
Table 5.14: Cross-tabulation: Gender versus preferred form of communication 225

Table 6.1: Proposed model 239
Table 6.2: Goodness-of-fit tests 240

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Factors influencing the choice of paradigm 4
Figure 1.2: Conceptual model 13

Figure 2.1: A simple model of the marketing process 35
Figure 2.2: The evolution of relationship marketing 39
Figure 2.3: The pillars and process of consumer relationship marketing 53
Figure 2.4: Number of users (billions) for popular social media platforms worldwide 59

Figure 3.1: Percentage distribution of student enrolments 68
Figure 3.2: Most popular social media 85
Figure 3.3: Engaging university alumni through social media 87

Figure 4.1: Research onion 118
Figure 4.2: Deductive approach 123
Figure 4.3: Inductive approach 124
Figure 4.4: Convergent parallel mixed methods design 135
Figure 4.5: Research methodology 140
Figure 4.6: Empirical research process 141
Figure 4.7: Primary research method – Qualitative data 142
Figure 4.8: Primary research methods: Quantitative data 159

Figure 5.1: Layout of the data analysis and presentation process 178
Figure 5.2: Qualitative data analysis and presentation 179
Figure 5.3: Word cloud 180
Figure 5.4: Management and marketing perspectives of students' experience 183
Figure 5.5: Northlink College brand identity 186
Figure 5.6: Management and marketing's perspectives of students' financial support 189
Figure 5.7: Quantitative data analysis and presentation 199
Figure 5.8: Preferred communication mode 203
Figure 5.9: Student experience 209
Figure 5.10: College identity 210
Figure 5.11: Culture and values 210
Figure 5.12: Financial support 211
Figure 5.13: Trust 212
Figure 5.14: Commitment 213
Figure 5.15: Satisfaction 214
Figure 5.16: Loyalty 214
Figure 5.17: Community engagement 215
Figure 5.18: Spearman's monotonic functions 217
Figure 5.19: Triangulation 226

Figure 6.1: Conclusions and recommendations 232
Figure 6.2: Path diagram 240
Figure 6.3 Recommendations of the study 241

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CASE	The Council of Advancement and Support Education
CE	Community engagement
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CET	Community Education and Training Centres
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CHE	The Council of Higher Education
CRM	Customer relationship marketing
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DHET	The Department of Higher Education and Training
FET	Further Education and Training
FTE	Full-time equivalent
H	Hypotheses
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Educational Institutions
N1	National Certificate levels
NCV	National Certificate of Vocational
NQF	National Qualification Model
NSF	National Skills Fund
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NWU	North-West University
OLC	Open Learning Centre
P.R.U.N.E	Pride, Relevance, Unifying, Nostalgia Engagement
PHEIs	Private Higher Education Institutions
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupation
RM	Relationship marketing
RMSEA	Root Mean Squared Error of Estimation
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SAS	Smart Alumni System
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SET	Social Exchange Theory
SETAs	Sector Education and Training Authorities
SMM	Social media marketing
SMS	Contact Management System
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Science
SRC	Student Representative Council
SRMR	Standardized Root Mean Square Residual
SSS	Student Support Services
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
WOM	Word-of-mouth

KEY TERMS

Relationship marketing (RM): There is agreement that the marketing domain has changed radically over the last couple of years. The focus is now on retaining consumers who have been recruited; systems must be in place to manage data involving interactions with consumers and to ensure that longer-lasting relationships within networks of relationships are taking place for the benefit of both parties. Relationship marketing attempts to create loyal, long-term relationships by building, enhancing, and managing long-term relationships through trust and commitment by means of specific marketing strategies (Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:53; Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2179; Wilson *et al*., 2018:173).

Customer relationship marketing (CRM) is the overall process of constructing and maintaining profitable customer relationships by delivering superior consumer satisfaction and value. Management needs to understand consumers' needs to enable them to satisfy those needs by customising their services. It is all about consumers' satisfaction to foster loyalty (El Essawy, 2012:22; Lindgreen *et al*., 2012:12; Ngo & Vu, 2021:175).

Social media marketing (SMM) involves a wide range of applications that allow users to create, share, comment on, and discuss digital content. Social media emerged as a powerful medium of communication worldwide, and its use changed the way in which people communicate and interact online (Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:5; Eager *et al*., 2020:2).

Higher education institutions (HEIs): Higher education (HE) is defined as all learning programmes leading to a qualification that meets the requirements of the Higher Education Qualification Model (SAQA, 2010:7). Higher education institutions (HEIs) include not only universities and colleges but also various other professional schools that provide preparation in fields such as law, theology, medicine, business, music, and art. HE also includes teacher-training schools, junior colleges and institutes of technology (Halls, 2019:11).

TVET colleges: TVET stands for technical and vocational education and training. It is an international educational term applied to certain post-school educational institutions. It includes education and training, the study of technologies and related sciences, and the acquisition of practical skills relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life (Halls, 2019:11).

Alumni: These are students who previously attended and graduated from a particular school/college/university or people who had a former association with an educational organisation. Alumni can provide funding and their time to an academic institution. HEIs should

build and enhance long-term relationships to maintain loyal alumni (Ebert *et al*., 2015:253; Cownie & Gallo, 2020:3).

Community engagement (CE): Residents and community groups in neighbourhoods experiencing multiple forms of deprivation are often socially excluded and reveal low levels of social capital. A further challenge, namely low educational attainment, poses a favourable opportunity for alumni to get involved. CE is the "process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people" (McCloskey *et al.*, 2013:3).

Loyalty: Berndt and Tait (2012:27) describe loyalty as a "biased behavioural response, expressed over time by customers with respect to one supplier out of a set of suppliers, which is a function of decision-making and evaluative processes resulting in brand or store commitment." Bateson and Hoffman (2011:383) are of the opinion that loyal customers (alumni) have an emotional connection with their alma mater.

CHAPTER 1 PRÉCISING

1.1 Introduction

Alumni are key academic stakeholders, and fostering loyalty with them should be a priority for the management of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2178), such as technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges in South Africa. Stakeholders in this regard refer to management, staff, students, alumni, and the community. Academic institutions in today's highly competitive environment are facing unique challenges (Schlesinger *et al*., 2015:475; Pedro *et al*., 2018:129) in their endeavour to develop meaningful long-term relationships to promote student engagement (Khann *et al*., 2019:1). Colleges and universities (collectively referred to as HEIs) aspire to seek the ongoing involvement and support of alumni, and therefore petition to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with their alumni. HEIs traditionally turn to philanthropic donations from alumni and friends (Wilson *et al*., 2018:12) to advance these institutions. In the process, HEIs are to transform from 'giving' support to students-turned-graduates to 'getting' support from alumni (Gallo, 2018:92). Relationship marketing in its various forms is an appropriate marketing tool for HEIs, as these institutions are aspiring to build long-term relationships with their alumni.

This study is premised on relationship marketing and its effects on higher education, students, and the alumni of specifically a TVET college in the Western Cape. Following is a discussion on the background of relationship marketing, alumni, and the importance of these concepts for HEIs. The research problem follows, and then the aims and objectives of this study are presented. Thereafter follow descriptions of the methodological tools used, the initial limitations of the study, and the ethical considerations recognised to conduct this study. An exposition of the chapters constituting this study is presented to conclude the chapter.

1.2 Background to the study

Marketing is rooted in the idea of exchange, as Drezner (2018:181) expresses. Exchange requires at least two parties, and each has something that the other values. In the realm of TVET colleges, there are two main exchange paths. The first is between students and their alma mater, in which they exchange education tuition. The second is between donors and the institution, where stakeholders exchange time and money and receive gratitude in return (Drezner & Huehls, 2014:25). The relationship with an alma mater begins before matriculation and, if nourished, can last for decades after graduation.

The idea of relationship marketing (RM) emerged as a central tenant of the marketing literature during the 1990s (Sheth *et al*., 2012:4). RM can be viewed as a philosophy of doing business where the focus of a business is on keeping customers through long-term relationships (Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:533). Therefore, the focus of RM is on attracting and retaining consumers through trust (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2179; Wilson *et al*., 2018:17), satisfaction, and commitment using long-term relationships (Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:12). The literature on HE depicts students as service consumers.

Northlink College was established in 2002 following the merger of four colleges in the northern suburbs of the greater Cape Town Metropole in South Africa. In general, people want to be identified with successful entities or brands (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001:22; Rust, 2015:37; Khanna *et al*., 2019:2). Therefore, identification with a successful academic institution is an important factor in generating alumni donations (Stephenson & Yerger, 2015:303; Perutoa & Helm, 2018:124). Active participation by alumni in the form of scholarships, mentoring and the development of academic programmes, research endowments, and improving college facilities will all benefit current and potential students (Gallo, 2018:95). This is only possible if an educational brand, such as Northlink College, succeeds in establishing that special feeling of belonging among its students.

Marketing scholars have, however, begun to challenge many of the practices of RM, according to McAlexander and Koenig (2001:22), who also noted that the benefits of RM are often too 'one-sided' with consumers (alumni, in this case) who might be feeling as though they are 'punished' for their loyalty rather than being rewarded. Constant and/or repetitive 'well-intended' mailing and phone calls could alienate already loyal alumni rather than build strong relationships (Rattanamethawong *et al*., 2018:151). Alumni relations, probably at most HEIs in South Africa, are still in the early stages of development (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2179; Gallo, 2018:93). Rattanamethawong *et al*. (2018:151) agree by saying that current involvement and collaboration between alumni and academic institutions are still scarce, mainly because alumni feel they are not provided with useful information and benefits. According to these authors, alumni are mostly only tracked down for funding purposes.

Northlink College currently does not have an alumni association and does not endeavour to build or maintain any relationships with former students (alumni as per definition). This study explores what current students consider as important for a potential future relationship as loyal alumni (to the benefit of themselves, the college, and the community) after they have completed their studies. Consequently, the research population for the qualitative segment included the views and opinions of the management and marketers members and former students who would, in the

future, directly be involved should the college decide to pursue establishing an alumni association. The quantitative segment consists of current students.

It would have been ideal to include former students in a study of this nature but tracing such students is a major challenge due to the lack of an existing alumni programme at the college. RM is a long-term process and should ideally commence when a student commences his/her studies on campus and should be continued after graduation – thereby fostering and maintaining long-term loyal alumni.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by giving HEIs insight into how to use RM strategies to build and enhance relationships with alumni to 'become friends' since this is pivotal to 'giving back' to their communities and applying what they have learned through their higher education experiences (Campbell & Baxter, 2019:169).

1.3 Problem statement

HEIs are increasingly devising strategies and tactics to build strong relationships with their former and current students (Drezner, 2018:181) to cultivate lifetime loyal alumni. According to Gallo (2018:93), alumni relations are often considered the precursor to securing philanthropic donations: the 'friend-raising' before fundraising. The strategic role of alumni is essentially a philanthropic one, one of 'giving back' to their alma mater.

McAlexander and Koenig (2001:22) and Schlesinger and Cervera (2015:475) concur that by using RM coupled with philanthropy strategies, academic institutions can build a larger pool of responsive alumni with accurate databases. Drezner (2018:181) supports this view.

A study by Kleist *et al*. (2019:12) indicated that HEIs should host events, connect people through networking, and provide a strong value proposition to alumni to become 'friends' with their alma mater, aiming to give back to their communities. According to Pedro *et al*. (2018:132), HEIs must develop relationship programmes with their alumni, especially directing resources to motivate alumni's involvement in the institution and community activities.

For those in HEI marketing who seek to build relationships with alumni, finding answers to questions relating to the nature of these relationships (Peruta & Helm, 2018:125), which are how relationships are built to become lifetime supporters, is critical. This joins with the principles of omni-channel marketing whereby mass communication channels are brought together to deliver information consistently to alumni through advanced technology (Cummins *et al*., 2016:4). Omni-channel marketing strives to maximise the relationships and experiences of consumers (alumni and HEIs in this case) across channels and consumer touch points. It will be vital to keep a

dialogue with students, staff, faculties, and alumni about what will keep them engaged with an HEI.

Given the importance of the student-HEI emotional bond and the lack of related studies in the South African higher education sector, this issue should be critically assessed and addressed (Rojas-Mendez *et al*., 2009:21). Therefore, the problem remains: Which key determinants ought to be incorporated into an alumni relationship-model to foster a lifetime alumni bond, for alumni to become 'friends' who invest in their HEI and community through community engagement as a proposed key component of alumni relationship marketing?

1.4 Paradigmatic perspective

A paradigm is a fundamental belief that directs a process of research (Creswell, 2014:9; Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021:17). Paradigms are regarded as worldviews because they bring together the totality of researchers' perceptions, choice of a study, and the methods involved in conducting research (Lor, 2010:4). The research paradigm and philosophy depend on various factors, such as a researcher's mental model, his/her worldview, different perceptions, and many beliefs and attitudes related to the perception of reality, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

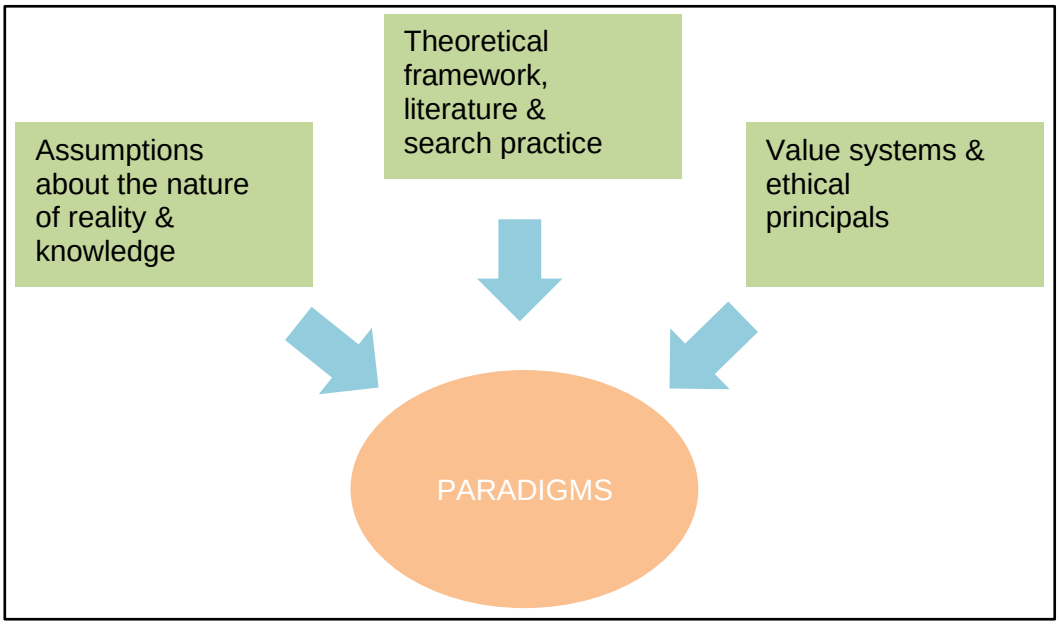


Figure 1.1: Factors influencing the choice of paradigm

Source: Lor (2010:5)

Researchers' beliefs and values are important in this concept to provide good arguments and terminology to obtain reliable results. In certain cases, a researcher's position can significantly

impact the outcome of research, and both the positivism and the interpretivism paradigms were adopted for this study.

1.4.1 Research traditions

Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:22) state that the three dominant research traditions are positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism. Apart from the above philosophical instances, post-positivism, objectivism, post-modernism constructivism, and pragmatism (Creswell, 2014:11) can also be applied in research studies. Positivism can be defined as the approach of the natural sciences (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:22). Positivists support the application of natural science methods to study certain phenomena, including social phenomena.

Physicists Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr adopted the dogmatic view of positivism, turning the emphasis from absolute certainty to probability (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012:1). Chilisa and Kawulich (2012:1) portrayed the scientist as one who constructs knowledge, instead of just passively noting the laws of nature. They argue that "*no matter how faithfully the scientist adheres to scientific method research, research outcomes are neither totally objective nor unquestionably certain*". This view is known as post-positivism (or logical empiricism). It is important to note that post-positivists share much in common with positivists. Still, most research approaches and practices in social science today fit better into the post-positivist category.

Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:22) believe that interpretivism developed as a reaction to the shortcomings and limitations of positivism, specifically in its application to the social sciences. This view is supported by Kumatongo and Muzato (2021:18). The main idea on which this paradigm rests is that people are essentially different from objects. Interpretivists merely want to understand human behaviour to be able to appreciate how they experience daily life and to get an understanding of what is meaningful and relevant to them. Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:23) state that critical realism was borne out of frustration with positivism's narrow focus and emphasis on the causal nature of universal laws. There was also frustration with interpretivism's passive, contextual, and subjective views. As a result, critical realism took aspects from both traditions and uniquely combined them. It can be distinguished from positivism according to whether the focus is on theory verification (positivism) or theory falsification (post-positivism).

In the quest to address the research problem of this study, both positivism (associated with the quantitative component) and the interpretivism paradigms (associated with the qualitative component) were exploited to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Sahay, 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2019:149). Furthermore, mixed-method research was

decided upon and included both quantitative and qualitative approaches to strengthen the content of the study.

1.4.2 Research philosophies

Chilisa and Kawulich (2012:1), Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:23), and Nha (2021:2) all concur that research paradigms are defined by their ontological, epistemological, and axiological orientations, which are subsequently briefly dealt with.

- Ontological

This philosophy makes one aware of the nature of reality. The focus is on trying to find out how the world operates, as well as realising how society can impact the surroundings. In other words, ontology clears the difference between reality and how reality is perceived (Nha, 2021:2). This philosophy believes that reality can be observed and measured – and therefore be known – and that a researcher has to discover the laws that govern reality (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:23).

- Epistemology

Epistemology means the study of knowledge. It tries to find acceptable knowledge and addresses facts accordingly. Therefore, each research study must be expected to contribute to the body of knowledge. Epistemology is mostly applicable for scientific research purposes. Researchers must find evidence to either support or reject their hypotheses (Creswell, 2014:9).

- Axiology

Axiology refers to the study of values and value judgements. It values honesty and personal integrity more than anything else, as these values have the function of creating trust (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012:1). For any particular study, assumptions can be made about reality (ontology), about what is being claimed to be known about reality (epistemology) and the procedures of doing such (methodology).

What applies to this study – taking together what is above. Ensuing is a synopsis of the theoretical assumptions applicable to this study.

1.4.3 Theoretical assumptions

A theory systematically describes concepts, constructs, and relationships of specific processes in a given discipline. Theories form the academic foundation of every discipline and allow the transformation of information into knowledge (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013:24). Researchers use two

research approaches, which are subsequently discussed, followed by the main theories relevant to this study.

1.4.3.1 Research approaches

There are essentially two directions of theorising, namely inductive and deductive theorising (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:48). In inductive theorising, theoretical concepts are inferred from data collected and analysed in a specific way. There is movement from the specific to the general to apply the findings to more abstract and broad theoretical constructs. Deductive theorising allows the 'building' of an existing or a new theory. Deductive theorising involves reasoning from general assumptions to more specific ones, and the move is from exploring a theory's broad and general aspects to applying it to a specific topic under investigation. This study adopted both the deductive approach (to test hypotheses) and the inductive approach (to explore and generate new theories or insights), employing the mixed-method research approach.

In the following section, relevant theoretical models are expounded upon, and their relevance to this study is rationalised.

1.4.3.2 Theories

The main theories relevant to this study are the social exchange theory (SET), the organisation identification theory, the relationship marketing theory, the pro-social behaviour theory, and the model of community engagement.

(1) Social exchange theory (SET)

Previous research established that one of the basic principles of SET is that relationships evolve into trust, satisfaction, and commitment to ensure a robust and enduring relationship, ultimately leading to loyalty (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005:875) as the study's primary aim. Drezner (2018:183) used the social exchange theory to explain the interdependent relationship that exists between a donor and an alma mater. It is, therefore, extremely important to engage students in alumni initiatives and educate students about the importance of philanthropy (monetary and service to their communities) towards their alma maters.

(2) Organisation identification theory

Organisation identification, as part of the social identity theory, occurs when an individual associates/identifies/defines him-/herself with an organisation (Mael & Ashforth, 1992:105;

Drezner, 2010:4). Social identification is an individual's perception of belongingness to a group. An individual perceives him-/herself as an actual or symbolic group member.

(3) Relationship marketing theory

Morgan and Hunt (1994:20) theorised that the presence of commitment and trust is central to successful relationship marketing and its ability to 'condition others'. Morgan and Hunt identified, in their commitment-trust theory, the 'relationship benefit' as a key antecedent for the relationship commitment characterising consumers who engage in relational exchange. Furthermore, consumers (in this case, students) desire relationship partners they can trust. Therefore, the success of the alumni and HEI relationship lies in the development and maintenance of trust and commitment among the parties.

(4) Pro-social behaviour theory

In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Batson (as noted by Cherry, 2018:1) explains that pro-social behaviour refers to "*a broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself – behaviours such as helping, comforting, sharing and cooperation*". Essentially, the reciprocity theory believes that alumni might contribute towards increasing the ranking of an HEI and thereby the value of their qualifications (Drezner, 2015:4) by giving even small financial contributions and/or services to their alma mater.

(5) Model of community engagement: Learning empowerment through public-student engagement

Owen and Hill (2011:7) describe student engagement as:

> *"The energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioural, cognitive, or affective indicators across a continuum. It is shaped by a range of structural and internal influences, including the complex interplay of relationships, learning activities, and the learning environment".*

Students need to become empowered, informed, responsible, and intentional life-long learners to enable them to do something that makes a difference. Drawing upon extensive research regarding educational practices and in-depth explorations of innovative learning models, it is stressed that liberal education is most effective when studies reach beyond the classroom to the larger community, requesting students to apply their acquired analytical skills and ethical judgement to sense problems in the community. The idea of 'giving back' focuses on the ways in which students and alumni can be involved in helping to shape their higher educational institutions and societies of which they are part.

Following is an exposition of the methodological assumptions relevant to this study.

1.4.4 Methodological assumptions

Choosing a methodology starts with selecting the research paradigm that informs a study. The methodological process, therefore, is guided by philosophical beliefs about the nature of reality, knowledge, and values and by the theoretical model that informs comprehension. Research strategies, such as experiments, surveys, case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, action research, and phenomenology exist in academic literature. Survey research involves collecting data from a relatively large group of people by asking selected individuals questions (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:48) designed to gather the required information. Surveys can range from highly structured questionnaires to unstructured in-depth interviews. It is a very popular research tool (Hofstee, 2006:115) and is often used to gather demographic information, as well as data about people's attitudes, opinions, impressions, levels of satisfaction and so on which were relevant to this study. Survey research can be quantitative, qualitative, or even both (mixed-method).

This study aimed to gather data from the marketing, management teams, and former students at the college using interviews (qualitative), and from current students employing a questionnaire (quantitative). The mixed method was followed, and it terminated with triangulation to achieve the objectives stipulated for this study. The integration of data, called triangulation and described by Fusch (2018:19), combines several research designs to study the same occurrence. This view is supported by Guetterman *et al.* (2015:559) and more recently by Leedy *et al.* (2019:235). The qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other providing richness or comprehensive outcomes that would be unavailable from one method alone (Litheko, 2019:195). The study employed triangulation to crosscheck the credibility of the data, enrich understanding, and achieve objectivity, reliability, and validity in both techniques (Fusch, 2018:9; Leedy *et al*., 2019:235).

1.5 Research aim and objectives

Wiid and Diggines (2009:50) pinpoint that "*research objectives indicate broadly what the research hopes to accomplish*". An answer must be found to the question: What is the purpose of this marketing survey? The aims and objectives define the primary focus of any research study, and what applies to this study is now dealt with in terms of the theoretical and empirical objectives.

1.5.1 Research aim

This study aimed to develop a proposed model that can be used by the management of not only a TVET college but also by HEIs to foster a loyal alumni bond, and this is also the primary objective of this study.

1.5.2 Research objectives

The following theoretical objectives have been identified for this study:

- To explore literature in the domains of marketing and relationship marketing.
- To explore literature relevant to alumni, community engagement, and its effect on alumni loyalty.

To achieve the aim of this study, the following empirical objectives were formulated:

- To examine the perceptions of the stakeholders in enhancing relationships with alumni.
- To explore the stakeholders' perceptions towards relationship marketing within an alumni context.
- To explore the stakeholders' interest in community engagement within an alumni context.
- To examine the stakeholders' perceptions towards community engagement as a dimension of alumni loyalty.

1.5.3 Conceptual model and hypothesis development

A conceptual model represents the synthesis of literature on how to explain a phenomenon. It maps out the actions required in the course of a study given the knowledge by other researchers and their observations on the subject of their research. In other words, a conceptual model is the understanding of how particular variables in a proposed study connect. Therefore, it identifies the variables relevant to the investigation (Ang, 2014:7; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:108).

The conceptual model explains the main antecedents of alumni loyalty. It commences with alumni and incorporates relationship marketing as a mediator to create and enhance alumni loyalty. Community engagement has become a contemporary catchphrase, and there is uncertainty about whether this should be incorporated into an alumni relationship model, i.e. the conceptual model. Community engagement is included in this study to expand on existing models found in academic literature.

Brown and Mazzarol (as emphasised by Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180) mentioned that scholars have performed relatively little formal research on the drivers of loyalty in HEIs. Four dimensions were identified to research alumni for this study: student experiences, college identity, culture and values, and financial support to foster alumni loyalty. Firstly, a study done by Koenig-Lewis *et al*.

(2015:14) confirmed that students recalled experiences as a driver of alumni loyalty. In contrast to Lewis *et al*. (2015:14), InsideTrack (2021) specifically reported that the COVID-19 pandemic greatly changed students' experiences when academic institutions closed their campuses and sent their students home to finish the term online. Secondly, there are many studies published by various scholars (Melewar & Akel, 2006:43; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008:452; Porter *et al*., 2011:3; Rauschnabel *et al*., 2014:3077; Valitov, 2014:295; da Silva *et al*., 2020:354; Eger *et al*., 2020:4) who optimistically view branding as an instrument to improve competitiveness and reputation, and this also applies to higher education. In light of increased competition, HEIs in all parts of the world have begun a search for a unique definition (Valitov, 2014:296) of what they are to differentiate themselves to attract students and academic staff. Alves and Raposo (2010:1263) firmly believe that measuring and understanding HEI branding could be the first step for HEIs to design competitive strategies to improve student loyalty.

Biederman (2022:23) concluded that students with a greater perceived academic quality and prestige are also inclined to greater levels of alumni giving. Thirdly, the type of education offered to students, including cultural dimensions, adds to students' lives and could result in a continued feeling of attachment to HEIs. Teaching students a set of values and a particular type of character could make individuals more predictable, and thereby produce a highly effective alumni network. A further study revealed shared values to be another antecedent of loyalty (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2190). Vidal and Pittz (2018:4) refer to a holistic education experience that goes far beyond the classroom and introduces values and traditions that can be a reason for higher retention rates, substantial endowments, and engagement.

Fourthly, the study by Biederman (2022:28) revealed that students receiving a need-based scholarship raises the probability of giving by 12% – indeed an opportunity for TVET colleges where students receive National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) grants. Similarly, Monks (2003:129) discovered that students who used study loans from a financial institution tend to give less because of their financial burden.

Relationship marketing (RM) is a mediator to foster and enhance alumni loyalty and from literature and the relationship marketing theory as identified by Theron and Terblance (2010:383), the dimensions most often used to study this construct are trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Consistent with the previously mentioned scholars, Rojas-Mendez *et al*. (2009:34) reported that trust, commitment, and satisfaction explained 83% of student loyalty. Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2179) found the previously stated dimensions as the most important when relationships are established, maintained, and crucial for the enhancement of long-term relationships to build loyal donors. Firstly, Abdullah and Kanyan (2013:93) found trust to be the most important

dimension in predicting consumer loyalty. Students are less likely to drop out if HEIs are trusting, thereby reducing retention problems although students encounter many other difficulties (Rojas-Mendez *et al*., 2009:25). Trusting alumni are more likely to contribute financially, and spend more time actively engaging in their alma mater's activities as well as in their communities.

Secondly, is the construct of commitment. Bejou (2005:44) declared that commitment occurs when both parties are loyal to each other and realise that mutual relations will bring benefits and gratification. Relationship commitment is an important issue that could influence students' loyalty to HEIs (Pedro *et al*., 2017:129). Pedro *et al*. (2017:148) reported that committed alumni are willing to pass on positive references to family and friends, either regarding courses presented at an HEI or promoting the brand. Thirdly, student satisfaction is most probably positively related to student loyalty, as was found by several researchers (Schertzer, Helgesen & Nesset, as cited by Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180).

Community engagement (CE) as a construct can most probably be added to the equation to enhance alumni loyalty and be beneficial to an HEI in return. Fear *et al*. described CE, as revealed by Bhagwan (2020:181), as "*opportunities to share knowledge and learn with those who struggle for social justice; and to collaborate respectfully and responsibly to improve life*". Bhagwan (2020:171) opined that HEIs' engagement with local communities holds the potential to shift the discipline based on the boundaries of higher education to a deeper concern with societal issues. Moreover, Brunton *et al*. (2017:5) wrote that community engagement mostly evolves into long-term partnerships that address one of the objectives of this research study – to understand stakeholder behaviour towards relationship marketing and the link with the community.

The conceptual model devised for this study is presented in Figure 1.2.

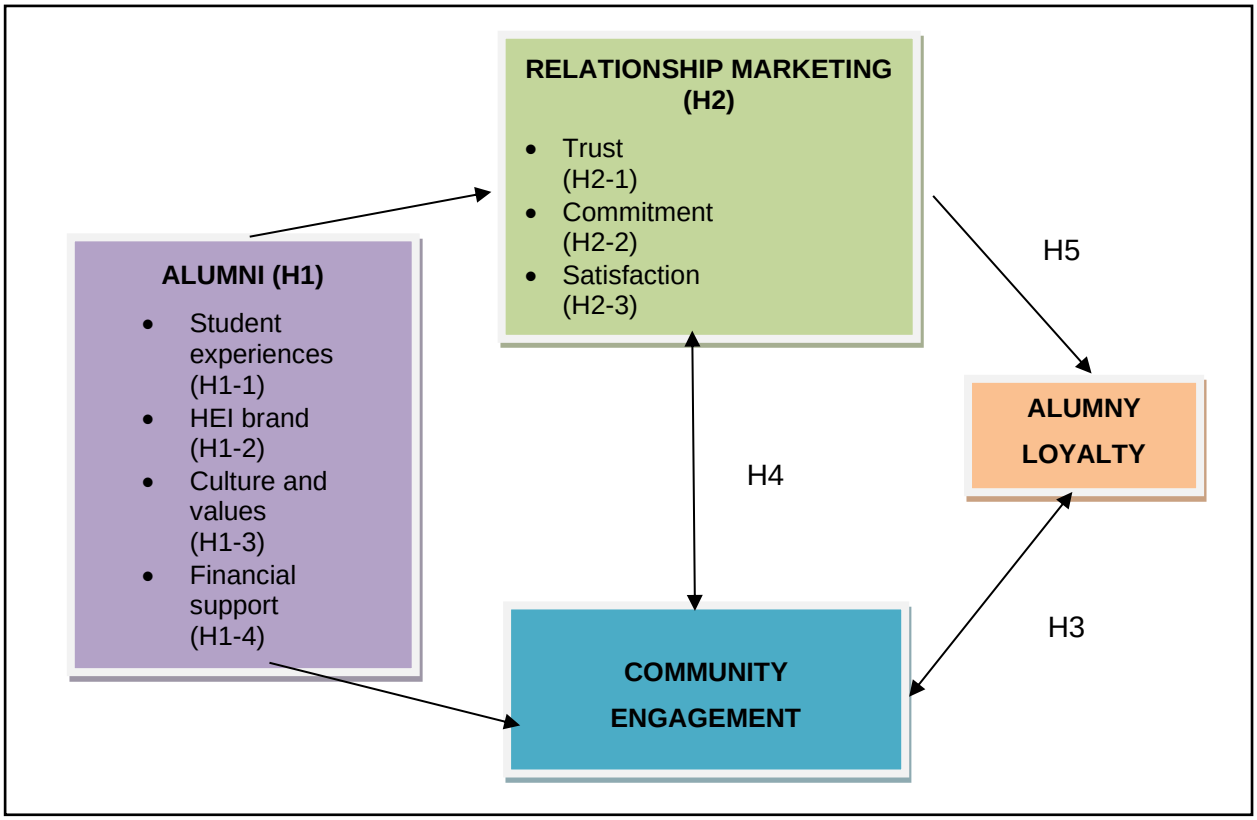


Figure 1.2: Conceptual model

Source: Compiled from Rojas-Mendez *et al*. (2009:34); Koenig-Lewis *et al*. (2015:14); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2184); Pedro *et al*. (2018:132)

Annexure C provides a detailed description of the meta-analysis, including the itemised scales used to identify the constructs applicable to this study, and elaborates on it in the research methods chapter.

1.5.3.1 Hypothesis development

Students' loyalty to an HEI is a multiphase concept that stretches from enrolment to graduation and then beyond (Koenig-Lewis *et al*., 2015:1). The following statement is of specific value to this study:

> *"the establishment and nurturing of mutually beneficial relations between a college and its alumni as a primary stakeholder should be a top priority for any higher education institution that wants to prosper and grow in a fast-changing and highly competitive market".*

Alumni are likely to always have an integral and inseparable connection to the HEI from which they have graduated. Alumni must be cherished as the most important assets to any HEI since loyal alumni can make funding available, offer a variety of services, perform the role of representatives for the brand, and improve competitiveness in the education milieu. For this study, the relationship marketing dimensions of trust, commitment and satisfaction are deemed as efficacious for the active involvement of engaged stakeholders to foster loyal alumni.

Subsequently is an abstraction of the hypotheses posed for this study to provide a complete view of how the hypotheses fit into the conceptual model. A thorough examination of the existing literature presented the foundation for the formulation of the research hypotheses as explored in the succeeding chapters.

Based on the above discussion, the hypotheses posed are:

H1 Alumni contact has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H1-1 Student experiences have a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H1-2 HEI identity has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H1-3 Culture and values have a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H1-4 Financial support has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

H2 Relationship marketing has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H2-1 Trust has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H2-2 Commitment has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.
H2-3 Satisfaction has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

H3 There is a positive correlation between community engagement and alumni loyalty.

H4 There is a positive correlation between relationship marketing and community engagement.
H4-1 Trust has a significant positive influence on community engagement.
H4-2 Commitment has a significant positive influence on community engagement.
H4-3 Satisfaction has a significant positive influence on community engagement.

Frisby *et al*. (2019:162) commented that if HEIs effectively build rapport with students, the opportunity exists for them to become loyal alumni. Regular contact enables alumni to feel connected with their alma mater, fostering a sense of belonging and maintaining an emotional bond and therefore the need to be a member of a community (Amani, 2022:3). Traditional

engagement strategies, such as reunions, social media platforms, and newsletters maintain relationships with alumni. Based on the above discussion, the first hypothesis posed is:

H1: Alumni contact has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Numerous studies have found that undergraduate students with positive experiences such as experienced lecturers, intensified education and recalled their time with fond memories have a significant impact on alumni's giving behaviour (Mael & Ashforth, 1989:24; Vidal & Pittz, 2018:2). Alumni contact is subdivided into four sub-hypotheses to address different factors that guide alumni loyalty. This leads to the first sub-hypothesis.

H1-1 Student experiences have a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Stakeholders concur that Northlink as an identity/brand is known predominantly because of word-of-mouth. A brand is described as something unique – something that exists in the mind of consumers (alumni) – it may even be perceived as having a distinct personality whom consumers may develop personal relationships with (Khanna *et al*., 2019:340; Eger *et al*., 2020:4). Branding in education is usually associated with: *firstly*, the quality of education (as PA3 orated), and *secondly*, the corporate identity of the HEI (Walter *et al*., 2020:14). This leads to the following sub-hypothesis:

H1-2 HEIs' brand has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

The future of philanthropic giving to HEIs lies with an academic institution's current students (Drezner, 2010:2). Therefore, exploring how HEIs cultivate students to be future loyalists is important. Drezner (2010:2) is of the view that decisions to act in a pro-social way by contributing towards one's alma mater is indeed a complex phenomenon and the third sub-hypothesis in this regard is proposed:

H1-3 Culture and values have a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

NSFAS is a recognised financial support scheme to provide financial assistance to eligible South African students to enable them to access higher education. Additionally, the college provides free meals for needy students when money is available. Lastly, the fourth sub-hypothesis is suggested:

H1-4 Financial support has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Relationship marketing is about forming long-term relationships. Within the context of this study, HEIs need to attract, build, maintain, and enhance desirable exchange relationships with stakeholders to become loyal lifelong partners, and to create value for the benefit of all. Relationship marketing emphasises mutual benefits, such as networking opportunities, career services, and exclusive events, which provide tangible value to alumni and foster continued loyalty. Furthermore, relationship marketing encompasses strategies designed to retain graduate students and canvassing for prospective future students. Based on the above discussion, the second hypothesis presented is:

H2 Relationship marketing has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Relationship marketing's dimensions of trust, commitment, and satisfaction are the most frequently cited in empirical research as those that will result in consumer loyalty. Several scholars, including Abubakar (2015:468) and Singh and Jain (2015:971), regard trust as a central construct to the development of successful relationships. The definition of trust has evolved. Morgan and Hunt (as noted by Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180) described trust in the 1990s as one party's confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity. To confirm the direct link between relationship marketing and loyalty, the succeeding three sub-hypotheses will be addressed next. This leads to the first sub-hypothesis.

H2-1 Trust has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Wong *et al*. (2018:207) found that commitment is well-established in the relationship marketing literature and is indeed essential for the creation and preservation of long-term relationships. Almost every description of commitment emphasises the '*drive*' for continuity to maintain a valuable relationship. The second sub-hypothesis postulated is:

H2-2 Commitment has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Consumer satisfaction is one of the best-studied areas in marketing. Previous research by Pedro *et al*. (2017:129) found that consumer satisfaction is a forerunner to consumer loyalty and a willingness to continue a relationship. In addition, Sanchez-Fernandez (2016:671) described satisfaction as an evaluation between a consumer's expectation of a service about actual experiences. This leads to the following sub-hypothesis:

H2-3 Satisfaction has a significant positive influence on alumni loyalty.

Community engagement is described as the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting the well-being of all parties involved. Loyal alumni can contribute financially as well as non-financially (mentor, guest speaker) for the betterment of stakeholders, including the welfare of communities. The following hypothesis reads:

H3 There is a positive correlation between community engagement and alumni loyalty.

Purcell *et al*. (2020:3) claim that community engagement pays particular attention to and links up with the principles of relationship marketing. The dimensions of relationship marketing are essential for developing and enhancing long-term relationships to build up loyal alumni. This addresses one of the objectives of the research study: to understand stakeholder behaviour towards relationship marketing, the link with community engagement, and working collaboratively towards the aim of alumni loyalty. In the same vein, McCloskey *et al*. (2013:7) believe that the act of engagement is similar to an act of relationship building while linking arms with raising awareness and visibility. The following hypothesis postulated is:

H4 There is a positive correlation between relationship marketing and community engagement.

Students and stakeholders need to believe that academic institutions will stand behind their promises and honour their commitments to build trust (Berndt & Tait, 2012:15). Trusting alumni are more likely to spend tie actively engaging in their alma mater's activities in their communities. This leads to the following sub-hypothesis:

H4-1 Trust has a significant positive influence on community engagement.

Literature proposed that rust and commitment are to be studied in conjunction (Caliskan & Esmer, 2019:377; Mbango & Mmatili, 2019:1) because both parties intend to engage in activities that are of best interest of both parties in the long term. The second sub-hypothesis postulated is:

H4-2 Commitment has a significant positive influence on community engagement.

Previous research by Seiders *et al*. (2005:26) and Pedro *et al.* (2017:129) found that consumer satisfaction is a forerunner to consumer loyalty, a willingness to continue their relationship and participation in HEIs activities, like community engagement. Consumer satisfaction is the core of every business philosophy that focuses on the creation of value (Kiyak *et al.*, 2015:77) for

consumers, forestalling and managing consumer's expectations and signifying responsibility that will satisfy consumers' needs. Lastly the third sub-hypothesis is suggested:

H4-3 Satisfaction has a significant positive influence on community engagement.

Relationship marketing covers all marketing activities to establish, develop, and maintain successful relational exchanges. As noted by Schlesinger *et al*. (2015:476), it involves building an enduring relationship network with loyal alumni to benefit all parties involved. The final hypothesis reads:

As observed, alumni are an independent variable; relationship marketing is a mediator; community engagement is a contemporary catchphrase; and loyal alumni are the dependent variable, as indicated in Figure 1.2. Subsequently, this study's contribution is explored.

1.5.4 Study contribution

This research was conceptualised as a response to the need to identify and study the dimensions of HEI life that influence both the academic and post-academic involvement of students. The aim of this study, as previously stated, is to propose a model that can be used to cultivate alumni loyalty by gathering and measuring information on the set of variables of interest to this study. The results of the study aimed to contribute practical guidance to the efficient allocation of resources to maximise alumni involvement and support and to optimise students' experience on campus (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2184). The task that followed was to apply the principles of relationship marketing and the development of a model that is firmly embedded in HEIs to illustrate how relationship marketing, which in the case incorporates community engagement, can be beneficial to not only higher education institutions (McLaughlin *et al*. as cited by Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2179), but also to their alumni and society at large.

1.5.5 Study design

There are three general types of designs: descriptive, exploratory, and casual (Hofstee, 2011:21; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:75). Descriptive research designs entail procedures aimed at describing methods and procedures to gather data on variables of interest. Cooper and Schindler (2014:25) reported that descriptive research designs are scientific and seek to observe and describe people's behaviour and other research variables without establishing an association between factors. Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:75) claimed that exploratory designs are unstructured, informal, and often engaged when researchers seek insight into a research problem. Causal research designs seek to establish the cause-and-effect relationships between or among research variables (Malhotra, 2007:79).

This study adopted a mixed research design. The exploratory research path was followed due to the lack of scholarly information on this specific topic in higher education in the Western Cape, South Africa. Thereafter, the causal research design was undertaken to determine whether there are cause-and-effect relationships between the different variables identified. This involves the identification of a variable causing certain behaviour and, in turn, affecting the behavioural (dependent) variable.

A synopsis of the research method followed is subsequently presented and further expounded upon in a later chapter.

1.6 Research methodology

Research methodology refers to a set of methods and tools used to conduct research. Survey research can be quantitative, qualitative, or both (mixed method). The parallel mixed method was selected for this study to obtain the primary data required.

The mixed-method approach was adopted and incorporates both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The main advantages of this approach, as explained by Truong *et al*. (2020:4), are that it provides deeper insights into the research problem, it gives a better understanding of the social context of the constructs included in this study, and it verifies and enriches the findings. In addition to this, the marketing discipline encourages mixed-method research because of the emphasis on rigorous research (Woodruff, as stated by Harrison & Reilly, 2011:7), which is founded on analytical integration.

1.6.1 Study context

Research methodology for this study refers to all the methods and tools engaged in pursuing this study in a logical order, granted that it complies with the conventions of scientific research.

1.6.2 Research universe

Research was crucial to achieving this study's objectives, and empirical information was obtained from people and the research universe. The research universe, which encompasses all experimental units from which a sample can be drawn, played a pivotal role in this study. It included management, all marketing staff, alumni, and current students, forming the basis for the two research population subsets.

1.6.2.1 Research populations

Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:132) describe a research population as the group of people or entities from which information is required. Bryman and Bell *et al*. (2014:57) view a population as a group in the universe with specific characteristics.

The research population for the *qualitative* component of this study comprised the marketing and management teams, and former students (alumni). Data was collected using face-to-face interviews using a purpose-designed interview guide. Atlas-ti was used to analyse the qualitative data, which enhanced data coding into themes and categories to establish the key factors describing the relationships between alumni and an HEI to foster and improve alumni loyalty.

The research population for the *quantitativ*e component of this study, which comprised all current students registered at Northlink College, was instrumental in the data collection process. The quantitative phase, projected at 19 153 students registered at Northlink College for the 2023 academic year, aimed to comprehensively understand the student body. Quantitative data was collected with the aid of a questionnaire, as recommended by Morgan (2014:58), and was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and statistical tests such as canonical correlation and structural equation modelling.

Northlink College was established in 2002, following the merger of four colleges in the northern suburbs of the greater Cape Town Metropole. Table 1.1 indicates the full-time equivalent of all seven campuses, which is a unit that indicates students' workloads and/or class loads in a way that makes workloads/or class loads comparable across various contexts.

As indicated in Table 1.1, six of the seven campuses' Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) student numbers decreased immensely from 2019 to 2020. During times of economic downturn and the recession caused by COVID-19, Northlink College student enrolments plummeted by 26% – a shocking decline. This could be because college students are the most likely to have technology and internet deficiencies, making online learning an enormous challenge. Inside Track (2021) reported that experts expected HEIs to get a bigger-than-usual enrolment boost post-2020. In contrast to other colleges, the Parow Campus' FTE students increased slightly from 2019 to 2020 – a reason for this increase may be that many learners are opting for skills training instead of a diploma course to enter the job market quicker. To prove this, the Parow Campus offers many vocational courses such as secretarial, safety in society, hair, and beauty.

Table 1.1: Northlink College FET students

Campus	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2022
Belhar	1 662	1 714	1 743	2 206	1 114	3 800
Bellville	1 164	1 095	1 105	1 364	1 006	2 317
Goodwood	817	703	717	772	396	1 336
Parow	983	1 089	1 190	1 284	1 421	1 594
Protea	825	815	928	1 182	877	1 740
Tygerberg	3 435	3 120	3 159	2 594	1 762	5 152
Wingfield	1 320	1 071	1 144	1 117	867	3 214
TOTAL	10 206	9 607	9 986	10 519	7 743	19153
% GROWTH	3.9%	(5.9%)	4.0%	5.3%	(26%)	147%

1.6.2.2 Sampling

Sampling, as defined by Vasileiou *et al*. (2018:3), is:

> *"the process by which researchers select a representative subset or part of the total population that can be studied for their topic so that they will be able to conclude the entire population".*

Therefore, conclusions and generalisations about a research population will be as good as those of the samples it is based on. A sample (a selection of some members of the population) was selected to include the whole population more cost-effectively and less time-consumingly, as Widd and Diggines (2009:191) recommended. Table 1.2 indicates a student demographic gender profile of the students at Northlink College.

Table 1. 2: Student demographic profile 2022

Northlink College	Black		Coloured		Indian, White	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
%	40	25	12	19	1	3

Table 1:2 indicated that black students made up 65%, coloured students 31%, and Indian/white 4% of the total. Drezner and Huehls (2014:78) are concerned that much of the extant literature does not consider diversity. There is a lack of exploration into how racial, ethnic, gender, or religious diversity within populations affects marketing. Therefore, scholars must explore these experiences and their effect on alumni engagement. Drezner (2018:185) suggests that HEIs should leverage these social identity differences and build different marketing strategies to engage alumni properly.

1.6.2.2.1 Sampling technique

Sampling designs are broadly categorised into non-probability and probability sampling (Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:137).

Non-probability sampling is used when it is nearly impossible to determine who the entire population is or when it is difficult to gain access to the entire population. Non-probability designs include quota, convenience, judgemental, and snowball sampling. For the *qualitative* component of the study, convenience sampling was used, and the target population components were selected based on convenience, availability, geographical proximity, and willingness to participate (Cash *et al*., 2022:3). Moreover, management and marketing departments and alumni were identified and accessible.

Probability sampling requires that every respondent in the population has an equal and independent chance of being selected for inclusion. This method is scientific and preferred and, therefore, often used in quantitative studies, for it removes human bias from the sampling process by using random and systematic techniques. However, convenience sampling is also applied to the *quantitative* component for the same reasons as the qualitative component. Convenience sampling was used because students from the seven campuses were identified and accessible daily at the college. A sample frame could not be constructed for the qualitative and quantitative components of the study (Beukes, 2014:165). A sample frame is described as a list that identifies the units of the target population, which was not possible seeing that the frame was not all-embracing.

1.6.2.2.2 Sampling size

Bryman and Bell (2014:176) maintain that sampling can never be 100% correct. These authors argue that the sample size to use is often a case of judgement rather than a calculation. In the same vein, Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:135) note that there are no fixed rules for determining sample sizes and recommend choosing a sample that is big enough to yield a relatively precise estimate of the population's values, which is financially viable, and easily put into practice at the same time.

The sample size for the *qualitative* component comprised 19 interviews based on similar studies by Chae *et al*. (2022:7) and Cash *et al.* (2022:2). According to Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:135), there are no fixed rules for determining qualitative sample sizes. They recommend choosing a sample big enough to yield a relatively precise estimate of a population's values, which is financially viable and easily implemented.

Du-Plooy *et al.* (2014:135) and Dereje *et al.* (2022:2) determined the sample size for the quantitative component of this study based on the population size. The Krejcie and Morgan table (as commented on by Basera, 2019:14) was used to determine the appropriate sample size of 375 based on a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 0.05%. However, the aim was to obtain 400 usable responses.

1.6.2.2.3 Inclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria refer to requirements deemed appropriate that participants must comply with to be included in the sample for the research. For this study, the following parameters were applicable:

Qualitative component*:*

- Marketing and management teams of Northlink College
- Former students of Northlink College – if contactable.

Quantitative component*:*

- Students currently registered at Northlink College, Western Cape.

1.6.2.2.4 Exclusion criteria

Exclusion criteria are a set of requirements used to exclude persons from being considered as potential members for a sample (Bryman & Bell, 2014:177) and for this study are:

Qualitative component:

- All administrative staff.
- All management staff of Northlink College.

Quantitative component:

- Students from TVET colleges other than Northlink College.

1.6.3 Recruitment of participants

Recruitment encompasses all the activities researchers engage in when selecting and approaching suitable sample members in a research study. Recruitment of study participants

indicates the start of the informed consent process and poses one of the greatest challenges for researchers dealing with human subjects.

Several methods can be used to contact potential participants. In this study, permission was obtained from the College Principal to approach possible participants.

Qualitative component

Within this context, heads of departments and programme managers with eras of experience in education, especially in the TVET sector, members of the marketing team, and former students of Northlink College (as alumni), who all have experience in the daily operations of Northlink College, were deemed suitable as participants. A total of 19 participants were contacted individually, requesting their availability to partake in conducting the interviews and to arrange a suitable time and date to conduct the interviews. Participants were briefed and informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures, as well as any potential risks and benefits associated with their involvement. By doing so, participants could voluntarily agree/disagree to partake in the study from an informed position. Obtaining informed consent from study participants was thought very important to acknowledge and protect their rights and welfare.

Quantitative component

Within this context, selected participants from across all academic programmes offered by Northlink College were recruited. Four fieldworkers were recruited and trained to administer the questionnaires. The purpose of the research was explained to the fieldworkers, and the material facts of the study were fully disclosed. It should be noted that the researcher is a staff member on the Tygerberg Campus, and fieldworkers were utilised to prevent any form of bias or sample member selection error due to students feeling compelled to partake or respond in any anticipated manner.

1.6.4 Process of obtaining Informed consent

Informed consent is the voluntary agreement concerning the participant's role in a research study after being fully informed. It is necessary to obtain informed consent from study participants to protect their rights. It is known that informed consent of human beings is essential for an objective study. This agreement indicates that participants are willing to participate voluntarily after fully understanding what the study entails. The researcher has a responsibility to brief participants about the purpose of the research, the procedures, as well as any potential risks and benefits associated with their involvement

Qualitative component

The researcher and participants communicated via telephone to exchange relevant information. An oral consent process was followed without requiring a written signature. Oral consent can assist in establishing trust between the researcher and the participant, as it involves a more personal and interactive process.

Quantitative component

The fieldworkers briefed the students before completing the questionnaire. During the survey, they referred any questions or concerns they could not address to the researcher concerning the study. Participants may opt out of participation without any consequences. An oral consent process was followed to complete the questionnaires.

1.6.5 Data collection

Data collection refers to "*the systematic gathering of facts relevant to the research question which may be collected through a variety of means such as observation, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and experiments"* (Hofstee, 2006:128). While the students and their opinions (refer to Figure 5.3 as depicted in World Cloud) are the focus of this study, the other stakeholders are viewed as 'linked samples' as referred to by Drezner (2010:7). To measure the variables of the study, relevant items were selected from various researchers' guidance, and aligned to the study's goals and the literature reviews in Chapters 2 and 3.

Qualitative component

Seven members of the management team, three members of the marketing team, and nine alumni were interviewed face-to-face in semi-structured interviews (see Annexure B) for further details).

Quantitative component

The researcher decided to conduct a survey instrument (see Annexure C) in a questionnaire to gather quantitative data based on facts and theories to access students' responses to the questions.

1.6.5.1 Data collection tools

Data collection for this convergent mixed-method study is two-pronged, with a quantitative and a qualitative component collecting data concurrently.

Qualitative component

The data collection method for the component was a semi-structured interview using an interview guide as the research instrument. Participants were guided through discussion questions about alumni loyalty and the primary constructs of relationship marketing and community engagement relevant to this study.

Quantitative component

The data collection method for this study's component was a survey, and a research instrument in the form of a questionnaire was constructed to obtain the quantitative data needed. According to Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al.* (2014:152), a questionnaire is a popular data collection tool among researchers engaged in primary research based on facts and theories to access students' responses to questions.

1.7 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are critical concepts used in research to assess and evaluate the accuracy of research work (Du-Plooy Cilliers *et al*., 2014:253).

1.7.1 Validity

Both qualitative and quantitative research studies demand high levels of reliability and validity. Validity involves an instrument's ability to measure what it is supposed to measure (Du-Plooy *et al*., 2014:253; Kumar, 2019:270; Nha, 2021:6). Similarly, Du-Plooy Cilliers *et al*. (2014:253) explain that validity is the extent to which a research instrument selected reflects the reality of the constructs measured. Confirmability was obtained in the *qualitative* study by ensuring that all interviews were recorded and documented in detail. Validity was sustained in the *quantitative* study by guaranteeing that questionnaires were administered only to students of Northlink TVET College.

1.7.2 Reliability

Reliability measures the extent to which a research instrument consistently and repeatedly produces similar results if used in identical situations under different circumstances (Babbie, 2010:150). Reliability was obtained in the *qualitative* study by ensuring the in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with only the college's management and marketing teams and former students (Kumar, 2019:276). For the *quantitative* study, Cronbach's alpha values were used to determine the reliability of the measurement instrument, the questionnaire. The reliability

approach aims to infuse trustworthiness and minimise biases in study findings (Assarroudi *et al*., 2018:3).

1.8 Ethical considerations

Ethics refers to the appropriateness of behaviour regarding the rights of those who become research subjects or are affected by it. All information gathered for this study was obtained, processed, and stored in strict accordance with the guidelines of what is regarded as ethical research.

Respondents were advised about the nature of the study and given the choice of either participating or not and/or terminating their participation at any time during the process. They remained anonymous, protecting their privacy.

Participants were not exposed to any risk during or after participation and did not receive any monetary or non-monetary rewards. However, they and their communities could gain long-term benefits by being loyal alumni. The findings are reported entirely and honestly without misrepresenting or compromising the study's outcome.

1.8.1 Permission and informed consent

Informed consent is premised on information, voluntariness, and comprehension. Participants must be well informed with sufficient detail regarding the nature and procedures of this study and the objectives of the study, as well as disclosing possible dangers and benefits associated with this study. Participants' permission was obtained before any data was captured electronically or manually. This study has been approved by Northlink College and the cooperation of the human resources and marketing department to get the contact details of registered and pre-registered students.

1.8.2 Anonymity

In-depth interviews with a selected group of participants were conducted for the *qualitative* component of this study, and it was of utmost importance to ensure that the identities of these participants were kept confidential by employing pseudonyms/codes and that only their responses were incorporated for processing purposes. Participation in the *quantitative* component of this study was anonymous, and the names of respondents were not recorded at any stage of the research process. It is also impossible to match participants' identities to their responses in the consolidated dataset in any way.

1.8.3 Confidentiality

Participation in this study was anonymous, and the dataset was treated with confidentiality, although the entire research study was not classified as confidential.

1.9 Study exposition

The domain of marketing and relationship marketing in cultivating alumni loyalty has a vast variety of concepts, and exploring the essence of this in sufficient depth requires sequencing several chapters. The chapters constituting this study are subsequently highlighted.

Chapter 1: Précising

This chapter provides a detailed overview of the study. It discusses the introduction and background of the study of giving HEIs insights on how to use relationship marketing strategies as a means for building and enhancing relationships with alumni to 'become friends' since this is pivotal to giving back to their communities and applying what they have learned through their higher education experiences. The chapter also presents the statement of the problem, as well as the primary purpose and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2: Marketing and relationship marketing

This chapter reviews related literature to concisely define the concept of relationship marketing, describe the critical facets of the subject in question, and deliberate on its measurement. A critical evaluation of the literature leads to developing a conceptual relationship marketing model, including its measurement.

Chapter 3: HEIs, alumni and community engagement

This chapter explores the higher education landscape and the indispensable role alumni can perform in advancing academic institutions and the local community. It also extensively explores loyalty outcomes in higher education and its measurement technique. Finally, the chapter concludes by integrating relationship marketing concepts and alumni loyalty at HEIs.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

Chapter 4 explores the research methods used in this study. It discusses the research philosophy and approaches, research design, population, sampling, data collection instruments, and data analysis. This chapter also discusses validity, reliability, and ethical issues in detail.

Chapter 5: Research results

Chapter 5 is set aside to present and discuss the results obtained from the survey with the students and the interviews with the management and marketing department of Northlink College and former students.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter consolidates the research results from which the conclusions are drawn. It highlights the limitations of the research and suggests practical recommendations, including recommended future studies and the proposed model for fostering loyal alumni at TVET colleges.

CHAPTER 2 MARKETING AND RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

2.1 Introduction

The exchange has arguably been the foundational construct in marketing for several decades. Exchange, the act of giving or taking one thing in return for another, is not unique to marking but a central concept in almost all human sciences, such as economics, sociology, political sciences, education, theology, medicine, science, and many more (Sheth & Uslay, 2007:302). Houston and Gassenheimer (1987:4), Theron and Terblance (2010:387), and Schlesinger and Cervera (2015:476) demonstrated that need satisfaction was ultimately the goal of exchanges. A large volume of published studies from scholars mentioned, and more recently Kotler *et al*. (2019:14) recommend that the marketing concept should be broadened to create a theory of value creation. This, ideally, as commented by Casais *et al*. (2020:53), should include many stakeholders. The success of the value co-creation process relies heavily on consumers' efforts and involvement, which, in turn, build trust and maintain relationships (Casais *et al*., 2020:53). A considerable amount of literature has been published on the application of relationship marketing and endeavours to create and maintain long-term valuable relationships with stakeholders.

This chapter focuses on marketing as a discipline to lay the foundation upon which this study is based. A comparison between transactional marketing and relationship marketing is delineated as per the array of definitions of marketing as presented by scholars in this field of study. This is followed by an explanation of the marketing process and explaining how this then fits into the scope of this study. Then follows a presentation of the myriad types of marketing listed in the literature, and it should be kept in mind that this study focuses on relationship marketing, consumer relationship marketing, and social media marketing. These are explored in more depth to obtain a deeper understanding of the impact of these marketing types, specifically for this study – to foster loyal alumni. This chapter culminates with a deliberation on the main dimensions constituting relationship marketing, including trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Theron & Terblance, 2010:387).

2.2 The discipline marketing

Marketing developed over time into an activity that is highly valued, diverged, and vital in its contributions to the success of any business (Wilkes, 2012:3). This is reflected in the pace of change that has been and is taking place in the marketing domain.

Marketing has two sides. *Firstly*, it is a philosophy (Wilkes, 2012:7), an attitude, a perspective, and a management orientation that emphasises consumer satisfaction (Kotler & Armstrong,

2016:29; Kotler *et al*., 2019:33). *Secondly*, marketing is a set of activities used to put these philosophies into practice (Lamb *et al*., 2009:24; Kotler *et al*., 2019:33). There is consensus among researchers (Wilkes, 2012:8; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:29; Kotler *et al*., 2019:35) that the essence of marketing aims to satisfy consumers' needs. The before-mentioned scholars believe that marketing involves engaging consumers and managing profitable consumer relationships. Consequently, consumers are the focal point of all marketing activities.

Service has become an extremely important economic issue (Chang & Lee, 2020:341). College education falls into the service marketing category and because of increasing competition, makes the emphasis on quality inevitable (Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*., 2018:1079). Education as a service is unique where most of the marketing efforts are concentrated on attracting prospective students (Khann *et al*., 2019:2), who are acknowledged as the consumers of this study. Students are higher educational institutions' (HEIs) most important consumers and this implies that students become the main target of the marketing strategies of HEIs, aiming to meet their needs and expectations. Relationship marketing can be used to enhance consumer satisfaction, commitment, retention, and loyalty (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:29).

In contrast to the above-mentioned scholars, a study conducted by Bay and Daniel (2001:2) contends that students are not the 'consumers' for the following reasons: *Firstly*, HEIs are not first and foremost profit-seeking entities, which implies that the characteristics of these two mentioned parties may prevent models that work well in a business (referred to as TVET colleges) from working in an education environment. *Secondly*, even the successful implementation of strategies developed and tested in the business environment may have unexpected and even possibly negative impacts on an academic institution and its stakeholders. In the same vein, Dimitriades (2006:783) warns that one should differentiate between consumer satisfaction with services delivered as opposed to consumer satisfaction with goods, as consumers may be influenced by a very different set of factors in each one of the cases. Bay and Daniel (2001:2) suggest an alternative – that the student and HEI are regarded as collaborative partners and further propose to improve the relationship during recruitment, during the entire period in which the student is enrolled and beyond.

It has become increasingly important for all businesses, including HEIs, to build relationships with their consumers (students and other key stakeholders in this case) in the markets within which they operate (Boateng, 2019:226). Boateng (2019:226) believes this can be attributed partly to the advent of new forms of technology, its ability to change the nature of relationships, and how businesses develop between businesses and their stakeholders.

El-Ansary (2005:5) believes HEIs must clearly identify their stakeholders and engage in activities that reinforce their relationships by properly integrating strategy, processes, and people, just as in a normal business operation. Competition among educational institutions is growing more intense, requiring greater responsiveness to student needs, as Shaker and Nathan (2017:9) professed before the turn of the century, which is still valid today. Shaker and Nathan (2017:9) and Drezner (2018:181) maintain that the one area of marketing theory that holds special relevance for higher education is relationship marketing. Consequently, the need to develop strategies to attract and retain the students of TVET colleges in South Africa as loyal alumni arises.

El-Ansary (2005:5) and Kosan (2014:276), and more recently, Caliskan and Esmer (2019:375) and Kotler *et al*. (2019:33), are of the view that the rise of relationship marketing happened at the same time as the evolution of a new marketing era, namely consumer-centric marketing. Marketing is not only directed outward towards consumers but also inward so that every staff member in the business is fully aware of the objectives and marketing strategy of the business. Supporting this argument, Yildiz and Kara (2017:28) point out that internal marketing focuses on coordinating and motivating internal employees (such as lecturers) who serve external consumers to achieve higher consumer satisfaction.

In today's increasingly competitive marketing environment, a short-term transactional approach to dealing with consumers seems to be inadequate (Khao, 2019:196; Kotler *et al*., 2019:33). There is a need for a new approach to retain consumers, to gain their trust, commitment, and loyalty to establish a competitive approach (Palmatier & Steinhoff, 2019:15). To understand relationship marketing is to contrast it with transaction marketing. The following table indicates the major differences between relationship marketing and transaction marketing. Relationship marketing is discussed in depth later on in this chapter.

Table 2 1: Transaction marketing vs relationship marketing

Transaction marketing	Relationship marketing
• Focus on single sale	• Focus on consumer retention
• Orientation on product features	• Orientation on product benefits
• Short timescale	• Long timescale
• Little emphasis on consumer service	• High consumer service
• Limited consumer commitment	• High consumer commitment
• Moderate consumer contact	• High consumer contact
• Quality is primarily a concern of production	• Quality is the concern of all

As from the year 2000, most transactions moved online, and social media started to take centre stage in marketing (Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:2; Bamberger *et al*., 2020:476; Drummond *et al*.,

2020;1247; Jacobson *et al*., 2020:2). These scholars furthermore emphasised that building relationships with consumers without face-to-face interaction is the new challenge of modern-day marketing activities. Consumers' dependence on technology and the Internet is the insignia of the contemporary era. Marketers ought to use the latest technology to reach their markets, but traditional marketing values should not be sacrificed.

2.2.1 Definition of marketing

Although marketing developed into a science and art in its own right, there is still no consensus on what marketing is precisely. Subsequently, a deliberation on the term marketing to ensure a mutual understanding of how marketing is regarded for the purpose of this study is provided. Table 2.2 provides a synopsis of the definition of marketing according to various scholars.

Table 2.2: Description of marketing

Author	Description
Grönroos (1997)	"to establish, maintain & enhance relationships with consumers and other partners, at a profit, so that the objectives of the parties involved are met".
Jobber (2007)	"achievement of corporate goals through meeting and exceeding consumers' needs and expectations better than the competition".
Pride &Ferrell (2010)	"process of creating, distribution, promoting, pricing goods and services to facilitate satisfying exchange relationships with consumers to develop and maintain favourable relationships with all stakeholder in a dynamic environment".
Kotler & Armstrong (2016)	"set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivery and exchange offerings that have value for consumers, partners and society at large".

The above-mentioned scholars' definitions share several key features, namely the importance of relationships, the exchange concept, and the satisfaction of needs. Kotler and Armstrong (2016:30) introduced the value concept. These features concur with this study's objectives, which are to build relationships with stakeholders to foster loyal alumni.

The following is a synthesised description of marketing based on the various definitions reflected: marketing is a process with the ultimate goal of satisfactorily meeting consumers' needs, building sustainable relationships, creating mutual value, and accomplishing the profit targets of the business (college in this case). Marketing must be planned, and it is therefore necessary to first explore what planning is. Following is a synopsis of strategic planning.

2.3 Strategic planning

Strategic planning involves adapting a business to take advantage of different opportunities in its constantly changing environment (Kotler *et al*., 2019:35).

2.3.1 Business-wide strategic planning

All businesses should find a game plan for their long-term survival called strategic planning. Strategic planning requires the process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between the objectives and the capabilities of a business (Kotler, 2014:63; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:37; Kotler *et al*., 2019:35). In the HEI system, strategic planning becomes an important conveyor of the mission to attract talented students (Gallo (2018:95) with whom to build long-term relationships in the form of loyal alumni (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:2). Research conducted by Rust (2015:38) and Gallo (2018:92) established that HEIs ought to view alumni as a key enabler to contribute towards such an institution's mission and vision by giving their time and monetary donations. Gallo (2018:95) contends that HEIs must rely on alumni as internal stakeholders with an external ability to offer value to HEIs.

Bagheri and Beheshti (2010:2) stated that it is Trinity College in Dublin's desire is *"to involve alumni in the strategic advancement of the institution*". In the same vein, Gallo (2018:95) strongly advocates that strategic planning should feature alumni in terms of their ability to 'serve' for the betterment of HEIs. Business-wide strategic planning then ultimately guides the marketing strategy.

2.3.2 Marketing strategy

Relationships with consumers are the core of a marketing strategy. Kotler *et al*. (2019:30) profess that the major strategic objectives of marketing are to create consumer value and achieve profitable relationships with consumers, which is also referred to as a consumer-value-driven marketing strategy. Several lines of evidence suggest that value creation also plays an important role in understanding students' choices when enrolling at an academic institution (Kieu *et al*., 2020:3). Strategic marketing is a future-oriented, long-term strategy that focuses on consumer equity and requires energy and ability. It also requires flexibility and the capacity to learn and change (Kotler *et al*., 2019:30). Strategic marketing is built on two straightforward principles, which are: (1) consumer trust and (2) employees' trust in the business, which is fundamental to the commitment to earn consumers' trust. Kotler *et al*. (2019:30) comment that strategic marketing plays an important role in developing a corporate culture and looking at each consumer, not in terms of profit only but also in terms of creating long-term value. Finding the best marketing strategy and putting the marketing mix into practice require a business to engage in marketing analysis, planning, implementation, and control (Kotler, 2014:63). To plan effective strategies is often easier than putting them into action. To be successful, businesses need to turn marketing strategies into marketing action in the form of a marketing plan.

In the arena of higher education, students are the main consumers of all HEIs, which insinuates that students become the main target of marketing strategies, aiming to meet their needs and expectations (Kieu *et al*., 2020:3). Kotler and Fox, in the mid-1990s (as stated by Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:3), commented that market orientation (sometimes referred to consumer orientation) demands that all employees ought to be *au fait* with providing high-quality programmes and services that will satisfy the needs of stakeholders (and this also applies to the staff of HEIs). Achieving students' satisfaction will result in long-standing relationships (Hoffman *et al*., 2009:348), which can benefit all relevant parties. Kieu *et al*. (2020:3). conducted a study on marketing in higher education and commented that these relationships take on the character of companions for life, which implies a life-long learning approach where students can return to academic institutions through continuous education.

2.4 The marketing process

The marketing process involves creating and capturing value, and HEIs need to understand students' needs to provide quality education, create value for students, build relationships, and finally capture value from alumni's involvement to give back to HEIs and society at large. The marketing process involves understanding the marketplace, consumers' needs and wants; designing a consumer-driven marketing strategy; constructing a marketing programme that delivers superior value; building profitable relationships and creating consumer delight; and lastly, capturing value from consumers to create profits and consumer satisfaction (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:5). In today's changing marketing landscape, businesses should also take additional factors, such as technology and global opportunities into consideration and ensure that they act in an ethical and socially responsible way. Sahaf (2019:15) believes that every business should approach marketing as a strategic process to enhance its financial performance and gain a competitive position in the market. Subsequently, this is a brief overview of the five marketing process steps, as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

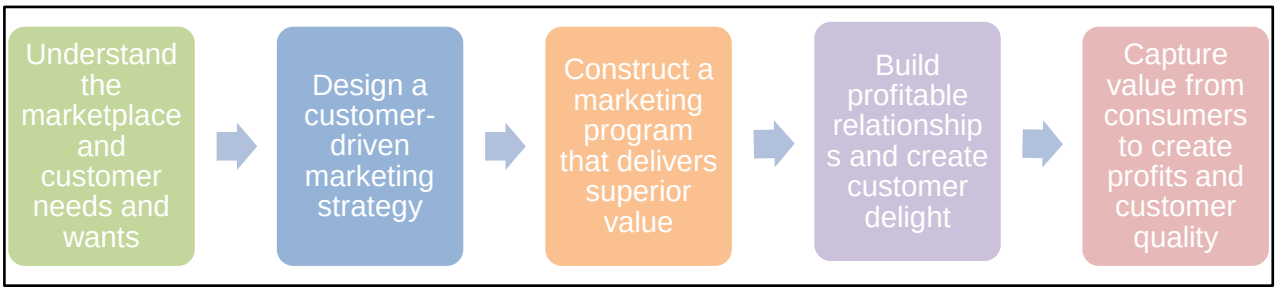


Figure 2.1: A simple model of the marketing process

Source: Kotler & Armstrong (2016:3)

Step 1: Understand the marketplace and consumer needs and wants

The first step in the marking process entails understanding basic human needs such as food, clothing, security, and social and individual needs, such as knowledge and self-expression. These needs are shaped by culture and personality and are then transformed into wants. Wants are shaped by one's community and are described in objects and services that will satisfy those needs (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:3). Backed by buying power, wants become demands. People demand products and services to satisfy their needs and add value and satisfaction. Businesses ought to conduct consumer research, analyse data, and observe their consumers as they shop and interact to be able to acquire an understanding of the marketplace.

Step 2: Consumer-driven marketing strategy

To be able to design a winning marketing strategy, management must first decide whom they will serve. A strategic tool often used with great success to segregate consumers into homogeneous groups is market segmentation (Jemaa & Tournois, 2014:1). Then only can a specific group be selected, and this is then referred to as the target market because it is unlikely that a business will be able to serve all consumers well. The business will also decide how it will serve these consumers and differentiate and position itself in the market. The value proposition is the set of benefits a business promises to deliver and to differentiate one brand from another.

Step 3: Marketing programme

During the third step, the marketer develops a programme to deliver value to targeted consumers (Casais *et al*., 2020:51). The marketing programme builds consumer relationships by transforming the marketing strategy into action by implementing the marketing mix. The marketing mix consists of the four Ps, namely: product, price, promotion, and place for manufactured products, and the extended 10Ps for services marketing (product, price, promotions, place, partnerships, programmes, packages, physical evidence, people, and lastly, process). The marketing programme will be communicated to targeted consumers to demonstrate the value offerings.

Step 4: Profitable relationships

The fourth step is probably the most important of the marketing process and involves engaging consumers and managing profitable consumer relationships by delivering superior value (Jemaa & Tournois, 2014:1; Kosan, 2014:276) and satisfaction. Satisfied consumers tend to be more loyal (Casais *et al*., 2020:51) and willing to offer a larger share of their wallet to a business. A loyal consumer buys from a business that provides the highest consumer-perceived value.

Step 5: Capturing value from consumers

The final step involves capturing value in return from consumers through sales, market share, and profits. By creating excellent consumer value, businesses give rise to satisfied consumers who will be loyal and talk favourably of the business to others. Simply retaining consumers in invaluable relationships can assist marketers in increasing their share of consumers (Kosan, 2014:276). To increase their share of consumers, businesses can offer a greater variety to their current consumers. Therefore, it is of utmost importance not only to acquire new consumers but also to keep them by building relationships. Therefore, the value of a business comes from the value of its current and future consumers.

The discipline of marketing has developed and continues to evolve very quickly. During the 1990s, a new marketing strategy – consumer-engagement marketing – fostering direct and continuous consumer involvement to make a brand a meaningful part of the conversations and lives of consumers was introduced. HEIs need to guide students on how to be supportive and convert them into active alumni – to give back to their academic institutions and community. This aligns with the final step of the marketing process, which is capturing value from consumers (which equals students in this case).

The subsequent discussion is a delineation of the different types of marketing.

2.5 Types of marketing

A content analysis of literature in the domain of marketing revealed that there is a myriad of types of marketing listed and it is apparent that there is no consensus in this regard. The list includes traditional, social media, native, conversational, campus, global, word-of-mouth, voice, and many other types of marketing. For this study, relationship marketing, consumer relationship marketing, and social media marketing will be discussed as these three types of marketing substantially influence the relationship between students, HEIs, and stakeholders to build, maintain, and enhance their relationships to become loyal alumni. Relationship marketing will be explored first in more depth.

2.5.1 Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing is about forming long-term relationships with consumers. It is not about a one-time sale but involves a business refining how they do business to maximise the value of the relationship for the consumer. Relationship marketing covers all marketing activities aimed at establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges, as Berry first mentioned in 1983. Schlesinger *et al*. (2015:476) later added that it involves building an enduring

relationship network with loyal alumni to benefit all parties involved. To fully understand the concept of relationship marketing, attention is given to the origin of relationship marketing, its definition, and its importance among different stakeholders.

2.5.1.1 What is relationship marketing?

Marketers understand that relationships matter and indicate that relationships are the very essence of most businesses. Varey (2002:47), some time ago, commented that a 'relationship' becomes an important attribute of an offer, differentiating one business from others (Kiyak *et al*., 2015:730), and this gave rise to an entirely new discipline within marketing: relationship marketing. Ford *et al*. (2003:38) and Gordon (2013:xv) agree that time is the defining feature of a relationship, meaning every relationship is unique in its content, its dynamics, how it evolves, and what it requires from the parties involved to gain mutual success.

Within the context of this study, HEIs need to build, maintain, and enhance their relationships with all their partners, especially students as, in this case, to become lifelong partners. The studies of Christopher (2013:27) and Palmatier and Steinhoff (2019:15) indicated that relationships can occur at different levels: between individuals, between businesses, or between businesses and individuals. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the focus of relationship marketing, which is on attracting and retaining consumers, and maintaining desirable exchange relationships with consumers (Berry, 1995:238; Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:12; Hult *et al*., 2012:14; Kiyak *et al*., 2015:730; Casais *et al*., 2020:52) through trust and commitment. However, Du Plessis *et al*. (2012:12) propose that the sharing of information should be included. Relationship marketing can be viewed as a business philosophy that focuses on keeping consumers through long-term relationships (Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:533). Berry (1995:238), who first used the term relationship marketing, boldly stated that the core of relationship marketing is the retention of consumers instead of continuously acquiring new ones.

A large and growing body of literature substantiates that relationship marketing deals with long-term consumer satisfaction, which, in turn, can lead to consumer loyalty, which is a major factor in maximising the profitability of a business (Rojas-Méndez *et al*., 2009:23; Romero, 2014:668; Abubakar & Mokhtar, 2015:466; Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180).

For this study, the management of HEIs should develop relationships with students and other stakeholders to convert them into loyal partners who will contribute financially and non-financially to create value for the benefit of all stakeholders. There is a relatively small body of literature that links relationship marketing and the education sector, as commented by Abubakar and Mokhtar (2015:466). Similarly, Osayawe and Taylor, as claimed by Schlesinger *et al*. (2015:476), reported

that only a few articles have applied the principles of relationship marketing to the higher education sector. Christopher *et al*. (2013:29) and Amoako *et al*. (2019:327) propose that relationship marketing should cover all stakeholders because it is a concept that would make relationship marketing's dependence on other disciplines more relevant with no room for confusion.

2.5.1.2 The origins of relationship marketing

Scholars such as Ballantyne (2009:1), Theron and Terblanche (2009:384), and Beukes (2014:69) disagree about the origins of relationship marketing. Some scholars indicated that the relationship marketing concept has existed since the 1800s, as long as marketing itself, when referring to the normal practice of creating and maintaining constructive social and business links between buyers and sellers. Theron and Terblance (2009:383) stated that relationship marketing 're-emerged' at the beginning of the 1990s with a renewed focus on the value of consumer relationships. Berry (1995:236) and thereafter Ballantyne (2009:2) even refer to relationship marketing as a 'new-old' concept, indicating that creating value and loyalty in business dealings is as old as wholesale trading itself (Theron & Terblance, 2009:383). In the same vein, Egan (2008:16) states that relationship marketing has been a major trend in marketing and this change in approach is illustrated in Figure 2.2.

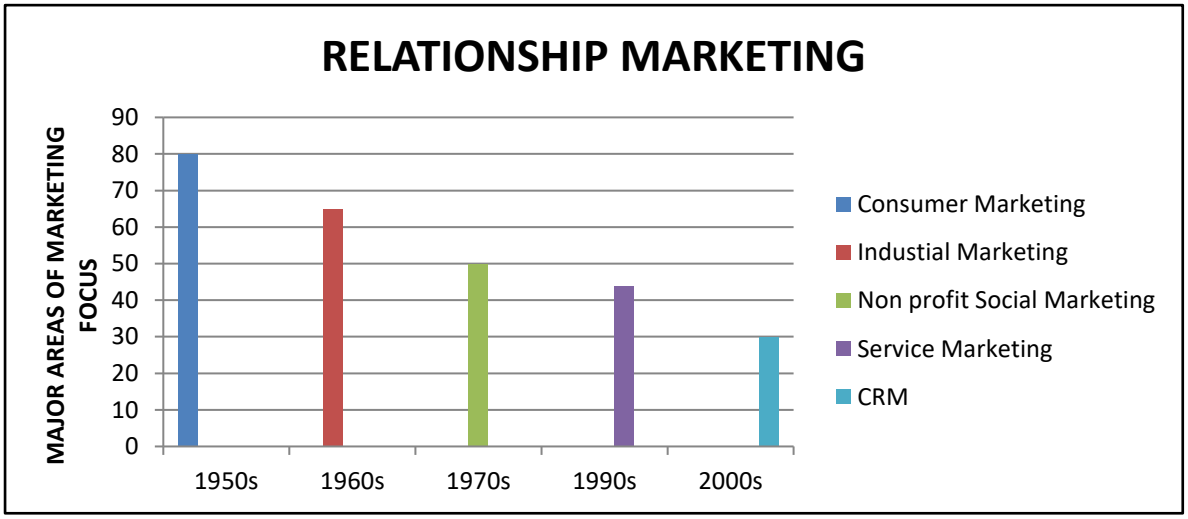


Figure 2.2: The evolution of relationship marketing

Source: Christopher *et.al* (2002: xiv)

Figure 2.2 provides a clear timeframe of the shift in importance towards relationship marketing over the past 60 years, where there has been a gradual but constant move that has taken place with a more evident end-product called relationship marketing. Businesses (including HEIs) need

to understand and manage their consumers' needs individually; then only can the business treat each individual consumer differently and thereby develop personalised relationships. Highly-satisfied consumers directly result from this kind of attention to detail and motivate these consumers to remain with the business over a long period (Chen & Lin, 2012:207).

Gummeson (1994:7) and Morgan and Hunt (1994:15) propose that the most innovative and theoretically developed contributions to relationship marketing come from service marketing (Eisingerich & Bell), as stated by scholars such as Theron and Terblanche (2009:384). Berry (1995:237), Kosan (2014:276), and Sánchez-Fernández *et al*. (2016:671) are credited as the first scholars to put relationship marketing into words when relationship marketing is described as "*attracting, maintaining and – in multi service organisations – enhancing consumer relationships*". Within the context of this study, students and other stakeholders are regarded as consumers.

2.5.1.3 Relationship marketing described

It is, as avowed by scholars such as Egan (2008:16), Harker (as cited by Theron & Terblanche, 2009:386), Beukes (2014:61), and Kiyak *et al*. (2015:74), quite difficult to find a single acceptable definition for relationship marketing and researchers ought to accept that this vague understanding of relationship marketing is bound to create multiple definitions in the literature. Kiyak *et al*. (2015:74) agree with other scholars by saying that each scientist's opinion does not interfere with each other but rather complements each other by agreeing on the importance of relationship marketing as a new marketing concept. In contrast to the scholars mentioned above, Abdullah and Kanyan (2013:92) opine that the idea of relationship marketing lacks conciseness, causing it to be interpreted in many ways. Palmer (as commented by Abdullah & Kanyan, 2013:92) posits that relationship marketing fails to position itself as a single concept; it is costly, and many consumers are not interested in a relationship. Furthermore, no guidelines exist that guarantee an effective design, implementation, monitoring, and measurement of relationship marketing programmes.

Harker (1999:13) conveyed 26 definitions of relationship marketing. Many definitions are proposed by researchers, academia, and practitioners; however, Kumar (2020:3918) maintains that the one definition by Gronroos (1994) is widely considered appropriate. Table 2.3 presents a synthesis of the concept of relationship marketing as obtained from several sources.

Table 2.3: Definitions of relationship marketing

Reference	Definition
Grönroos (1997)	"identify and establish, maintain and enhance and when necessary, also terminate relationships with consumers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives al all parties are met, and that this is done by a mutual exchange and fulfilment of promises".
Kavali *et al*. (1999)	"process of planning, developing and nurturing a relationship climate that will promote a dialogue between a company and its consumers and which aims to create a mutual understanding and respect for each other's capabilities and concerns".
Eiriz & Wilson (2006)	"activities which concern multilateral relationships as well as networks of relationships".
Theron & Terblanche (2009)	"aimed at building on-going relationships with consumers rather than motivating isolated purchase transactions".
Roonay *et al*. 2021	"means of initiating, accumulating and where necessary, discontinuing direct and technologically-infused ecosystems where those interactions evoke valued experiences".

Within the context of this study, relationship marketing encompasses strategies designed to attract, establish, and consolidate relationships with all stakeholders, including students, parents, reference groups, and communities. It emphasises retaining graduate students and canvassing prospective future students (Moore & Bowden-Everson, as cited by Abubakar & Mokhtar, 2015;467).

Following is a synthesised description of relationship marketing based on the various definitions reflected above:

> *relationship marketing, for the purpose of this study, is regarded as the building, enhancing, and managing of beneficial long-term relationships through specific marketing strategies.*

2.5.1.4 Relationship marketing's benefits to consumers

Relationship marketing continually deepens consumers' trust in a business, which, as consumers' confidence grows, will, in turn, increase the understanding of the consumers' needs (Hult *et al*., 2012:14). Humans have an inherent need to build relationships. Following is a concise description of the benefits of relationship marketing for consumers:

- High-involvement services such as medical, banking, and insurance hold a relationship appeal to consumers that would confirm many consumers' desire for continuity with the same service provider, a proactive service attitude, and customised service delivery (Berry, 1995:237; Kayak *et al.,* 2015:73; Chang & Lee, 2018:342; Khoa, 2019:196; Hlefana *et al*., 2020:2).

- In addition to the risk-reducing benefits of having a relationship with a supplier, consumers can also reap social benefits. Abubakar and Mokhtar (2015:468) point out that "*it fundamentally appeals to people to be dealt with on a one-to-one basis".*

- Relationship marketing puts service providers in a favourable position to become more knowledgeable about consumers' requirements and needs (Abubakar & Mokhtar, 2015:468; Chang & Lee, 2018:342; Hlefana *et al*., 2020:2; Mogaji, 2020:20).

- The belief that a particular partner can be trusted as competent to provide quality market offerings (Jemaa & Tournois, 2014:2; Kayak *et al*., 2015:73; Hlefana *et al*., 2020:3).

- The belief that the partnering business shares values with consumers (Jemaa & Tournois, 2014:2; Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:30).

Relationship marketing is an ongoing approach that seeks to create, develop, and enhance relationships with targeted consumers to improve consumers' values and thereby maximise shareholders' value. The following is a synopsis of the different dimensions of relationship marketing.

2.5.1.5 Dimensions of relationship marketing

The creation of long-term relationships with consumers requires knowledge of the dimensions contributing to the establishing, maintaining, and enhancement of such relationships (Theron & Terblance, 2009:384; Abdullah & Kanyan, 2013; Khoa, 2019:195). A great deal of previous research on the dimensions of relationship marketing was conducted by Morgan and Hunt (1994:7), Sin *et al*. (2002:658), Theron and Terblanche (2009:394), Amine *et al*. (2012:70), Sánchez-Fernández *et al. (*2016:674), as well as Khoa (2019:196), who all indicate that the relationship marketing orientation is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of different components.

Theron and Terblanche (2009:394) mention 23 dimensions of relationship marketing perceived by relationship marketing managers as essential for establishing and managing business-to-business relationship marketing in the financial services industry. A broader perspective has been adopted by Khoa (2019:197) in a study done for designer fashion brands, which includes the following dimensions: the designer's reputation, social media, trust, intimacy, and consumer loyalty. More recently, during the 2020s, Hlefana *et al*. (2020:4) proposed a model for relationship marketing that contains the following constructs: corporate image, service quality, perceived

value, customisation, and trust. Table 2.4 reflects the dimensions of relationship marketing most often emphasised by authors.

Table 2.4: Dimensions of relationship marketing identified in the marketing literature

Dimension	Reference
Bonding	Sin *et al*. (2002); Goounaris (2005); Kumar (2020)
Commitment	Goounaris (2005); Theron & Terblanche (2009); Abdullah & Kanyan (2013); Jeema & Tournois (2014); Kiyak *et al*. (2015); Mbango (2019); Amoako *et al*. (2019)
Communication	Anderson & Narus (1990); Sin *et al*. (2002); Vatanasombut *et al*. (2008); Theron & Terblanche (2010); Abdullah & Kanyan (2013); Kiyak *et al*. (2015); Mbango. (2015); Mbango & Mmatli (2019)
Corporate image	Schlesinger *et al*. (2015); Sánchez-Fernández *et al*. (2016); Hlefana *et al*. (2019)
Satisfaction	Berry (1995); Garbarino & Johnson (1999); Jurkowitsch *et al*., 2006; Theron & Terblanche (2010); Jeema & Tournois (2014); Kiyak *et al*. (2015); Sánchez-Fernández *et al*. (2016); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Frisby *et al*. (2019)
Trust	Morgan & Hunt (1994); Orth & Green (2009); Theron & Terblanche (2009); Jeema & Tournois (2014); Kiyak *et al*. (2015); Khoa (2019); Frisby *et al*. (2019)
Value creation	Jeema & Tournois (2014); Kiyak *et al*. (2015); Sánchez-Fernández *et al*. (2016)

Trust, commitment, and satisfaction are the dimensions most frequently cited in empirical research as those that will result in consumer loyalty. Within this study, these three dimensions are adopted as crucial for building and nurturing ongoing positive long-term alumni relations for any HEI's continued existence. A broader perspective has been adopted by Mbango and Mmatli (2019:1), who indicated that the relationship between the different dimensions of relationship marketing is dependent on the characteristics of samples used for a study, industry sector, and product type, among others. A study by Mpinganjir *et al*. (2017:2) concerning these dimensions (trust, commitment, and satisfaction) states that these dimensions are interlinked and therefore the study disagrees with Morgan and Hunt (1994:5) and Theron and Terblanche (2009:385). In the leafy vegetables markets, Mbango and Mmatli (2019:2) highlighted that product quality and consumer value play a significant role in the satisfaction of consumers. In contrast to Theron and Terblanche (2009:385), Mbango and Mmatli (2019:2) claim that trust, commitment, and consumer loyalty are positioned as the outcomes of satisfaction and product quality and consumer value as predictors of consumer satisfaction.

Despite the uncertainty concerning a complete set of dimensions to describe relationship marketing, the study by Theron and Terblanche (2009:394) provides overwhelming support for the three most important dimensions, which are trust, commitment, and satisfaction. As far as can be ascertained, no comprehensive study of all the dimensions relevant to the establishment of long-term marketing relationships within an alumni context has been reported (Theron & Terblanche, 2010:38; Abdullah & Kanyan, 2013:91). However, Kiyak *et al*. (2015:74) suggested

that the two major dimensions of relationship marketing – trust and commitment – can be regarded as the most important.

Many scholars indicated that relationship marketing is widely applied in different sectors of the economy, as Table 2.5 indicates.

Table 2.5: Relationship marketing applied in different sectors

Sector	Dimensions	Reference
Cement	Supplier competency; trust; commitment; communication.	Mbango (2015)
Fashion	Reputation of the designer; social media marketing; intimacy; trust.	Khoa (2019)
Food	Communication; trust; empathy; commitment.	Abdullah & Kanyan (2013)
Hawkers/vendors	Product quality; consumer value; price; communication; product mix.	Mbango & Mmatli (2019)
Health care	Confidence; commitments; reciprocity; interactions; cooperation; power; communication; satisfaction; value; justice; empathy.	Kiyak *et al*. (2015)
Hospitality	Trust; commitment.	Amoako *et al*. (2019)
Information and communication technology	Corporate image; service quality; perceived value; customisation; trust.	Hlefana *et al*. (2019)
Service	None.	Juwaheer (2000)
Service	Trust; bonding; communication; shared value; empathy; reciprocity.	Sin *et al*. (2002)
Tertiary education	Relationship benefits; shared values; trust.	Wong *et al*. (2018)

As indicated in the table above, the principles of relationship marketing are successfully applied in many different business sectors to acquire and retain consumers, stay in close contact with them, and learn their concerns and needs.

The following dimensions were adopted for this study: trust, commitment, and satisfaction, which are subsequently explored in more depth.

- **TRUST**

Overwhelming support was found in the marketing literature for the inclusion of trust as an important dimension of relationship marketing and many scholars even regard it as a central construct to the development of successful service relationships (Eisingerich & Bell, 2007; Liang *et al*. as cited by Theron & Terblanche, 2010:387; Abubakar & Mokhtar, 2015:468; Singh & Jain, 2015:971). Morgan and Hunt (1994:180) some time ago already established that trust leads to relationship commitment. Relationship quality involves the behavioural constructs of trust and

commitment, as mentioned in the trust-commitment theory. Similarly, Abdullah and Kanyan (2013:93) found trust to be the most important dimension in predicting consumer loyalty, followed by communication, commitment, and conflict handling (Raimondo, 2000:232). Berry (1995:242) and, more recently, Hlefana *et al*. (2019:8) reported that "*trust is the single most powerful relationship-based marketing tool."*

(1) Description of trust

There is no complete agreement on what trust is or on the conditions that determine its development (Raimondo, 2000:229). However, scholars generally agree that trust is a process that develops over time. Table 2.6 presents a selection of how different scholars view trust.

Table 2.6: Trust described

Author	Description
Morgan & Hunt (1994)	"consumers' belief in the reliability, integrity and benevolence of an exchange partner. They believe that reliability is the belief in competence to deliver a service effectively".
Ghosh *et al*. (2001)	"degree to which a student is willing to rely on or have faith & confidence in the college to take appropriate steps that benefit him/her and help them achieving their learning and career objectives".
Zheng *et al*. (2002)	"willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of the other party, on the basis of the expectation that the other one will carry out a particular action for the trustor, irrespective of the ability to control that party".
Tzafrir & Dolan (2004)	"willingness to increase one's resource investment in another party, based on positive expectation, resulting from past positive mutual interactions".
Berndt &Tait (2012:25)	"willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence; it is a generalised expectancy held by an individual that the word of another can be relied upon".
Dowell *et al*. (2015)	"evolving, affective state including both cognitive and affective elements and emerges from the perceptions of "competence and positive, caring motivations in the relationship partner to be trusted".

An extensive literature exploration revealed that reliability is the core of trust, followed by the benevolence of a relationship partner, where benevolence concerns moral good and receiving good treatment in return.

(2) Construct development: trust

Trust was originally a common object in the study of social psychology and sociology (Rotter, 2000:3). Research studies concerning trust became more frequent in the 1990s (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:5) as the development of relationship marketing, especially as business-2-business markets emerged (Theron & Terblanche, 2010:385). Singh and Jain (2015: 971) indicated that, in retail, trust is seen as the single most powerful relationship marketing tool. Marketing literature

repeatedly shows that trust is an important factor in the conversion from market transactions to exchange relationships. Recent studies, including that of Singh and Jain (2015:971), Kiyak *et al*. (2015:73), and Khoa (2019:197), also consider the trust concept in the area of consumer marketing, which indicates the relationship between a business and a final consumer as applicable. These studies aimed to analyse the trust involved in consumer buying behaviour, with outcomes such as satisfaction, communication, brand image and loyalty (Raimondo, 2000:231; Khoa, 2019:197).

Several scholars (Tzafrir & Dolan, 2004:118; Abubakar & Mokhtar, 2015:468; Wong *et al*., 2018:209; Hlefana *et al.,* 2020:3) considered the importance of the role of shared values in establishing high levels of trust. When lecturers and students share similar values, such as strong work ethics (Barroso-Mendez, 2020:4), students may be more likely to accept an educator's motives for writing challenging examinations to support work ethics rather than as a mean spirit on the part of the lecturer (Holdford & White, 1997:250). Barroso-Mendez (2020:5) further highlighted factors such as integrity, honesty, goals, and objectives as the key antecedents of trust and commitment. Holdford and White (1997:255) and more lately, Caliskan and Esmer (2019:377) concur that the presence of trust in a relationship influences the exchange of ideas, solving of problems, handling of conflict situations, joint activities, and the level of transparency.

Barroso-Mendez (2020:5) contends that commitment and trust are the key variables for successful relationships because these dimensions promote cooperative behaviours between relationship partners and encourage them to maintain long-term relationships. Similarly, Rust (2015:40) and Mbango and Mmatli (2019:1) confirmed that trust and commitment are precursors of consumer satisfaction. Trust is the single most powerful relationship-based marketing tool in many different sectors with no difference within the educational context (Wong *et al*., 2018:209).

(3) Higher education institutions

To build trust, students and other stakeholders need to believe that TVET colleges will stand behind their promises and honour their commitments (Berndt & Tait, 2012:25). Prospective students who trust a word-of-mouth reference (Pedro *et al*., 2018:131) are more likely to enrol at a specific college because of the brand or image. Current students are less likely to drop out if HEIs are trusted, thereby reducing retention problems although students encounter many other difficulties (Rojas-Mendez *et al*., 2009:25). Increased trust is likely to lead to positive experiences and evaluations and thereby assist HEIs in differentiating their services. Trusting alumni are more likely to contribute financially and spend more time actively engaging in their alma mater's activities and their communities. Students are often socially, academically, and financially

assisted by management and staff, which translates benevolence into loyalty through the feeling of security implanted in the minds of such students (Wong *et al*., 2018:209). Students' confidence in the HEIs' integrity and reliability positively impacts students' commitment and loyalty to their institutions, as Wong *et al*. (2018:209) commented.

- **COMMITMENT**

Recent literature proposed that trust and commitment are to be studied in conjunction (Pressey & Mathews cited by Amoako *et al*., 2019:328; Caliskan & Esmer, 2019:377; Mbango & Mmatli, 2019:1). Morgan and Hunt (1994:23) proposed in the 1990s that relationships are characterised by trust and commitment, allowing partners to be more accepting of high-risk situations, because both parties intend to engage in activities that are of best interest to both parties in the long term. Little and Marandi (2003:53) agree with Morgan and Hunt (1994:23) by commenting that trust and commitment help reduce anxiety because it is believed that trusting and committed partners will not harm their relationship by knowingly breaking promises. In contrast to the previously mentioned scholars, Bejou (2005:44) and Wong *et al*. (2018:216) maintain that commitment is undoubtedly related to trust. Still, it is unclear whether any of these should appear first. Bejou (2005:44) further declared that commitment occurs when both parties are loyal to each other when they realise that mutual relations will bring both benefits and gratification.

(1) Description of commitment

Wong *et al.* (2018:207) found that commitment is well-established in the relationship marketing literature and essential to the creation and preservation of marketing relationships. Table 2.7 summarises the descriptions of different scholars of commitment.

Table 2.7: Commitment described

Author	Description
Moorman *et al*. (1993)	"an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship".
Morgan & Hunt (1994)	"an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it".
Dwyer *et al*. (as cited by Barroso-Mendez *et al.,* 2010)	"the implicit or explicit sign of the continuity of the relationship between parties in exchange".
Kiyak *et al*. (2015)	"to keep a valuable connection in the hopes that this is the equivalent exchange".
Shukla *et al*. (as cited by Kiyak *et al*. 2015)	"involves the readiness of partners to give up short-term benefits in order to reap long-term benefits of the relationship".

Almost every description of commitment emphasises the 'drive' for continuity to maintain a valuable relationship. Unlike most descriptions, Kiyak *et al*. (2015:75) are concerned that partners do not necessarily attach the same value to the exchange.

(2) Construct development: commitment

The commitment process starts with a seller's need to find buyers for its products (in this case, the qualifications of a VET college) and the buyer's/student's desire to purchase products that can meet their needs (Kiyak *et al*., 2015:75). There are different forms of commitment between parties, which indicates that there are different levels to a relationship. In a significantly advanced relationship stage, commitment is so strong that it is almost impossible to destroy the relationship.

Holdford and White (1997:250) and, more lately, Caliskan and Esmer (2019:377) claim that commitment is enhanced when both parties perceive that a relationship has excellent benefits, similar values, and high termination costs. There is a large volume of published studies concurring that committed consumers add value and benefits to exchange partners to ensure continuity of their relationship, such as that of Wilson *et al*. (2018:23), Wong *et al*. (2018:216) and Amoako *et al*. (2019:328). Shukla *et al*. (as cited by Amoako *et al*., 2019:328) believe that commitment involves the readiness of partners to give up short-term benefits to reap the long-term benefits of a committed relationship.

Some scholars (Park *et al.,* 2012:462; Caliskan & Esmer, 2019:377) claim that commitment promotes the exchange and creation of new knowledge. Parties should be willing to share relevant information that is of value to both by engaging in dialogue to give meaning to the shared information. A study by Amoako *et al*. (2019:335) indicates that commitment partially mediates the link between trust and consumer satisfaction. Likewise, Wong *et al.* (2018:205) hold the view that trust is found to have a positive influence on relationship commitment. These scholars further emphasised that managers should employ relationship marketing strategies to communicate commitment as an important 'tool' to acquire and retain consumers.

(3) Higher education institutions

Relationship commitment is an important issue that could influence students' loyalty toward HEIs (Pedro *et al.,* 2017:129). Students' commitment to their academic institution is determined by the degree of educational and social integration, culture, sporting activities, etc. (Wong *et al*., 2018:207). Pedro *et al.* (2017:129) point out that HEIs should understand the need to commit to students, assuming that all academic and non-academic staff practice all marketing strategies. A study by Rust (2015:44) suggested that HEIs should increase their efforts to increase commitment

by giving recognition to outstanding academic performance. Relationship marketing underlines that a partnership should be secured with students, especially after graduation. Pedro *et al*. (2017:148) reported that committed alumni will most likely be willing to pass on positive references to family and friends, either regarding courses presented at an HEI or promoting the brand. Alumni engagement is critical and potentially very practical when given specific roles, such as testimonies in promotional material, participation in seminars, acting as mentors, and voluntary collaboration.

- **SATISFACTION**

Consumer satisfaction is one of the best-studied areas in marketing because it has become a significant facilitator in achieving business goals (Munusamy *et al*., 2010:399). The slogan "*the consumer is always right*" highlights consumer satisfaction's importance (Hussain *et al*., 2015:167). Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2180) declare that a comparatively small body of literature is specific to the drivers of loyalty in HEIs. Previous research by Seiders *et al*. (2005:26) and similarly Pedro *et al*. (2017:129) found that consumer satisfaction is a forerunner to consumer loyalty, a willingness to continue their relationship and participation in HEI activities. Businesses, including HEIs, should understand the meaning of consumer expectations and meet or exceed those expectations by focusing on a consumer-centred business approach (Little & Marandi, 2003:46; Theron & Terblance, 2009:388). Within the context of this study, HEIs should concentrate on retaining their existing consumers (students) and obtaining new ones to expand as successful HEIs.

(1) Description of satisfaction

Dimitriades (2006:784) claims that consumer satisfaction is a complex construct with numerous definitions. This view is supported by Stephenson and Berger (2015:312). There is a large volume of published studies describing the definition of satisfaction (Dimitriades, 2006:784; Parker, Mathews, Giese & Cote cited by Jurkowitsch, 2006:10; Paswan *et al*., 2008:76), while (Kiyak *et al*., 2015:76) believe that consumer satisfaction and its exact relationship with consumer loyalty is still vague.

Subsequently, a collection of descriptions of satisfaction is listed in Table 2.9.

Table 2.8: Satisfaction described

Reference	Description
Kotler & Armstrong (2006)	"individual's feeling of pleasure or displeasure resulting from matching a product perceived performance".
Baran *et al.* (2008)	"overall experiences with a businesses' products or services over time or transaction-specific satisfaction that describes feelings related to a single transaction".
Lamb *et al*. (2009)	"outcome of an evaluation of a service experience by a consumer in relation to what the consumer expected before the service took place".
Olivier (as cited by Oluseye *et al*., 2014)	"psychological state resulting from the emotional surrounding expectations which are coupled with the consumer's prior feeling about the consumption experience".
Hansemark & Albinson (as cited by Oluseye *et al*., 2014)	"overall consumer attitude towards a service provider, or the difference between consumer expectation and consumer perception concerning the satisfaction of some want, desire or goals".
Hayati *et al*. (2020)	"overall evaluation of the fulfillment of needs from dissatisfying to satisfying".

Researchers (including those mentioned above) who have attempted to describe satisfaction concluded that satisfaction is an evaluation of a consumer's expectation of service concerning the experience (Sanchez-Fernandez, 2016:671). Some scholars (Kiyak *et al*., 2015:76; Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180) labelled satisfaction as the emotional feelings of pleasure that a consumer experiences through fulfilling a need.

(2) Construct development: satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction is the core of every business philosophy and all objectives that focus on creating value (Kiyak *et al*. 2015:77; Sanchez-Fernandez, 2016:671) for consumers, forestalling and managing consumers' expectations, and signifying capacity and responsibility that will satisfy consumers' needs. Therefore, delivering high-quality education is paramount to the continued existence and 'survival' of HEIs in continuously changing economic conditions (Bateson & Hoffman, 2010:302; Kiyak *et al*. 2015:77; Hlefana *et al*., 2020:3).

Consumer satisfaction implies that employees' attitudes and actions must also be geared toward consumer orientation. Bateson and Hoffman (2011:298) claim that businesses that pride themselves in excellent consumer satisfaction generally provide better working environments to their employees and invest in their staff members' training and development (Lee & Trim, 2012:773). Within the context of this study, the management of HEIs, students, alumni, and community leaders need to be honest and practice goodwill (Schlesinger *et al*. 2017:2190) towards each other. In the same vein, Kiyak *et al*. (2015:79) noted in their research article that all employees should act ethically and politely, and scholars such as Theron and Terblanche

(2010:387) and Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2190) commented that when trust is broken, it may not be possible to rebuild these relationships.

Because of the importance of satisfaction, businesses use various methods to measure consumer satisfaction (Beukes, 2015:68). The main shortcoming of consumer satisfaction ratings is that these assessments only include consumers' current evaluation, not their changing needs or potential lifetime value (Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:545).

(3) Higher education institutions

In terms of students' satisfaction and loyalty, a study done in Indonesia in 2021 revealed that students' experiences at HEIs are deemed as key components as nearly 50% of all students fail during the first year of their course because of dissatisfaction with services rendered by the HEI (Susilawati *et al*., 2021:41). Therefore, HEIs must embrace the first-year of students as a valuable opportunity to build and maintain student loyalty. The following message is from the president of the NWU convocation, Bert Sorgdrager: "*2023 started with a bang – our students are where they belong: on their campuses, learning, growing, socializing and being young",* clearly conveying an inspiring message to first-year students (Sorgdrager, 2023:3).

Primary activities are significant such as teaching, learning, evaluation, research, extension activities, and innovation along with an emphasis on infrastructure facilities, quality of services, welfare measures for students and staff satisfaction (Kanwar & Sanjeeva, 2022:2; Malinao & Agustin, 2023:4). In contrast to scholars mentioned above, Hlefana *et al.* (2020:4) assert that consumer satisfaction is not a guarantee that a consumer will become loyal. Within the HEI context, student satisfaction is most probably positively related to student loyalty, as was found by Schertzer, Helgesen, and Nesset (as cited by Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180).

Consumer relationship marketing is perhaps the most important concept of modern marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2006:13; Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:30; Oluseys *et al*., 2014:49) and is subsequently explored in more depth.

2.5.2 Consumer relationship marketing

The term consumer relationship marketing (CRM) was first used in a general sense by management scholars Peter Drucker and Theodore Levitt in the 1960s (Venoos & Madadiyekta as cited by Oluseye *et al*., 2014:52). Businesses were initially product-driven, which means they were driven by manufacturing. Consumers played no part in their planning or decision-making, resulting in lower production costs. Payne (2006:7) comments that, fortunately for these businesses, consumer expectations were low, and they were fond of the then-so-called variety of

available products. By the end of the 1970s, consumer needs and wants increased tremendously in importance. As a result of this, businesses had to adapt to these changes as it forced businesses to include the consumer dimension in planning and manufacturing decisions (Malik, 2010:39). Resource planning made the production processes more efficient and effective, but consumer demand for many businesses today still plays a not-as-important role in comparison to the product itself. El Essawy (2012:22) categorically states the following: "*the term consumer relationship marketing became more prominent for the purpose of describing those business strategies that are used to enhance consumer satisfaction*". The focus on the 'relationship' rather than the 'transaction' implies that consumer relationships can now be viewed as a business asset (Lindgreen *et al*., 2012:212), and businesses are to and ought to amend their strategies to provide products per consumer specifications. Customer relationship marketing can be utilised by businesses to facilitate their transition from a product-oriented to a customer-centric strategy (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:30).

2.5.2.1 Origins of consumer relationship marketing

The consumer-centric approach has led to the rise of consumer relationship marketing, where activities are performed to retain existing consumers rather than expand the consumer base (Kosan, 2014:276). Consumer relationship marketing has escalated into a field of major importance since its inception less than a decade ago. Although the term consumer relationship marketing only came into use in the latter part of the 1990s, the foundation of consumer relationship marketing and relationship marketing goes back to the origins of commerce (Payne, 2006:1). A study done by Rigby and Bilodeau (2013:6) is supported by Beukes (2014:23) where these academics comment that top management observes signs of diminished consumer loyalty in an economic downturn and believe that insufficient knowledge of consumers' needs does hurt the financial performance of any business.

Generally, a market-oriented (sometimes referred to as customer-oriented) business is a business in which all operations are consumer-centric, and the emphasis is on satisfying consumers' needs and requirements to build long-term relationships with them (Preedy *et al*., 2003:252). The emergence of consumer marketing applications in HEIs refers back to the late 1990s when HEIs started to restructure their operating processes to reduce costs while raising the quality of their services (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:30). Many HEIs have moved towards establishing student-centric strategies such as advisory and service learning, internships and project-based learning as a means to achieve a high level of student satisfaction and long-lasting relationships (Bagheri & Behesthi, 2010:i).

The three pillars of business success are personnel, technology, and the structure of the business itself. Knowledge of consumers' wishes yields the possibility of a long-term, sustained increasing level of satisfaction to retain existing consumers' willingness to commit and also the strengthening of consumers' loyalty, which all directly influence costs and profits (Romero, 2014:668). As an integrated overall concept, consumer relationship marketing, similar to all other business activities, aims to increase profits (Berndt & Tait, 2012:7). Therefore, nowadays, businesses are more consumer-centric. Gordon (2013:xviii) claims that managing consumer relationships starts with a commitment, not to all consumers but with a selection of individuals to develop and improve consumer retention and profitability, as illustrated in Figure 2.3.

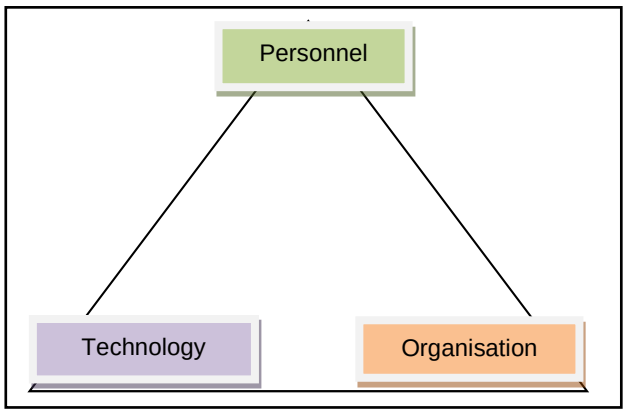


Figure 2.3: The pillars and process of consumer relationship marketing

Source: Berndt & Tait (2012:7)

With the development of consumer relationship marketing, managers soon realised the presence of certain critical factors that can support the development, implementation, and success of a consumer relationship marketing approach. These factors are mentioned below.

(1) **Leadership:** If management grasps the value of consumer relationships, it will place relationships at the centre of its business and link the various strategies and capabilities to improve these relationships with different shareholders (Berndt & Tait, 2012:159). Top-level management should focus on the mutual interests of all parties involved and ensure that all employees buy into implementing consumer relationship marketing (Becker *et al*., 2009:208; Santouridis & Tsachtani, 2015:307). As Gordon (2013:30) wisely noted: "*businesses should view relationships positively and value sharing as a virtue, and not as a sign of negotiating a weakness*".

(2) **Consumer-centric culture:** Many businesses have a set of beliefs to put the consumer first (Berndt & Tait, 2012:159). Du Plessis *et al*. (2012:5) claim that consumer centricity can be viewed as similar to the marketing concept because it refers to a business orientation

that focuses on the needs of its consumers. In the same vein, Peltier *et al*. (2013:1) and Ngo and Vu (2021:176), in their studies, agree with Du Plessis *et al*. (2012:5) and stress that a consumer-centric business must constantly adapt to consumers' needs to differentiate them from fierce competitors. Molenaar (2015:3) points out that consumers want to be known and recognised. As in the case of this study, students, stakeholders, and alumni should be noted as 'worthwhile' to contribute to the welfare of a TVET college. In the execution of a consumer-centric business, the business should become a listening as well as a learning business to respond to and act upon valuable information received from its stakeholders.

(3) **Employees:** McCloskey *et al.* (2013:3) expressed that for consumer relationship marketing to be effective, all employees' roles are critical. Berndt and Tait (2012:16) observed that employees have two fundamental roles: information management and relationship management. Employees are responsible for collecting data from consumers, enabling them to manage their relationships with their consumers. Employees should have holistic views of their jobs and have different skills, knowledge, and personal traits in order to successfully implement consumer relationship marketing. Employees ought to be trained to assist consumers in making more informed decisions, as this could lead to increased consumer loyalty. Gordon (2013:30) suggested that employees who face consumers must have the ability to communicate with their consumers, recognise them, understand their issues, and even predict anticipated behaviours to make appropriate suggestions.

(4) **Technology:** Managers at present mostly understand the crucial role of technology (Ngo & Vu, 2021:179) as a key component to business performance. Harrington *et al*. (as cited by Harrigan *et al*., 2015:28) believe that technology is a key consumer relationship marketing enabler that facilitates mainly two processes: (1) communication with consumers, and (2) the management of consumer data and information. This view is supported by Ngo and Vu (2021:179), who propose including consumer-centric management systems as the moderators for the link between consumer relationship marketing technology and business performance. Anh (2021:542) concludes that the idea behind consumer relationship marketing is an approach that businesses take to initiate and retain their relationships with consumers.

Subsequently, an in-depth exploration of what consumer relationship marketing entails follows.

2.5.2.2 Description of consumer relationship marketing

Buttle (2004:3), Du Plessis *et al*. (2012:553), and Ngo and Vu (2021:175) are of the same opinion that consumer relationship marketing means different things to different people. Consumer relationship marketing should not be confused with consumer relationship management – although these concepts are related, complement each other, and share the acronym CRM. The focus of consumer relationship marketing is on building long-term relationships with consumers to increase engagement, loyalty, and consumer lifetime value; as opposed to consumer relationship management, which concentrates on technology to manage a business' relationships and interactions with its consumers and potential consumers (Payne, 2006:1). Table 2.10 presents a collage of descriptions of consumer relationship marketing obtained from marketing literature.

Table 2.9: Descriptions of consumer relationship marketing

Reference	Descriptions
Ivens & Shaw (2002)	"manner in which a business dedicate itself to maximise consumer experience and how to satisfy consumers' needs".
Buttle (2004)	"business strategy that integrates internal processes and functions, and external networks to create value and deliver value to targeted consumers at a profit. This strategy surely depends on accurate consumer data and I".
Bagher & Beheshti (2010)	"business strategy which has been proved to be one of the most efficient consumer-oriented business approaches within the past decades".
Reiman *et al*. (2010)	"business practice which systematically manages their consumers to maximise value across the relationships lifecycle of the consumer".
Rogers & Howlett (as cited by Bagher & Beheshti, 2010)	"business strategy which places the consumer at the heart of a businesses' processes, activities and culture".
Oluseye *et al*. (2014)	"To identify and render customised services to every consumer".
Kotler & Armstrong (2016)	"overall process of constructing and maintaining profitable consumer relationships by delivering consumer satisfaction, creating value and maximising shareholders' value".
Liu *et al*. (2020)	"strategic process in which firms take advantage of consumer data and technology methodologies to acquire, retain & win back consumers in order to create both consumer & firm value".
Anh (2021)	"strategic software used to learn more about consumer needs and behaviours in order to develop stronger relationships with its consumers".

Although no agreement between executives, academia, and the media can be found to define consumer relationship marketing accurately (Oluseye *et al*., 2014:52; Anh, 2021, 543), all do agree that consumer relationship marketing is a business practice that focuses on the needs and wants of consumers. Almost every paper on consumer relationship marketing came to this one conclusion: putting the consumer first and at the centre of everything a business does. A variety of viewpoints exist regarding the concept of consumer relationship marketing.

There are, however, three main elements on which most scholars agree in terms of describing consumer relationship marketing:

- Consumer relationship marketing is a comprehensive business strategy: Consumer relationship marketing is not intended only for use by management or the marketing department. It is a culture an entire business should embrace, and a strategy should be implemented across all business functions (El Essawy, 2012:22; Anh, 2021:544).

- Consumer relationship marketing is about maximising consumer satisfaction: Management needs to understand and manage their consumers' needs individually in order to treat individuals differently. Satisfied consumers are a direct result of this kind of attention, which, in turn, motivates consumers to stick with a business over the long term (Chen & Lin, 2012:207; Liu *et al*., 2020:736).

- Optimising profits: New consumers can be attracted by businesses that understand and satisfy consumers' needs, and current consumers can be retained to enhance profitable relationships with them. This will ensure a steady stream of profits for businesses (Richards & Jones, 2016:121). In contrast to Richards and Jones (2016:121), Ngo and Vu (2021:177) claim that there has been a substantially high failure rate of consumer relationship marketing implementation among businesses – 90% according to Edinger (as cited by Ngo & Vu, 2021:177).

Following is a synthesised description of consumer relationship marketing based on the various definitions reflected:

> *The consumer is the most important asset of a business – through a process of building and maintaining profitable consumer relationships by delivering true consumer value and satisfaction on a continuous basis utilising appropriate technology.*

Consumer relationships build on the principles of relationship marketing, which involves building relationships of mutual value between the aforementioned parties. HEIs should gain a deeper understanding of their individual students' needs to maximise satisfaction to foster loyalty.

2.5.2.3 Consumer relationship marketing benefits

The ensuing section elucidates how consumer relationship marketing benefits both a business and its stakeholders. Businesses create and implement consumer relationship marketing

strategies because they believe they will mutually benefit all parties. The following benefits of CRM for a business are listed below:

- The foundation of a consumer relationship marketing approach is to always keep the focus on the consumer. By being consumer-focused, a business can identify with them, relate to their feelings, and subsequently satisfy their needs and wants better (Mackay, 2012:34). By developing specialised capabilities for sensing and responding to changes in consumers' tastes and preferences, consumer agility could be integrated with consumer relationship marketing processes to constantly identify any possible disequilibrium in the market and then exploiting it for positional advantages (Ngo & Vu, 2021:185).

- Businesses can store information about their consumers. This information is necessary to conduct analyses and detect new business opportunities (Anh, 2021:542).

- Consumer relationship marketing can leverage consumer data and knowledge to facilitate new product development, which aligns better with market requirements (Ngo & Vu, 2021:185).

- Consumer relationship marketing can help a business retain consumers and improve consumer loyalty (El Essawy, 2012:32; Liu *et al*., 2020:735). Within the context of this study, retained and satisfied students can become loyal alumni.

- Consumer relationship marketing helps businesses to manage consumers and to listen to their opinions to predict and manage the future more effectively.

- HEIs strive to increase revenue in the long run by maintaining relationships with different stakeholders. Data gathered from students, alumni, and other stakeholders will assist in understanding what their needs really are because in-depth knowledge is available through data mining and intense analyses.

- Reduce costs and increase profits.

- Help businesses promote products, brands, and services much faster, easier, and cost-effectively.

- Minimising other application software.

Consumer relationship marketing is not only beneficial to businesses. It also offers a range of advantages and benefits to consumers, and these are as follows:

- Consumer confidence: Henning-Thurau *et al*. (2010:379) suggest that a long-term relationship with a business allows consumers to feel confident about the quality of the products they buy and the services received.

- Social benefits: These benefits pertain to the emotional part of the relationship whereby employees must treat consumers as individuals.

- Friendships between consumers and employees develop as a result of the development of long-term relationships (Henning-Thurau *et al*., 2010:376).

- Special treatment refers to personalised services consumers receive from service providers. Personalised services could increase consumer satisfaction, which, in turn, could enhance loyalty (Liu *et al*., 2020:737).

- Higher-quality services: Berndt and Tait (2012:43) noted that if consumers' needs are known, businesses can focus on their functions and processes to excel in exceeding consumer expectations (Ngo & Vu, 2021:177).

- Older consumers feel that a business is seriously interested in what is related to them, such as their date of birth, interests, and their specific preferences and needs.

Within the context of this study, consumer relationship marketing applies to the relationship between HEIs, students, alumni, and other stakeholders. Relationship marketing involves building relationships of mutual value between the aforementioned parties. Consumer relationship marketing goes one step further by integrating consumer needs into all business operations. Even more, consumer relationship marketing uses information technology to enable a closer fit between what HEIs offer and the needs of students, alumni, and the community.

Social media is a phenomenon that has transformed the interaction and communication of individuals throughout the world. Higher education is an expensive affair, especially with financial needs growing daily. HEIs will need to adopt social media platforms to establish and maintain ties with alumni for financial support and active engagement, which will subsequently be explored in more depth.

2.5.3 Social media marketing

The explosive growth in digital technology is fundamentally changing the way of life (Jacobson *et al*., 2020:1) – how we operate, how we communicate, share information, access entertainment, and even shop (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:48). Consumers can nowadays directly connect with

new products, services, and brands by using social media platforms (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:1). Social media is growing at a tremendous pace. The latest figures show that there are expected to be 3.96 billion social media users worldwide in 2022 – a 4.8% increase from a year ago (Oberlo, 2022:29). More and more people, especially the younger generation, are using social media platforms to express their opinions on different topics. As illustrated in Figure 2.4, Facebook is still ranked as the most popular social network worldwide, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (Kumar & Nanda, 2020:241).

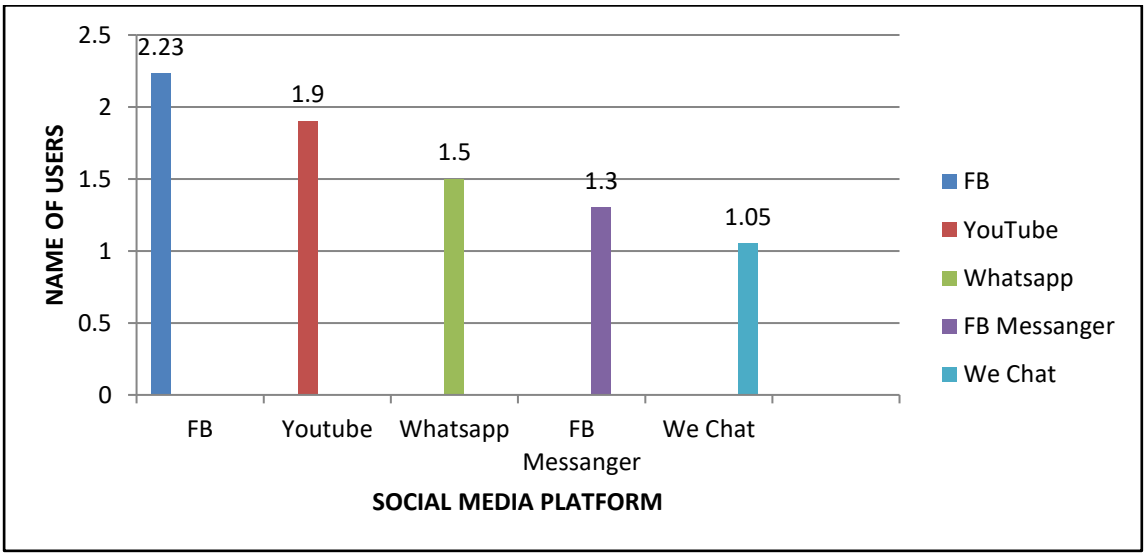


Figure 2.4: Number of users (billions) for popular social media platforms worldwide

Source: Kumar & Nanda (2020:241)

Most consumers are smitten with all things digital. Consumers' love affair with digital and mobile technology (Boateng, 2019:227) makes it a prosperous ground for marketers to involve consumers. However, Kantler (as cited by Jacobson *et al*., 2020:1) heightened the importance of considering consumers' privacy concerns and increased awareness of who might be accessing their data. This is especially significant after the recent data breaches at Facebook. Recent cases highlight the need for a more detailed understanding of consumers' attitudes toward marketers' use of social media data (Boateng, 2019:227). Jacobson *et al*. (2020:3) furthermore commented that there is a lack of understanding of the ethical norms, which can be ascribed to a lack of research on consumers' expectations of privacy.

Social media marketing involves using digital marketing tools such as websites, social media, mobile applications, online videos, e-mail, blogs, and many other tools to share information, interact, and build relationships through virtual networks (Boateng, 2019:227; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:3) anywhere, anytime via their computers, smartphones, tablets and other digital devices

(Kotler & Armstrong, 2016:49). Providing a range of digital engagement strategies in the development of social media marketing capability causes new grounds in terms of showing the strategic usage of social media to create value for exchange partners (Bamberger *et al*., 2020:479; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:3). HEIs, such as TVET colleges, ought to employ a personal approach (Toppi *et al*., 2012:7; Jacobson *et al*., 2020:2) facilitated by a digital platform, which allows for rich visual and written data to be conveyed, and also circulated within a network through options, such as tagging.

Social media is ubiquitous in marketing (particularly in a business-to-consumer environment) (Valos *et al.,* 2014:720*)*. Marketers are using publicly available data for three common functions, namely:

(1) Opinion mining: Marketers extract patterns that can be used to reach strategic business goals and provide a competitive edge in the marketplace.

(2) Targeted advertising: The use of social media in marketing has contributed to its individualisation, whereby marketers can leverage social media to craft personalised messages for targeted audiences (Boateng, 2019:227; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:3).

(3) Consumer relations: Developing strong relationships with consumers is the ultimate goal of all marketing programmes (Jacobson *et al*., 2020:2). Social media is used to attract consumers with user-generated content, engage consumers using online two-way interactions, and retain consumers by building relationships with stakeholders, as noted by Jacobson *et al*. (2020:2).

2.5.3.1 Origin of social media marketing

There are many opinions about the first occurrence of social media. As Edosomwan *et al*. (2011:1) stated: "*throughout much of human history, we've developed technologies that make it easier for us to communicate with each other.*" Jacobson *et al*. (2020:2) reported that the apparatus for communicating at a distance by coded signals, the telegraph, was introduced on 24 May 1884. Emile Durkheim, known by many as the father of sociology, and Ferdinand Tonnies, a German sociologist, are considered the pioneers of social networks during the late 1800s (Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:2). These mentioned sociologists believed that social groups exist because members shared certain values and beliefs. Kumar and Nanda (2020:240) claim that social media is not really that new, and it did not even start with the computer, but instead with the telephone in 1876. The internet became available to the public only as late as 1991 (Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:2).

Social media was greatly boosted at the turn of the century with the emergence of many social networking sites, such as LunarStorm, Six Degrees, Cyworld, and Wikipedia (Dennis *et al*., 2016:3056). Soon thereafter, in 2004, Facebook Harvard, YouTube, Dogster, and others materialised (Junco *et al*.), as noted by Edosomwan *et al*. (2011:3). The year 2006 was the year for Twitter (Swani *et al*., 2014:873) and Facebook began to open its doors to everyone as of September 2006. Facebook is still ranked as the most-used social network worldwide, as depicted in Figure 2.4. There are several paid services available to monitor conversations on the web that carry out a quantitative and/or qualitative analysis of how discussions are carried out and how much the same information is spread over the internet (Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:8; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:2). Social media has reshaped the way people communicate and interact (Boateng, 2019:226) in a consumer-to-consumer (C2C) and consumer-to-business (C2B) manner.

2.5.3.2 Social media marketing described

Social media, according to Edosomwan *et al*. (2011:5), is hard to describe and is a two-way street that gives the ability to communicate. The latter believe that social media is an instrument of communication, just like any other social network. Eger *et al*. (2020:2) claim that it is difficult to describe social media without encountering the phrase *social networking*. Merriam-Webster describes social media as: "*forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communication to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content".* Cohen and Stelzner, as accentuated by Edosomwan *et al*. (2011:5), are of the view that there is a difference between social media and social networking. Similarly, Chatterjee and Kar (2020:3) assert that social media refers to a strategy and an outlet for broadcasting instead of social networking, a tool and a utility for connecting with others. However, as asserted by Swani *et al*. (2014:875), Cohen explains that "*the difference is not just semantics, but in the features and functions put into websites by their creators which dictate the way they are to be used*". Table 2.11 highlights an assortment of descriptions of social media marketing in marketing literature.

Table 2.10: Social media marketing described

Reference	Description
Hartshorn (as cited by Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:5)	"media which is primarily used to transmit or share information with a broad audience".
Merriam-Webster (as cited by Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:1)	"forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content".
Swani *et al*. (2014)	"usage or communication tool to enable other activities & resources to be activated".

Reference	Description
Moghavvemi *et al*. (2017)	"wide range of application that allow users to create, share comments & discuss any digital content".
Drummond *et al*. (2020)	"ability to connect, engage, co-ordinate & collaborate in interaction with business exchange partners".
Paris *et al*. (as stated by Chatterjee & Kar, 2020)	"secured generation of web development & design, that aims to facilitate communication, sources, information sharing, interoperability & collaboration on the World Wide Web".
Tuten & Solomon (as cited by Jacobson *et al*., 2020)	"utilization of social media technologies, channels and software to create, communicate, deliver & exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders".

Several lines of evidence suggest that social media marketing deals with the ability to share relevant information. In recent years, social media has also provided HEIs with new means of communication with their target markets. Many HEIs have employed social media to portray themselves to prospective students in marketing campaigns. HEIS must develop and maintain relationships with its stakeholders to enhance loyal alumni. Increasing alumni engagement and donation opportunities through social media is a promising avenue by which colleges might enhance their donor base and foster a sense of 'doing good' to the community.

2.5.3.3 Social media marketing benefits

Johnson *et al*. (2021:1095) point out that statistics prove that the average time spent by millennial users worldwide on mobile internet is approximately 12% per day, which proves their strong dependence on the internet to share information and interact with others. It is, therefore, imperative to include the following benefits of social media marketing:

- The use of social media websites has increased the channels of communication and its effectiveness for many businesses (Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:7; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020:1). It is now well established from a variety of studies across the globe that the use of social media can improve the overall activities and growth of social media and medium businesses, such as TVET colleges.

- Time wastage is now limited as it has become easier for anyone to send messages through an instant messenger or tweet and get a response almost immediately (Iankova *et al*., 2018:175).

- Social media has also improved collaboration between different stakeholders, as noted by Drummond *et al*. (2020:1251), which has resulted in higher business performance. Social media allows people to generate and share their ideas to the benefit (or detriment) of others.

- Furthermore, social media marketing enables businesses to stay up to date with the latest developments in their respective industries and stay connected with top leaders. Chatterjee and Kar (2020:1) suggested that employees must receive proper training to stay motivated to use social media to engage with their consumers. Not so long ago, in studies undertaken by Dennis *et al.* (2016:3055) and Bamberger *et al*. (2020:485), it was purposively suggested that extensive support services should be in place, which also applies to colleges. To demonstrate the importance of student support services, profiles of administrative staff were constructed under the hashtag #StaffOfTheWeek. Furthermore, about a quarter of the posts were used to portray social and cultural events, trips, sports, and many more activities (Dennis *et al*., 2016:3054). These activities are portrayed as creating social bonds among students from very different backgrounds to interact, connect, express opinions, and stick to standards by building relationships to achieve the long-term goal of relationship marketing – fostering relationships between different stakeholders.

- Within the context of this study, social media could assist in strengthening the brand experience: Northlink College, the leader in TVET education and training. Dennis *et al*. (2016:3050) claim that establishing effective business branding is a way of identifying a business – how consumers recognise and experience services offered – thereby underpinning relationship building, forming an attachment between consumers and businesses. These principles of branding are furthermore applicable to HEIs, to present themselves to the community, to be remembered by its name and message, by promising a certain quality of experience (Jacobson *et al*., 2020:2).

Northlink College can become more attractive to students, employees, and other stakeholders if it authenticates its brand name (Valitov, 2014:295). Many recent studies, such as that of Dennis *et al*. (2016:30540), Bamberger *et al*. (2020:477), and Chatterjee and Kar (2020:1), emphasise that different types of HEIs need to employ different strategies to market and engage with students on Facebook and many other platforms. Social media marketing has emerged as an important tool for institutional branding, where institutions promote desirable images of themselves to the public and other stakeholders (Rauschnabel *et al*., 2016:3077; Bamberger *et al*., 2020:476). The latter also suggests that social media should be used to flaunt alumni's successes and highlight their connection to the brand of the college. A TVET college can even promote its occupational programmes (such as sports and drama) and acquire credit for itself and its alumni through national successes in applicable and relevant industries. Bamberger *et al*. (2020:484) suggest that students' personal stories that emphasise the connection between 'home' and 'family' should be posted as this is likely to expose a desire to study at a specific academic institution.

Social media is now the key mode of interaction among the younger generation, which is indeed the main consumer of HEIs. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and many more, will enable students and other key stakeholders to create an online community for conversations to take place, collaborate, participate, and develop in-depth learning through engagement (as measured by 'likes' and 'shares'). HEIs should create relationships through engagement to enhance long-term relationships and elicit online trust and loyalty among consumers.

Undoubtedly, 21st-century students are e-active, digitally savvy, and better choice makers, whose expectations, reasons for becoming students, and experiences are socially constructed. Relationship marketing is key in establishing and enhancing exchange partners (students, HEIs, alumni, and community) with the ultimate goal: loyalty.

2.6 Summary

This chapter provides an academic overview of the discipline of marketing and various other aspects of marketing. The three types of marketing discussed are relationship marketing, consumer relationship marketing, and social media marketing. Several approaches and descriptions were reported and engaged within the context of this study. The three core principles of relationship marketing, i.e. trust, commitment, and satisfaction, were explained in detail. These principles contribute to establishing, building, and managing long-term relationships with different stakeholders. These relationships are predicated on loyalty that can result in alumni commitment and support. Furthermore, various studies have indicated the importance of investing in consumer relationships, which forms the basis for developing strategies to create consumer value. Lastly, social media marketing has increased the channels of communication available and its effectiveness in many businesses, and its extensive use has changed the way people communicate and interact online. Social media is also redefining how HEIs are reaching their targeted audiences where the different stakeholders contribute to the welfare of their communities.

Education has been fundamental in the lifecycle of all human beings. Higher education offers an environment where students develop skills to prepare them for the dynamic world of work. HEIs are increasingly looking to build life-long relationships with students, and this then needs to evolve into loyal alumni as benefactors and the college as alma mater. HEIs depend on the assumption that these ongoing relationships will result in giving their time and money in exchange for the larger societal benefit. The higher education landscape, alumni, and community engagement will be explored more deeply in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER 3 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, ALUMNI AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter thoroughly explored the marketing discipline, dissecting its numerous branches and subfields, and offered a detailed analysis of the various marketing genres. Relationship marketing, consumer relationship marketing, and social media marketing are explored in more depth to obtain a deeper understanding of the impact of these types of marketing, specifically for this study, to foster alumni loyalty. A deliberation on the main dimensions constituting relationship marketing is presented, including trust, commitment, and satisfaction. These principles contribute to establishing, building, and managing long-term relationships with different stakeholders.

This chapter examines the higher education landscape in South Africa, specifically focusing on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges that fall under the auspices of higher education authorities. This case study centres on Northlink College, a TVET institution in the Western Cape Province. According to 2022 data, TVET colleges accounted for 22% of total student enrolment within the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. This is followed by an examination of the importance of fostering loyal alumni, who are essential to the success of any HEI to support their alma mater by giving their time and monetary contributions.

This chapter culminates by scrutinising community engagement, which entails people who share an area of interest and come together to uplift and enhance the standard of living of others through regular engagement and interaction. Subsequently, a synopsis of the higher education environment in South Africa is provided.

3.2 The higher education landscape

As this study involves a public higher education institution, particularly a TVET college, a concise literature review was conducted on the South African education landscape as it is relevant to this study. TVET colleges were previously known as further education and training (FET) colleges, but underwent a name change in 2012 to be known as technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges. TVET colleges enable learners to receive an education with entrepreneurial opportunities in a range of occupational or vocational industries to prepare them to become functional workers in a skilled trade. At a TVET college, a student develops technical skills and specialises in practical courses incorporating on-the-job training while completing an internship. A scholar aged 16 can enrol at a TVET college to obtain a qualification at a lower

expense than a university. From the age of 18 years, youngsters are regarded as emerging adults, which is a critical stage in their lives. They need to understand resilience since this is the phase when important changes in their functional competence, educational achievement, and social roles (Arnett, 2007:68) take place. In the case of this study, a TVET college should grasp the opportunity to expose students to the true meaning of philanthropy by making voluntary contributions to HEIs. Following is a concise overview of the meaning of emerging adulthood.

3.2.1 Emerging adulthood

Arnett, a professor of psychology at Clark University, described emerging adulthood as the time from the end of adolescence to the young adult, age 18 to 24 (Arnett, 2007:69). This phenomenon has only arisen in the past few decades in response to social and economic changes and urges continuing research examining the nature of life and different stages of development. During emerging adulthood, youngsters focus on themselves as they develop their knowledge, skills, and self-understanding while preparing for adulthood. Emerging adults are at a unique point in their lives, characterised by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations. Identity exploration and the formation of their characters continue to develop during these years. Examples of research into emerging adulthood, such as that of Harris and Orth (2020:460) and Traino *et al*. (2021:5), propose that as adolescents move into adulthood, many psychological dimensions, such as prosocial behaviours, become more prominent. This presents an opportunity for lecturers, mentors, and alumni to embed principles such as volunteering and 'doing good to others'. An integrated approach to student and alumni support during emerging adulthood could dramatically increase retention and completion rates and deliver more value to students. Radcliff (2019:174), in this regard, recommends the engagement of alumni through the lens of emerging adulthood, embracing that students' development continues well after diploma completion.

TVET colleges can legally confer diplomas because they are incorporated under the higher education authorities (Higher Education Act, 2013) and are subsequently explored in more depth.

3.2.2 Higher education authorities

The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 describes higher education as all learning programmes leading to a qualification that meets the requirements of the Higher Education Qualifications Model (Higher Education Act, 2013). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) defines higher education as education that generally begins after high school, is usually carried out at a university or college, and involves studying towards a degree or diploma. Higher education is conventionally divided into two levels, undergraduate and postgraduate, through lecture-based classes or distance learning. The Council of Higher Education (CHE) monitors the

quality assurance and education policies for all higher education institutions across South Africa. Furthermore, as per the Council of Higher Education, public HEIs are funded by the government via the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), which includes universities of technology and traditional universities across South Africa (SAQA, 2016) and TVETs.

Post-school education and training (PSET) in South Africa consists of all educational and training provisions for those who have completed school, those who did not complete their schooling, and those who never attended school. The PSET system encompasses:

- Higher education (HE): 26 public higher education institutions (HEIs) and 114 private higher education institutions (PHEIs).
- TVET colleges: 50 public and 627 private colleges.
- CET (community education and training) colleges: Nine public community education and training centres.
- Colleges: Nine public community education and training centres.
- SETAs: Sector Education and Training Authorities and the National Skills Fund (NSF).
- Regulatory bodies: Council on HE, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Quality Council for Trades and Occupation (QCTO), and Umalusi (Statistics on Post-School Education and Training, 2020).

Figure 3.1 is a graphic depiction of the PSET sector student enrolment in South Africa for 2022.

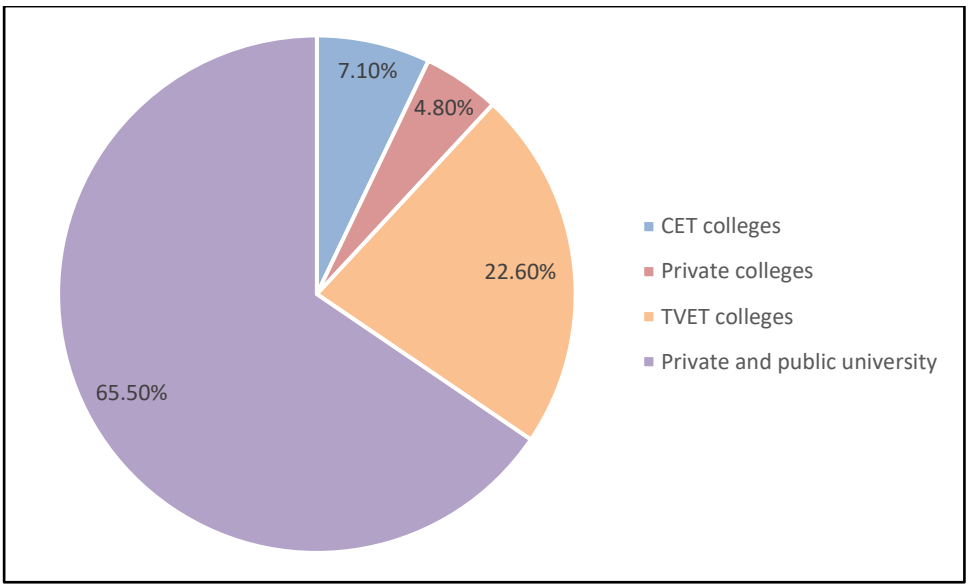


Figure 3.1: Percentage distribution of student enrolments

Source: PSET in SA (2022)

It is indicated in Figure 3.1 that 22.60% of students who were enrolled at PSET institutions in 2022 were in TVET colleges, which provide a choice to study at a university in South Africa. TVET colleges focus on developing students' practical skills for a wide range of job opportunities, are deeply rooted within communities, are cheaper, and the government provides funding through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) programme to learners who cannot afford further education. This indicates a promising opportunity to establish long-term relationships with students, which could ultimately benefit many stakeholders. Subsequently, this is a synopsis of the most recent higher education trends affecting HEIs' functionality.

3.2.3 Higher education industry trends

Khanna *et al*. (2019:1) explain that rapidly developing technologies pose significant challenges to college and university administrators. HEIs must identify industry trends to adapt curriculums to stay abreast of the competition. Drezner (2018:184) specifically advises that strategic planning should present a unified brand message, an environment of continuing learning, personalised guidance and counselling through recruiting and retaining relationships, and, finally, fostering loyalty.

Several researchers (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:217; Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*., 2018:1078; Peruta & Helm, 2018:123) have identified that competition among education institutions is increasing, thereby requiring more excellent responsiveness from these institutions to cater to students' needs. This view is supported by Chen (2012:1331), who claims that intense competition between

HEIs influences the concern for loyalty to survive. The latter maintains that non-loyalty at the higher education level might be associated with the level of engagement between students, academics, supporting staff, feedback processes, and HEI policies and facilities.

Even before the turn of the century, administrators of HEIs started to enthusiastically embrace the application of marketing principles in the higher education setting (Heckman & Guskey, 1998:97). Not so long ago, Naidoo and Wu (2014:547) explicitly indicated that administrators now need to focus on creating and enhancing loyal alumni. Similarly, Khanna *et al*. (2019:2) claim that relationship marketing holds particular relevance for higher education in developing and maintaining long-term relationships with consumers (in this case, students). Presently, in the higher education environment, knowledge comes with a substantial price tag (Sutrave *et al*., 2020:1). The cost of education increases consistently, causing public institutions to endure significant subsidy cuts in government funding (Peruta & Helm, 2018:124). HEIs should grab every opportunity to effectively identify industry trends to be incorporated into their strategic planning to obtain and maintain a competitive advantage (Khanna *et al*., 2019:1).

Bouchrika (2020:2) and InsideTrack (2021) provided the following main trends in the higher education industry for 2021:

- Skills: To meet the high demand for vocational education, HEIs should employ staff members with industry expertise instead of just academic qualifications.

- Global thinking: Large tertiary institutions are looking at new strategies to adapt course programmes and introduce new course delivery methods.

- Enterprise learning: Tertiary institutions are starting to align themselves with large businesses to assist them in employing new systems and procedures to develop a specified industry. In contrast to Bouchrika (2020:2), the European University Association (2020) contends that HEIs should be cautious not to lose their core mandates, such as intellectual pursuit, knowledge discovery, transmission, inquiry, and discourse. The latter cautiously warns: "*There is a real danger that if universities follow an entirely corporate mandate, they can lose focus on activities that extend beyond monetary value."*

- Diversity of higher education students: HEIs should create and welcome diverse campuses, recognise the educational value of ethnic and racial diversity, and work towards breaking the barriers that prevent proper diversification.

- Increase in non-traditional students: HEIs alter their policies to encourage non-traditional students juggling various responsibilities to join colleges and universities to reskill or upskill (Rose & Mallinson, 2020:2).

- Online courses: Online courses allow for a more comprehensive educational reach and do not require face-to-face delivery. Live video presentations may urge businesses to invest in these new blended learning methods. The number of students taking most online classes skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic (InsideTrack, 2021). Colleges, including Northlink College, are most likely to have technology and internet deficiencies, making online learning challenging. HEIs then found themselves in financial predicaments when the legislature slashed budgets, challenged by the unexpected expense of going online, providing laptops and hotspots, and expanding IT services and software. TVET colleges also experienced lower enrolments, and returning students further posed financial difficulties. In contrast to the scenario mentioned earlier, internet-based e-learning enabled online/distance learning in higher education for students who do not have access to traditional face-to-face classes (Sutrave *et al*., 2020:1). However, online learners view their education as 'transactional' and do not necessarily form an emotional bond with their HEI to engage and give back to their alma mater and community.

- Technological trends: Technological innovations drastically change the landscape of HEIs and ultimately affect how students learn and are being taught. Emerging technologies, such as virtual reality, can simplify learning, making it easily accessible to all learners. Artificial intelligence (AI) can enable HEIs to offer personalised learning to assist learners in gaining a comprehensive blend of skills. Artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies have created skills gaps across all industries. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is forcing rapid advances in robotics. The impact of technology-driven automation, the complexity of job processes, and the fragmentation of decision-making in the current workplace collectively occur in the increasing skills demand across all business sectors (Abad-Seguro *et al*., 2020:4).

- Partners: HEIs can partner with businesses by encouraging diversity through collaboration and forming strategic alliances with other academic, private, and/or public institutions.

- Mental health issues: A study done by Standard Bank in 2020 involved students from 25 public HEIs in South Africa, and the results indicate that a lack of resources, as a result of being away from campus, increased stress and anxiety, and lastly, a home environment not conducive to studying were the three most significant challenges faced by students in 2020 due to COVID-19 (Standard Bank, 2020). After almost two years of the COVID-19 pandemic,

HEIs should produce innovative approaches, online resources, and creative programmes to increase mental health awareness.

- Fundraising campaigns: According to Bouchrika (2020:3), alumni donations are reaching record highs, but the number of donors is declining. This poses a challenge to HEIs, which ideally should maintain a loyal alumni base.

- Need for alternative funding options: HEIs have always relied profoundly on government funding, but the government's decision to cut funding has sent some academic operations into a tailspin, forcing them to look elsewhere for funding. The goal now is to create initiatives that can awaken the interest of businesses and private entities in funding learning.

There should be an increased focus on mental health issues, which have been more prevalent in HEIs since the COVID-19 pandemic. HEIs should capitalise on the extensive reach of online learning, which includes non-traditional students. It is worth noting the valuable contributions that technological trends and innovations, such as virtual reality and 'esports', can make to the educational landscape.

Succeeding is a brief overview of the history, mission, vision and values of the TVET college selected for this study – the case of Northlink College.

3.2.4 Overview of a TVET college: Northlink College

Northlink College is a registered TVET college and was established in 2002, following the merger of four colleges in the northern suburbs of the greater Cape Town Metropole. Northlink College is one of the 50 public TVET colleges in South Africa and boasts seven campuses, along with a central office in Bellville, Cape Town. The college has an annual intake of approximately 20 000 students. It offers more than 90 programmes in business, utility, engineering, occupational studies, short courses, part-time studies, and distance learning, in which case the course material provides entrepreneurial opportunities in various occupational or vocational industries. All qualifications are registered on the National Qualification Model (NQF) at the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA, 2016).

The vision, mission, and values of Northlink College are summarised in Table 3.1. A few local partners of Northlink College include government departments, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), larger companies (for example, Nautic Africa, I&J, CONSOL Glass, and Afrisam), and some smaller companies (Gascon, Hesper Engineering, Damen Shipyards, Fine Chemical, Permoseal, Southern Air and Besamandia). International partnerships include

Haugaland in Norway, West Nottinghamshire College in the UK, and College Gwent in Wales (Northlink College, 2020).

Table 3.1: Northlink College: Vision, mission and values

VISION	MISSION	VALUES
The leading provider of education and training excellence.	To provide relevant, accredited education and training which will address the skills and developmental needs of consumers.	Ensure that innovation, creativity and responsiveness remain our driving force. Promote a culture of integrity, loyal and mutual trust. Be accountable, transparent and promote equality. Dedicated to quality and client satisfaction. Entrench teamwork and a culture of life-long learning. Committed to affordability and accessibility for all learners.

Northlink College offers courses on different NQF levels, listed in Table 3.2, where NCV stands for National Certificate: Vocational, a type of qualification offered in South Africa. The levels refer to the level of complexity and duration of the qualification. (NCV Level 2: equivalent to grade 10, age 16; NCV Level 3: equivalent to grade 11, age 17; NCV Level 4: equivalent to grade 12, age 18.) N1-N3 Engineering Studies refer to a series of qualifications in the field of engineering, where the N1 to N3 levels start at an introductory, intermediate, and advanced level. The N4-N6 Engineering Studies refer to a series of advanced qualifications in engineering, whereas N4-N6 Business Studies refer to a series of advanced qualifications in business, including subjects such as Business Management, Marketing, Finance, and Human Resources. The N4-N6 qualification is often used as a pathway to National Diplomas, bachelor's degrees, postgraduate studies, and professional certifications (Northlink College, 2020). They are designed to equip learners with the practical skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their chosen careers, making them an essential part of the growth of the South African economy.

Table 3.2: Programmes offered by Northlink College

NCV NQF	N1-N3	N4-N6	N4-N6
Level 2-4	Engineering studies	Engineering studies	Business studies

South Africa prioritises developing higher education to equip and upgrade young people to contribute to society and the economy. There is a place for TVET colleges, and the youth need to consider these colleges. Northlink College, as a registered TVET college, fits into the post-school system. By offering post-school education and vocational training, TVET colleges can

provide the South African youth with opportunities to bridge the South African skills shortage. HEIs must exchange 'giving' support to students to 'getting' monetary and/or 'non-monetary' support from alumni.

HEIs view alumni as key enablers who can contribute to an academic institution's mission and vision by giving their time and donations. Indeed, Northlink College has an excellent opportunity to apply the principles of relationship marketing to create a loyal alumni base.

Following is a synopsis of the pivotal role alumni can bring about for HEIs, including TVET colleges.

3.3 Alumni

Several lines of evidence from scholars, such as Singer and Hughey (2002:51), Newman and Petrosko (2011:739), and Chi *et al*. (2012:1391), denoted alumni as students who have graduated. "*They are often older, more robust, greyer, and sometimes balder, but they are also generally wiser and financially better off than when they were undergraduates"* (Singer & Hughey, 2002:51). Be that as it may, alumni are likely always to have an integral and inseparable connection with the HEI from which they graduated. For alumni, continued affiliation with their alma mater often provides intellectual stimulation, prestige, identity, stability, and tax-motivated financial contributions, as per Vidal and Pittz (2018:1) and even more recently by Hungsapruek (2022:333). HEIs should understand and meet alumni's unique needs to build relationships, which could ultimately result in loyalty. Khanna *et al*. (2019:14) suggested personalised and one-on-one encounters between academic institutions and alumni, which could contribute to creating strong emotional bonds. Likewise, Godin (2018:60) believes that different people should be treated differently. This could lead to the better utilisation of marketing budgets by sending out targeted messages to different segments based on the level of interaction (a rifle approach) rather than the mass targeted (shotgun) approach.

3.3.1 Definition of alumni

Alumni are generally acknowledged as "*men and women who have completed their studies, especially at a college or university"* (Cambridge Dictionary). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes an alumnus as "*a person who has attended or has graduated from a particular school, college or university".* The term alumnus is derived from the Latin verb '*alere,' which means 'pupil to nourish' or 'to bring up'.*

Alumni are former students and most often graduates of an educational institution such as a school, college, or university (Singer & Hughey, 2002:51). Alumni ought to be regarded as a group

of very loyal devotees who support their alma mater and represent HEIs both nationally and internationally (Chi *et al*., 2012:1391). Furthermore, alumni are cherished as one of the most critical assets of any HEI, for alumni can give rise to funding (Sutrave *et al*., 2020:1), offer services to an institution, as well as perform the role of representatives for a brand/institution, which speaks volumes of HEIs (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:739; Chi *et al*., 2012:1391).

Alumni associations are created to support the goals of an academic institution and strengthen ties between alumni, the community, and an HEI. These associations foster a spirit of loyalty and promote the welfare of HEIs, which calls for a more in-depth exploration of alumni associations.

3.3.2 Alumni associations

Alumni associations have existed for many years and are entities with specific business structures and management practices. Dolbert (1965:14) indicated that the first alumni association was established in 1821 at Williams College in the USA, and these associations became esteemed establishments worldwide. Higher education is facing increasing financial challenges as governments cut college and university budgets (Skari, 2014:23; Sanchez, 2021:542; Amani, 2022:1), and HEIs seek alumni for ongoing support, which an alumni association usually orchestrates. Alumni associations become a marketing instrument and mouthpiece for HEIs and its alumni (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001:23; Newman & Petrosko, 2011:739; Khanna *et al*., 2018:95; Amani, 2022:3). The primary functions of alumni associations are to cultivate relationships with alumni and HEIs by providing an ongoing connection between these parties (Newman, 1979:1; Amani, 2022:4). Recently, an alumni member of the Wisconsin Alumni Association commented: "*we're big, but we're individuals*. *Every person matters in this alumni association"* (Wisconsin Alumni Association, 2022).

HEIs usually form alumni associations to stay connected with alumni, often spread all over the world, for them to continue sharing knowledge and experiences and to support a network of former graduates (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:739; Sebola, 2015:8). It is from these networks where jobs are posted, and career coaching, advising, and new opportunities arise. Alumni associations can provide online career service opportunities, identify employment opportunities, and even offer positions (Singer & Hughey, 2002:49; Ebert *et al*., 2015:253). In addition, individuals from different industries share their challenges and experiences with the opportunity for lifelong learning (Ebert *et al*., 2015:253). Consistent with this, Walaba (2014:1) ascertains that alumni associations deal with bringing people together to share resources towards the success of an HEI. The latter refers to "*bringing together link-minded individuals"* and not only to provide much-needed funding to the association itself but also to HEIs involved.

A broader perspective has been adopted by the scholars Rust (2015:38) and Sebola (2015:7), who claim that, as a student, a person becomes one of the thousands of alumni who have attended the same HEI, having something in common with another person, which implies a 'sense of belonging' (Mael & Ashforth, 1992:104; Khanna *et al.*, 2019:349) and therefore the need to be a member of a community (Amani, 2022:3). The latter found that internal branding, as an inclusive approach to HEI branding, influences students' behavioural intention to become and participate as active members of alumni associations. Having something in common with another person (Stephenson & Yerger, 2013:244) is a meaningful way to enter a relationship; each person has a 'sense of belonging' and wants to be a member of a community; a community has a common identity, which includes many webs of relationships that offer meaning for its members. Amani (2022:7) considers alumni associations as an engine to build HEIs' social community identification, which may trigger other supportive behaviours. Amani (2023:4) believes that relationship-building is a more important function of an alumni association than raising money. The latter appropriately refers to alumni as 'friend raisers' instead of 'fundraisers'.

The research study by Koenig-Lewis (2015:15) indicated that alumni associations tend to adopt a mass relationship marketing approach that often results in low alumni engagement. Koenig-Lewis (2015:15) and Drezner (2018:190) suggested that alumni associations should, to a greater extent, adopt additional segmentation targeting alumni. This is in agreement with Jimenez-Castillo *et al*. (2013:237), who confirmed that the existence of heterogeneous alumni groups demands different interventions if long-term relationships are to be developed and maintained.

It is of utmost importance for any HEI to make sure that the alumni association and its functions are well known to its current students as this will facilitate building long-term relationships with them (Gallo, 2018:95). Students are to be viewed as lifelong consumers and HEIs need to respond to alumni's current and anticipate needs (Rust, 2015:41). Therefore, alumni associations should take on a consumer orientation approach and identify, analyse, understand and respond to their consumers' needs and expectations. Gallo (2018:95) proposes that alumni associations institute a more active relationship and commitment for HEIs in volunteering and providing expertise to the community. Newman and Petrosko (2011:756) came across two attitudinal variables, namely positive student feelings and university perception, which were unenthusiastically associated with alumni association membership. One potential explanation for this undesirable relationship between attitudinal measures and alumni association membership is that alumni who perceive their alma mater as being in a favourable financial position will perceive the institution to be in no need of donations.

Many HEIs establish associations with the implicit or explicit aim of generating a source of financial income (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2008:85; Sanchez, 2021:542; Amani, 2022:3). In the same vein, Khanna *et al*. (2019:344) point out that a strong and vibrant alumni association offers a potential source of finance and has a political influence and a strong likelihood of recommending students (Amani, 2022:6). For a graduate to join a dues-based alumni association, the graduate only needs to contribute annually or make a lifetime contribution (Wisconsin, 2022), which, in turn, presents such donators with a variety of specific member benefits (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:739). These authors indicated that there are only a few studies in the area of predictors of alumni association membership, and Amani (2022:7) encourages future research examining the predictors.

Alumni associations work closely with staff members in their endeavour to keep alumni connected and engaged with one another, current students, faculty members, staff, and the management of HEIs (Koenig-Lewis, 2015:15). Similarly, the North-West University (NWU) stated in their alumni relations policy that the alumni office continuously communicates with internal structures such as faculties, departments, and student structures to establish partnerships when organising activities.

A birds-eye view of what alumni relations are all about is presented below.

3.3.3 Alumni relations

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) elaborates on the purpose of alumni relations by stating:

> *"alumni relations programs build and strengthen relationships with students and former students, faculty and friends. They keep alumni informed about the institution and in contact with each other by providing opportunities such as homecomings, reunions and alumni club events. They provide education opportunities to alumni through continuing education programs, weekend seminars and travel programs" (Koenig-Lewis, 2015:15).*

Having sound alumni relations, as professed by Gallo (2018:93), may contribute to the perceived value of an HEI. Gallow further claims that alumni relations are often considered the precursor to securing financial contributions and voluntary support – the proverbial friend-raising before fundraising.

An alumni relations office provides alumni with a variety of services, such as organising events, access to the library, the promotion of social events, education enrichment, personal development, and many more. The idea is that alumni should become enthusiastic about their

relationship to support an academic institution in the long term. Several basic principles are therefore required for an alumni relations team to be effective, namely:

- COVID-19 left millions facing pay cuts and losing their jobs due to the economic crisis. The most important trend for alumni relations teams during times of crisis is providing continued career support to graduates (Kaylan, 2022).

- Alumni relations teams are apprehensive about going fully virtual as they realise that virtual events can never substitute the 'feelings' that alumni share at an in-person event. Moving forward, these relations teams most likely offer a combination of both – the best of two worlds.

- Alumni relations programmes have become a top priority for HEIs in maintaining a long-term relationship between HEIs and alumni (Weerst & Ronca, 2008:280). Alumni relations teams should invite alumni for a virtual reunion or homecoming supporting the HEI.

- Leverage a powerful alumni voice on behalf of HEIs.

- To build relations with non-academic institutions and partners and increase their social interactions (Ebert *et al*., 2015:254).

- Identify the key forms of communication through market research. These may include personal visits, publications, events, and social media (Ebert *et al*., 2015:254). Wallace *et al*. (2016:18) indicated that social media might be one of the biggest contributors to return on investment and encourage HEIs to use some form of social media to engage with alumni.

- Create a responsive website to engage with alumni (Wallace, 2016:18), which should be easy to manage by all users, young and old.

- Invest in web analytics. Amani (2022:4) suggested that alumni offices use web analytics to assist them in identifying the different types of audiences, who they are, where they are, and how they interact with HEIs.

- Manage data to keep the contact list of alumni up to date. Systems such as Contact Management System (CMS), Customer Relationship Management (CRM), and the Smart Alumni System (SAS) model will help HEIs to reach and maintain their contact with their alumni (Wallace, 2016:18), and to build a database that gathers and organises data, as well as tracks contacts and involvement over time (Ebert *et al*., 2015:256).

- Create and maintain identity (history, symbols, traditions, rituals, values) to develop and maintain loyal alumni (Singer & Hughey, 2002:53; Vidal & Pittz, 2018:3).

- Giving stewardship and recognition to beneficiaries in different ways is helpful when building strong relationships between different stakeholders (Plummer *et al*., 2022:137).

- Initiate action in special events to organise reunions/get-togethers that alumni will find appealing to participate in (Ebert *et al*., 2015:254). Special events enable creating visibility in a community, involving volunteers to bring prospects to campus and raising money.

- Provide further education to alumni.

HEIs ought to maintain a complex relationship with their alumni base. Moreover, the decreasing public funding for HEIs means the latter must turn to philanthropic donations from friends and alumni to advance HEIs. The role of alumni will be explored in more depth next.

3.3.4 The role of alumni

Alumni are not usually thought of as consumers, but HEIs' continued dependence on alumni for financial contributions and engagement with their community makes this a helpful relationship marketing example (Heckman & Guskey, 1998:97; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001:22). The principles of relationship marketing have found favour with HEI administrators by presenting the opportunity to create, enhance and maintain loyal consumers. Heckman and Guskey (1998:98) are scholars in this field of study and provided clear evidence that former students often perceive their relationships with their alma mater as a long-term lifecycle. The relationship being developed between a student and his/her faculty will form the foundation of the relationship alumni will maintain with their academic institutions. The relationship-building process and rapport will be supported through alumni recollections of interactions (memorable messages) (Frisby *et al*., 2019:162). Rapport exists in a mutually enjoyable and trusting relationship and should continue being important after graduation. Frisby *et al*. (2019:162) commented that if HEIs effectively build rapport with students, the opportunity exists for them to become loyal alumni. Traditional engagement strategies, such as reunions, magazines, social media platforms, and newsletters, are employed by HEIs to build and maintain their relationships with alumni (Gallo, 2012:95). Therefore, the role of alumni is indispensable for HEIs, including TVET colleges, and following is a list of different functions alumni can execute:

- Alumni as brand ambassadors: Alumni can meaningfully contribute to how external and internal consumers perceive the HEI, the public, and competitors (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014:244; Gallow, 2018:930).

- Alumni as mentors: Mentoring is an important aspect of assisting young adults to make informed decisions regarding their personal growth and their careers (Singer & Hughey, 2002:59). Ebert *et al*. (2015:253) claim that there may be an opportunity to draw input from alumni as clear expressions of their gratitude towards academic teaching. In addition, Ebert *et al*. (2015:252) indicated that alumni have a great deal of knowledge to offer and are in a favourable position to measure the application of education received in relation to job requirements. Cownie and Gallo (2020:3) pronounced that alumni are in a favourable position to design relevant case studies and assist with the development of syllabi focusing on the tailoring thereof to fit the needs of students rather than offering a one-size-fits-all academic qualification.

- Alumni as guest speakers: Alumni can share their experiences from different industries and how they combined their theoretical knowledge and experience gained to succeed (Ebert *et al*., 2015:253). Sharing valuable information will expose students to what is happening in the 'corporate world' to prepare them for their turn to enter the 'real world'. Alumni favour being asked by academics they know in a personal capacity to get involved by giving back to an academic institution. Sebola (2015:11) confirmed that alumni who are requested to act as guest speakers experience an escalation of their confidence. Cownie and Gallo (2020:3) highlighted that HEIs may access a wealth of 'experience' simply by asking alumni to contribute to students' education experiences. Research into these requests, however, reported that such requests received from HEIs are minimal (Cownie & Gallo, 2020:3).

- Financial benefit: HEIs are facing smaller public and government financial support, which means they rely more and more on private contributions (Sebola, 2015:11). These private donors can be alumni who are 'giving back' to the institutions that supported them while they were on campus.

- Lifelong learning experience: HEIs can generate revenue by allowing alumni to enrol again and attend short courses at a discounted cost (Sebola, 2015:12). Lifelong learning can deepen alumni's connection to an academic institution, enhancing and maintaining loyalty.

- Different activities: Connecting students and alumni in volunteer services makes students aware of how individuals can manage their full-time jobs while providing public services. In addition, these types of activities help create positive public relations exposure for HEIs and

enhance their social responsibility (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:742). In the United States, cultural norms include involvement in volunteering and philanthropy. These students who benefited from alumni contacts and programmes feel responsible for participating in programmes when they become alumni. In contrast to the United States and Swedish cultural norms, where the state provides academic institutions as a normal benefit to all citizens, alumni consider giving time to academic institutions as 'strange' or 'foreign.' This implies that what works in one culture might not be appropriate in others, and alumni programmes must be adjusted accordingly (Ebert *et al*., 2015:259).

- Lastly, numerous other services can be performed by alumni, such as serving on advisory boards, assisting in capital campaigns (Wiggins Johnson *et al*., 2010:126), and providing cooperative education (Heckman & Guskey, 1998:98).

There is a growing body of research on the factors influencing alumni giving (Biederman, 2022:21). HEIs are investing resources in fundraising and alumni engagement to support their institutions' operations. The question remains: Which factors motivate alumni to give?

3.3.5 Alumni giving behaviour

HEIs are increasingly looking for life-long relationships with alumni, and these academic institutions hope that such ongoing relationships result in alumni giving (Drezner, 2018:181). This view is supported by Skari (2014:26), who maintains that relationships between stakeholders are a reason for giving. Alumni tend to strengthen relationships with HEIs in which they feel the exchange is fair and that the institution is acting with integrity (Amani, 2022:7). Furthermore, the social exchange theory is focused on people as a social species who have a 'desire to do good' through social endeavours (Piliavan & Charng, 1990:35), which underlines alumni's financial and non-financial contributions. Drezner (2018:181) explains that alumni donate when they are *au fait* with their interests aligning with the needs and interests of HEIs. Vidal and Pittz (2018:1) and Gosier (2022:17) opine that alumni giving rates continue declining year-on-year. Subsequently, relationship marketing is appropriate for HEIs to build long-term regular donors rather than relying on discrete one-time gifts. Wishart and James (2020:1) emphasised the importance of moving donors to planned gift confirmation and maintaining relationships until the end of life. Marketing remains challenging as more than 50% of total bequest gifts received come from decedents who were not even donors during life.

Following is a synopsis of the important variables that affect alumni giving:

- Alumni involvement: Alumni associations plan and implement HEI reunions (Drezner, 2018:186). Attendance at these reunions positively relates to alumni giving. A study by Hu and Fana (2021:79) reported that institutional expenditures on alumni activities, communication, and other programmes are the most significant factor in explaining fundraising success.

- Student experiences: Student experiences are defined by levels of satisfaction (Frisby *et al*., 2019:162; Biederman, 2020:22), involvement, and relationships with HEIs and staff members (Koenig-Lewis *et al*., 2015:5). Pearson (1999:7) initially identified satisfaction as the "*single most essential precondition for giving."* Satisfaction has been identified as one of the most important relationship marketing concepts, as discussed in Chapter 2. Numerous other studies found that undergraduate students with positive experiences have a significant impact on alumni giving behaviour (Mael & Ashforth, 1989:24; Vidal & Pittz (2018:2). In coordination with different departments, the alumni association could provide opportunities for alumni to relive shared academic experiences. This can include offering online courses, which will also help update alumni's academic knowledge and strengthen the recalled value of their academic experience that may otherwise fade over time. Furthermore, alumni associations could aim to foster recall of the group who perceives their social experience as more favourable by organising events, picture sharing, and memorabilia.

- Institutional characteristics: Newman and Petrosko (2011:741) and, more recently, Biederman (2022:23) concluded that students with a greater perceived academic quality and prestige are also inclined to greater levels of alumni giving. The type of education offered to students, including cultural dimensions, adds to students' lives and could result in a continued feeling of attachment to HEIs. Teaching students a set of values and a particular type of character could make individuals more predictable and produce a highly effective alumni network. Vidal and Pittz (2018:4) refer to a holistic education experience that goes far beyond the classroom and introduces values and traditions that can be a reason for higher retention rates, substantial endowments, and engagement.

- Alumni characteristics: Existing research focusing on alumni financial contributions indicated that individuals' ability to give relies on higher levels of discretionary income and age (Baade & Sundberg, 1996:77). Additional research demonstrated that gender, marital status, and ethnicity on alumni giving have not been studied as frequently as other demographic variables (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:741). Skari (2014:14) and Riantiarno *et al*. (2020:349) emphasise knowing what characteristics affect giving and that HEIs should prioritise their time and effort for those alumni most likely to give. Managers of alumni databases are encouraged to obtain

not only demographic information but also to include attitudinal measures as found to be a predictor of membership status (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:757).

Alumni can add immense value to any academic institution by performing the role of a marketing tool. Alumni who have undergone the education journey are important stakeholders in developing the education brand (Khanna *et al.,* 2019:338). Subsequently, an exploration of the use of alumni as a marketing tool is provided.

3.3.6 Using alumni as a marketing tool for brand identification

A brand is described as something unique, something that exists in the minds of consumers; it may even be perceived as having a distinct personality that consumers may develop personal relationships with (Stehenson & Yerger, 2014:243; Khanna *et al*., 2019:340; Eger *et al*., 2020:4). Branding in education is usually associated with, *firstly,* the quality of education (Valitov, 2014:296; Khanna *et al*., 2019:338), and *secondly*, the corporate identity of an academic institution.

A study by Walter *et al*. (2020:14) demonstrated that the perceived quality of education has a huge impact on students' choices when selecting an academic institution. This positive impact of quality aligns with previous studies that found that quality positively impacts consumers' brand preferences. A study done some time ago by Keller (1993:2) confirmed that a brand image can be defined as a perception of quality associated with the name of an HEI. Only a few papers specifically address higher education's branding, such as that of Waeraas and Solbakk (2008:452) and Khanna *et al*. (2019:339). However, there are many studies published by various scholars (Melewar & Akel, 2006:43; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008:452; Porter *et al*., 2011:3; Rauschnabel *et al*., 2014:3077; Valitov, 2014:295; da Silva *et al*., 2020:354; Eger *et al*., 2020:4) who optimistically view branding as an instrument to improve competitiveness and reputation, and this also applies to higher education. In light of increased competition, HEIs in all parts of the world have begun searching for a unique definition (Valitov, 2014:296) of what they are to differentiate themselves and attract students and academic staff. Alves and Raposo (2007:1263) firmly believe that measuring and understanding higher identification could be the first step for HEIs to design competitive strategies to improve student loyalty.

Mael and Ashforth (1992:105) refer to identification as defining the self in terms of an association with a business (in this case, a higher education institution), which triggers an individual to perceive a bond with a group psychologically. Ultimately, individuals experience the successes and failures of the group as their own. Porter *et al.* (2011:3) asserted that some individuals develop separate identities related to specific aspects of higher education life, such as an

academic identity, athletic prestige, attendance of cultural events, and the student representative council (Mael & Ashforth, 1992:107; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014:246).

Chapleo (2004:9) has adopted a broader perspective and claims that reputation management, rather than branding, is more appropriate for HEIs. Reputation is built over time, as opposed to a brand that is easier to influence in the short term. A large and growing body of literature confirmed that reputation is indeed a factor of choice that prospective students portray when selecting an academic institution (Walter *et al.,* 2022:5). This is of special importance since the quality of education is difficult to evaluate before being experienced, as reputation can serve as a critical substitute for quality.

The researchers mentioned above believe that increasing alumni's sense of coherence and identification with a higher education institution directly impacts alumni donations and engagement. Results from a research study undertaken by Schlesinger *et al*. (2020:1), titled *Does brand identification transform alumni into university advocates?,* clearly indicated that image was found to be a key driver of alumni's positive word-of-mouth (WOM) intention. Scholars such as Schlesinger *et al*. (2020:4) explored three profile-raising outcomes: word-of-mouth, recruitment, and symbols. *Firstly,* word-of-mouth comprises individuals propagating verbal praise by speaking positively about an academic institution. Positive word-of-mouth is an influential source of interpersonal communication but is scarcely studied in higher education marketing. Word-of-mouth communication is important because people consider cognitive information to be more trustworthy than other sources (Schlesinger *et al*., 2020:4). *Secondly,* recruitment: It was found that graduates are among the best sources of recruits (Mael & Ashforth, 1992:106). *Thirdly,* symbol collection refers to graduates encouraging others to wear university clothing or collect logo-laden paraphernalia. A considerable amount of literature on identification pays particular attention to additional antecedents (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014:246): prestige and satisfaction, which drive supportive behaviours. The most explored antecedent of identification is prestige, which is when individuals view prestigious businesses (HEIs) as vehicles to express self-concept and enhance their self-esteem. Similarly, Rauschnabel *et al.* (2014:3083) claim that the prestige personality factor represents an HEI's overall reputation, perceived success, and 'snob appeal.' Valitov (2014:296) and Walter *et al*. (2020:2) observed that satisfaction is a widely tested antecedent of identification, defined as fulfilling one's expectations related explicitly to student affairs.

Once successfully created, a brand such as Northlink College cannot easily be duplicated by competitors, as Khanna *et al.* (2019:338) commented. Brand identification is important in

transforming alumni into advocates to promote and embrace a competitive attitude toward other academic institutions.

Northlink College confirms its brand image with the following statement*:*

> *"We at Northlink College ensure that innovation, creativity, and responsiveness remain our driving force. We promote a culture of integrity, loyalty, and mutual trust. We aim to be accountable and transparent and promote equality. We are dedicated to quality and client satisfaction. We entrench teamwork and a culture of life-long learning. We are committed to affordability and accessibility for all learners."*

Through social media, HEIs must communicate their unique strengths and qualities to students and alumni. The following is a discussion on engaging alumni through social media.

3.3.7 Engaging alumni through social media

Marketing communication has traditionally come in the form of printed newsletters, direct mail, and brochures (Levine, 2009:180); verbally in the form of telephone calls and face-to-face interactions; and more recently, online services such as emails and e-newsletters (Kumar & Nanda, 2020:240; Greater Good South Africa, 2022). Before the emergence of modern e-communication, people were separated by distance in geographical locations, which quickly resulted in losing contact, which Sebola (2015:7) and Sutrave *et al*. (2020:1) call communication challenges. Distance has now been bridged because of technology's growth, which caused communication platforms to improve extensively (Eger *et al*., 2020:1) to exchange information more effectively. The internet, social media, and email allow users to communicate with each other regardless of their geographic area or time zone.

Social media is a phenomenon that has transformed the interaction and communication of individuals worldwide, and reaching alumni through social media is inevitable. Kaplan (2014:531) describes social media as an "*internet-based application that allows the creation and exchange of content that a user generated*." Similarly, Kumar and Nanda (2020:240) describe social media as a wide range of applications allowing users to create, share, comment, and discuss digital content. Social media is further regarded as dynamic, interactive, democratic, people-centric, volatile, social, and adaptive.

Figure 3.2 below depicts the most popular social media networks by monthly active users in millions as of January 2022.

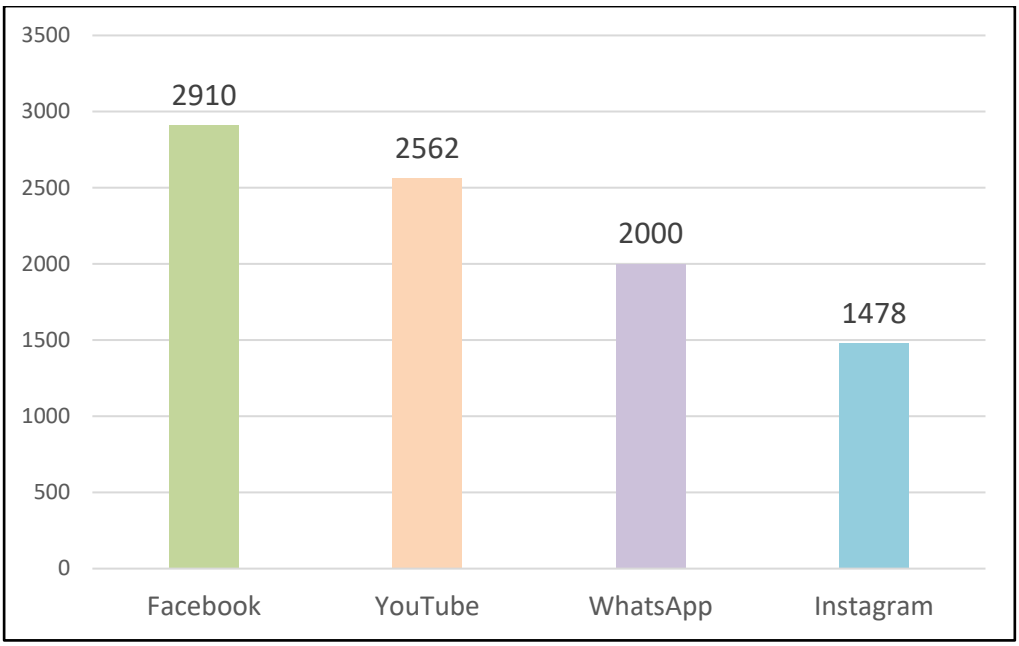


Figure 3.2: Most popular social media

Source: Marketing Business Network (2022)

Social media is characterised as one of the many facets of communication dynamics – instead of communication being directed at individual alumni, it allows for mass communication directed at alumni who follow their HEI accounts. Social media enables businesses to talk to their consumers (HEIs and alumni in this case), as well as putting consumers in a position to speak directly to one another (Eger *et al*., 2020:1). The latter believes that the number of HEIs using social media to reach alumni has grown and further maintains that the challenge for HEIs is not whether to use social media to communicate with their stakeholders, but rather how to effectively use this tool to reach their marketing goals. Lately, reaching existing and prospective students and stakeholders through social media has been considered the most promising marketing field (Kumar & Nanda, 2020:240). With the increasing number of choices of modes of communication, the world is becoming more accessible and presents new challenges for HEIs and their stakeholders (Sebola, 2015:7; Eger *et al*., 2020:1). HEIs need to adopt social media platforms, such as Facebook, to reach, establish and maintain ties with alumni and to intensify their relationships. However, to date, this phenomenon is still vastly understudied, according to Eger *et al*. (2020:5) and Sutrave *et al*. (2020:3). Sutrave *et al*. (2020:3), however, found that the majority of HEIs still use conventional methods, such as direct mail, for alumni engagement and fundraising.

HEIs can also use many other forms of social media, namely social networking sites (Instagram and LinkedIn); blogs; micro-blogging sites (Twitter); content communities (YouTube and Flickr); Podcasts (iTunes); Wikies and social news sites (Dig and Reddit) to reach greater numbers of

alumni at a far lower cost (Peruta & Helm, 2018:127) than many other marketing channels. Social media continue to dramatically change how people communicate (Khanna *et al.*, 2019:13). HEIs are attempting to take advantage of the different communication platforms to build their brands and engage with alumni. Furthermore, seeking contact with academic institutions' websites and social media has not yet been empirically tested, and this hypothesis is based on a theoretical perspective.

In identifying the most engaging social networking sites to target alumni, Chi *et al*. (2012:1390) and Kumar and Nanda (2020:240) identified Facebook as the best way to engage alumni being on a par with the platform that audiences use the most, as indicated in Figure 3.2.

Loyal alumni networks have always been an important source of funding for HEIs, and therefore HEIs have an inherent interest in pursuing communication strategies to establish and maintain relationships with potential donors (Sebola, 2015:7; Peruta & Helm, 2018:125), such as loyal alumni. This view is supported by Waeraas and Solbakk (2009:451), who wrote that the administrators of HEIs need to comprehend the value of these relationships in securing financial donations and other engagement activities. The more communication snippets alumni receive, the more likely they will financially support an HEI (Stephenson & Yerger, 2015:232). Peruta and Helm (2018:125) also discovered that those alumni receiving communication snippets containing some personal touches are more likely to give more than those who do not get the personal treatment. Similarly, Eger *et al*. (2020:15) reported that photo and video posts reached the highest engagement in their study.

HEIs need to use different strategies on their Facebook pages to increase the number of students and alumni, community engagement, and brand awareness (Edosomwan *et al*., 2011:7). Peruta and Helm (2018:129) presented the P.R.U.N.E. model to illustrate the use of a strategic approach through social media in HEIs to increase engagement. The most significant findings of Peruta and Helm's study, titled *Engaging university alumni through social media: strategies for creating* community (2018) found that similar content themes are used among HEIs' Facebook pages, with all trying to increase engagement on Facebook posts. These four content themes are:

(1) *Pride points* give the HEI's supporters something they can be proud of and want to associate themselves with, causing them to engage with the posts.

(2) *Relevance,* described as posts that include content that promotes an academic institution's involvement beyond its sphere, such as university ranking, detailing the achievement of a well-known alumnus, and posts that situate the HEIs within national and worldwide movements, holidays, or events.

(3) *Unifying imagery* is posted that includes an image or photograph with greater engagement than those without.

(4) *Nostalgia* is posts that include content that somehow mentions the past, allowing alumni to place themselves back within the history of their higher education experiences.

Unfolding from Figure 3.3 are the different content themes to increase alumni engagement.

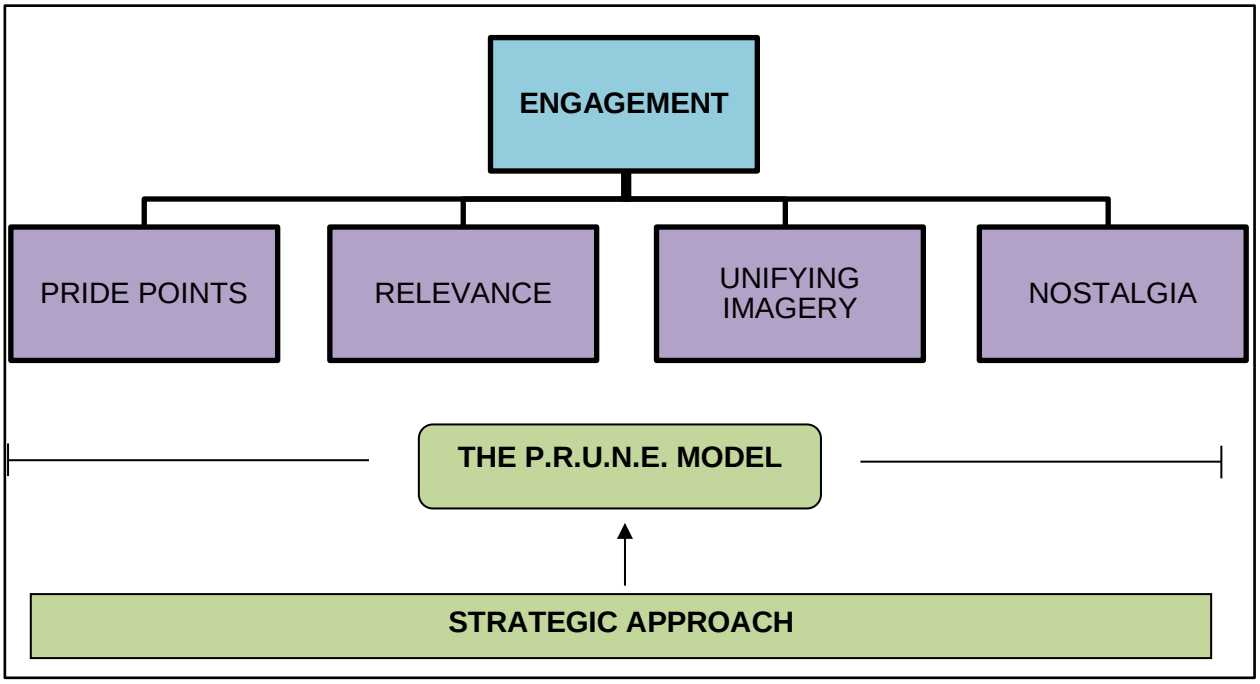


Figure 3.3: Engaging university alumni through social media

Source: Peruta & Helm (2018:129)

Alma Maters should remain proactively engaged with alumni to influence their engagement, as recommended by Drummond *et al*. (2019:1262). Increasing alumni engagement through social media is a promising avenue through which HEIs might enhance their donor base and foster a sense of community support after graduation. Therefore, HEIs need to know what mode of communication is suitable for different generational groups so that they can proactively engage with them long after graduation. In addition, HEIs should analyse the non-donors' experiences, which can be supplemented by social media, such as tailoring their needs that resonate with their higher education experiences, discussing emotional appeals, and increasing awareness by communicating the importance of giving to an academic institution (Eger *et al*., 2020:16).

Facebook pages and Twitter accounts visually create a sense of community. On Facebook, users can see how many others have liked, commented on, and shared a specific post (Peruta & Helm, 2018:129). The latter commented that sociability is measured as an engagement when people

are motivated to participate because they want to be a part of something that is successful. The level of engagement serves as both an indicator for HEIs that their communication is being received and poses an invitation to stakeholders, including alumni, to communicate in return.

As HEIs operate within dynamic, competitive, and challenging environments, designing a strong marketing strategy is necessary to achieve their targets. In recent years, social media has provided HEIs with new means of communication with different stakeholders. Facebook is still considered one of the prime platforms on which to engage with stakeholders. Branding, reputation, and building open communication relationships with current and potential students, alumni, and stakeholders have become indispensable. The principles of relationship marketing have found favour with HEI administrators by presenting the opportunity to create and enhance loyal alumni, which can provide not only proceeds for academic institutions over the long term but also to engage with their communities (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001:22; Sebola, 2015:7; Peruta & Helm, 2018:125). The focus of the following segment scrutinises the components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship.

3.4 Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship

Based on the conceptual model illustrated in Chapter 1, Figure 1.3, the alumni component comprises four key elements: student experience, HEI's identity, culture and values, and financial support. The HEI model will be expanded to include an additional component, relationship marketing, which will be integrated into the existing model. This extension will enhance the model's scope and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between HEIs and their stakeholders. It is crucial for fostering alumni loyalty and inspiring investment in their communities to benefit all parties involved.

3.4.1 Student experiences

Understanding students' experiences is a matter of academic interest and vital to building long-term relationships. These experiences, defined by satisfaction levels, involvement, and relationships with HEIs and staff members, significantly influence the likelihood of students becoming loyal alumni. This understanding is, therefore, crucial for HEIs seeking to enhance alumni giving and engagement.

Furthermore, Biederman (2022:23) opined that students with a higher perceived academic quality and prestige are also inclined to get emotionally attached, meaning they are more inclined to establish relationships.

Eger *et al*. (2020:1) believe that the number of HEIs using social media to reach alumni has grown. These scholars insisted that the challenge for HEIs is not whether to use social media to communicate with their stakeholders but how to use this tool to reach their marketing goals effectively. Lately, reaching existing and prospective students and stakeholders through social media is considered the most promising marketing field (Kumar & Nanda, 2020:240). The increasing number of choices of modes of communication presents new challenges for HEIs and their stakeholders (Sebola, 2015:7; Eger *et al*., 2020:3).

Koenig-Lewis *et al*. (2015:5) proposed that the 'passage of time' influences graduates' appreciation of their university experience. Life experiences may lead to revised evaluation as graduates reflect more positively on their college experience. An alternative view is that with the 'passage of time,' alumni may even downgrade their recollections of college experiences that were considered good at that time but are now considered poor (Koenig-Lewis *et al*., 2015:5). However, it is the academic experiences that play a substantial role in influencing loyal attitudes, indicating the significant role of HEIs in shaping alumni perceptions.

3.4.2 Identity and brand

Over the past few years**,** branding as a management concept has gained increasing popularity in HE as a mechanism for combating decreasing government funding and competition while increasing engagement with alumni (Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008:449; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014:243; Khanna *et al*., 2019:338). However, Walter *et al.* (2022:2) indicated relatively few historical studies on branding in higher education. HEI branding is complicated and relatively complex to initiate and maintain because of the different stakeholder roles that need to be accomplished.

A study by Walter *et al*. (2020:14) demonstrated that the perceived quality of education has a huge impact on students' choices when selecting an academic institution. This positive impact of quality aligns with previous studies that found that quality positively impacts consumers' brand preferences. However, there are many studies published by various scholars (Melewar & Akel, 2006:43; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008:452; Porter *et al*., 2011:3; Rauschnabel *et al*., 2014:3077; Valitov, 2014:295; da Silva *et al*., 2020:354; Eger *et al*., 2020:4) who optimistically view branding as an instrument for improving competitiveness and reputation, and this also applies to higher education. In light of increased competition, HEIs in all parts of the world have begun searching for a unique definition (Valitov, 2014:296) of what they are to differentiate themselves and attract students and academic staff. Alves and Raposo (2007:1263) firmly believe that measuring and understanding higher identification could be the first step for HEIs to design competitive strategies to improve student loyalty.

The 2021 Alumni Relations and Development report by the University of Chicago confirmed that creating successful identities is essential for HEIs whose future depends on attracting students. Potential students would instead be identified with a successful academic institution and its prestige than with unsuccessful ones, supported by Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018:1083). Mael and Ashforth (1992:105) refer to identification as defining the self in terms of an association with a business (in this case, a higher education institution), which triggers an individual to perceive a bond with a group psychologically.

Stephenson and Yerger (2014:244) propose that the most essential benefit of branding in higher education is the ability of HEIs to offer students and alumni a sense of belonging through life-long membership. Similarly, studies by Mael and Ashforth (1992:104), Singer and Hughey (2002:53), and Vidal and Pittz (2018:4) firmly established that a sense of identification with an academic institution plays an important role in alumni engagement. Active alumni participation in scholarships, mentoring, curricula development, research endowments, and the enhancement of campus facilities benefit current and future students (Khanna *et al*., 2019:338). Alumni identification represents potential philanthropic involvement and volunteering, determining how alumni can be indispensable to HEIs (Frisby *et al*., 2019:163). Similarly, Khanna *et al*. (2019:339) reported that alumni's active engagement stemmed from their positive association with belongingness and feelings of gratitude. Many former students indicated the sense of belonging as one of the most satisfying experiences while being a student, according to Khanna *et al*. (2019:342).

3.4.3 Culture and values

Organisational culture in a society or institution is established by focusing on symbols, languages, rituals, myths, beliefs, and the ideology inherent within a specific context. Luvalo (2019), as cited by Makole *et al*. (2023:2021), professed that organisational culture permeates institutional members' beliefs, attitudes, values, and overall performance and effectiveness. Overall, the determinants of organisational culture are complex and multifaceted (Selane & Odeku, 2024:293).

More recently, Makole *et al*. (2023:2021) declared that most TVET colleges in South Africa are characterised by a serious lack of an organisational culture of teamwork, shared ownership, integrity, and accountability, which impedes effective planning and management To improve management efficiency in public TVET colleges in South Africa, the culture of mutual respect, collaboration, and life-long learning should interface with the societal values of Ubuntu – which share strong connections with and the principles of CE – both emphasised the importance of community and collective well-being; the importance of mutual benefits and exchange; respect and empathy, and collective empowerment (Suryatni *et al*., 2023:295). This study examines

whether CE can be added to the equation to enhance alumni loyalty by exploring stakeholders' interest in CE within an alumni context. The culture of mistrust due to the apartheid ideology of racial separation hampered shared work practices, knowledge sharing, learning in diversity, performance improvement, and growth opportunities (Makole *et al*., 2023:2022). In the study, *Organizational culture and management practices at technical and vocational education and training colleges*, Makole *et al*. (2023:2033) revealed that operational managers at different TVET colleges view strategic planning processes as top-down to rubber-stamp decisions already taken at the executive management level, without consulting relevant stakeholders. The study further revealed that operational managers do not work as a team but in silos, which impacts negatively on their abilities to build partnerships, as in the case of Tourism and other departments in Northlink College.

Henceforth, TVET colleges' culture hugely influences management and lecturers' behavioural practices, determining performance quality. As part of African cultures, Ubuntu should be spoken of and implemented in all HEIs so that the new generation of leaders can embrace such practices for academic institutional improvement.

Therefore, TVET colleges should develop a strong and positive culture that aligns with their values and goals – a culture that places a premium on positive relationships in the workplace, prioritises open lines of communication, and encourages employee engagement and participation in decision-making. They should provide relevant, accredited education and training that addresses the skills and developmental needs of their consumers and our country, South Africa. Financial support will be discussed next.

3.4.4 Financial support

"*Colleges have placed little significance on private giving, and alumni relations are often underdeveloped"* (Skari, 2014:24). Amani (2022:6) is of the view that alumni represent the largest untapped pool of prospective donors for HEIs. The future of philanthropic giving lies with current students (Drezner, 2010:2). HEIs must cultivate students and young alumni to become future donors.

Marr *et al*. (2005:124) revealed that the receipt of scholarships or grant awards as an undergraduate also results in the generosity of donating after graduating. The study by Biederman (2022:28) revealed that students receiving a need-based scholarship raises the probability of giving by 12% – indeed, an opportunity for TVET colleges where students receive NSFAS grants. Contrary to this, Monks (2003:129) found that students who used study loans from a financial institution tended to give less because of their personal financial burden.

Skari (2014:14) and Amani (2022:6) comment that HEIs can generate more income if they contact more alumni and improve their attempts to approach them with a funding request. The subsequent section will analyse the intersection of RM, HEIs, and alumni.

3.5 Relationship marketing, higher education institutions and alumni

Marketers understand that relationships matter and realise that relationships are the very essence of almost all businesses. Some time ago, Varey (2002:47) and later on, Kiyak *et al*. (2015:730) commented that a relationship becomes an important attribute of an offer, differentiating one business from another, and this gave rise to an entirely new discipline within marketing, i.e. relationship marketing. Relationship marketing deals with forming long-term relationships, as explained by Theron and Terblanche (2009:384), with stakeholders to be transformed into loyal supporters. This study's stakeholders include students, academic institutions, alumni, and the community. Abubakar and Mokhtar (2015:467) profess that relationship marketing is an appropriate tool for HEIs searching for a way to build long-term loyal stakeholders. While exploring the studies of Kiyak *et al*. (2015:730), Schlesinger *et al.* (2017:2179), and Wong *et al*. (2018:210), it became apparent that HEIs can apply the principles of relationship marketing to their benefit. Wong *et al*. (2018:210) emphasised that stakeholder loyalty is a key factor for a business' survival and success, including HEIs. However, formal research on the driving forces of loyalty in HEIs is scant (Schlesinger *et al*., 2017:2180).

Even though there are similarities between the marketing of products and education services, the special characteristics of education services indicate that marketing education services are about interactions between institutions and students, forming the basis of the relationship-building process. Relationships are first built between students as learners. The academic institution is a source of knowledge, and lastly, they evolve into alumni as contributors to their academic institutions as alma maters (Drezner, 2018:183). The study by Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018:1079) focused on HEIs as service industries operating in a highly competitive education market. Wong *et al*. (2018:210) describe loyal consumers as 'good soldiers*'* who behave favourably towards service businesses, including HEIs, where stakeholders are treated as consumers.

Furthermore, the increasing competition among academic institutions, according to Wu and Lu (2012:279), accentuates the importance of quality as one of the goals to attract and retain students. Several studies, i.e. Rust (2015:41), Drezner (2018:183), and Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018:1079) have begun to examine the relationship quality-based student loyalty models and emphasise the importance of both service – and relationship quality – which can be considered as higher-order constructs containing several distinct, but related dimensions. Recently, the

academic study, *Building bridges in higher education student-faculty relationship quality, student engagement and student loyalty along relationship quality and student loyalty,* by Snijders *et al*. (2020:2), confirmed that a relationship management approach is indeed fruitful for HEIs to focus on building and nurturing the students' and HEI's relationship due to the positive effect on student engagement and loyalty.

The relationship student-loyalty-model of Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018:1079) consists of two components: *Firstly*, service quality in higher education is described as: "*the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery*." Therefore, the implementation of relationship marketing in HEIs requires dedicated staff with a service attitude, a well-kept environment, and service processes (Rust, 2015:41). Secondly, relationship quality – not only do students demand quality education services supplemented by support services, but also an eminent relationship with educators. Researchers incorporate relationship quality to describe how 'strong' or 'healthy' a relationship is, which correlates with service quality (Wu & Lu, 2012:279). As a multi-dimensional construct, relationship quality often comprises trust and commitment (Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 1997:747; Khoa, 2019:196; Salagrama *et al*., 2021:757) where trust refers to students' confidence in the integrity and reliability of HEIs, while commitment refers to the intention of an individual to continue a relationship with an exchange partner. Commitment is a core construct in service literature, as well as in education studies (Wong *et al*., 2018:216; Mbango & Mmatli, 2019:1). The survey of Snijders *et al*. (2020:2) also includes cognitive- and emotional commitment to examine the impact on alumni's loyalty. Salagrama *et al*. (2021:758) furthermore reason that committed students desire to achieve their own goals, which not only influences their engagement in HEI activities but further strengthens their attitudes towards stakeholders.

A large volume of published studies describes the many dimensions of a successful relationship. The studies by Morgan and Hunt (1994:3), Hennig-Thurau *et al*. (1997:740), Heckman and Guskey (1998:102), Theron and Terblanche (2009:383), and Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2179) found three dimensions, specifically trust, commitment and satisfaction, as the most important dimensions when relationships are established and maintained. As mentioned above, these dimensions are essential for enhancing long-term relationships and building regular loyal donors. For the purpose of this study, the management of TVET colleges should develop relationships with students and other stakeholders to become loyal partners who will contribute financially and, most probably, non-financially to create value for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Student loyalty should be interpreted as a multiphase concept that stretches from enrolment through to retirement and beyond (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2008:67). Loyal students, as

explained by Johnson *et al*. (2010:126) and Wu *et al*. (2022:334), are more likely to become active alumni supporting HEIs financially, engaging in WOM promotion, serving as guest speakers or offering work placements (Singer & Hughey, 2002:59). This view is supported by Drezner (2018:184). Still, the latter adds collaboration to these dimensions. Drezner and Anderson-Long (2020:189) further found that there is a relationship between trust, perceived importance of a cause, and giving behaviour as central tenets of relationship marketing where the giving behaviour of alumni coupled with philanthropy strategies matches successfully with the needs of a community. These dimensions above apply to the relationship between students, alumni, and the community.

Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2008:81) found that the strongest correlation with recommending an HEI is through word-of-mouth (WOM). Friends and family members are evoked by emotions at the graduation ceremony rather than those emotions called up by a student's years of study at HEIs. For HEIs, the graduation ceremony provides a last chance to create long-lasting memories and to make a good impression by informing graduates that they have chosen the right academic institution and congratulating them on their academic achievements. Research by Mael and Ashforth (1992:104) and, more recently, Frisby *et al.* (2019:165) established that the higher the emotional attachment with an HEI, the more likely it is that the graduate will engage with that HEI in the future. According to Grier (2005:280) and Salagrama *et al.* (2021:758), emotional attachment is a key driver in determining students' behaviour to be engaged in long-term relationships with their alma mater. Contradictory, as noted by Grier (2005:280) and Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2008:65), students' deficient experiences with HEIs underpin negative memorable messages that impact alumni behaviours and emotional attachments destructively.

The study by Frisby *et al.* (2019:165) further encourages HEIs to create events and activities that foster bonds between HEIs and students to become loyal alumni. In higher education, student satisfaction is positively related to student loyalty (Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*., 2018:1079). The following scholars, Cownie and Gallow (2020:1), Salagrama *et al*. (2021:759), and Chen *et al.* (2022:51), view gratitude, trust, and commitment as fundamental concepts within relational exchanges. Various stakeholders (including alumni) give their time and money as gratitude in exchange for the benefit of the larger society (Drezner, 2018:181). There is a paucity of research on alumni gratitude in the academic literature. However, recent research by Cownie and Gallo (2020:1) and Chen *et al*. (2022:51) reported how experiences of gratitude among alumni influence their active engagement. The latter contended that gratitude helps to sustain mutually beneficial relationships between alumni, HEIs, and students. 'Feelings of gratitude' are explained as a positive emotional response (Salagrama *et al*., 2021:759; Chen *et al*., 2022:51), accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits.

Cownie and Gallo (2020:1) highlighted that when the relationship progresses to a higher level, it is cited as the 'engagement stage'. Engaging consumers is a way to improve a relationship to a higher level of sustainable competitive gain and desired differentiation (Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*., 2018:1079). Students joining personalised programmes tend to be more likely to see themselves engaged in an ongoing relationship with the programme than bigger groups from traditional programmes. This implies that different students cannot be treated as identical. Frisby *et al*. (2019:165) opine that academic-student relationships are key to establishing alumni engagements. Academics should be encouraged and facilitated to enhance and maintain their relationships with students toward alumni status. Students need to be guided through the transition to alumni status. Students need to clearly understand the value of being a member of an alumni association and their lifelong value to academics, HEIs, and future students (Cownie & Gallow, 2020:10). On the contrary, many students from the study by Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018:1079) indicated that they are not grateful beyond the services they received, since they have just given the HEI a great deal of money in the form of tuition. These students' comments are consistent with those reported by Chen *et al*. (2022:51), who describe a student as a relatively passive recipient of what an HEI offers rather than an 'active, engaged, self-directed individual'.

Indeed, tuition fees will undermine the feelings of gratitude towards an academic institution. Academics emerged as a central focus for gratitude. Some of the academics were described in terms of their harmonious understanding, where feelings of personal connection were established, quality of ideas shared, and care and support developed when academics act as personal mentors (Cownie & Gallo, 2020:6). Frisby *et al*. (2019:162) also stated that alumni's recall of '*memorable messages'* from academics indicated that these messages would certainly have an impact on their lifelong alumni engagement. Feelings of gratitude underpin a willingness to give back through alumni engagement activities. In a qualitative study executed by Cownie and Gallo in 2020, a student, Damian, from a UK University, professed:

> *"I think gratitude does have a place in my mind when I think back about my time at … it would definitely influence my decision when giving back to the University for a mentoring program or anything else … I had a really positive experience and would want to give back based on that."*

Alumni can play an important role in developing and ensuring competitiveness in higher education (Pedro *et al*., 2017:130). To unite alumni involvement, marketers need relevant information to develop and hang on to effective relationship marketing strategies. HEIs should realise the value of relationship marketing as a necessary tool to achieve a strong position in the education sector by promoting a way of improving services, becoming more customer-oriented, and reinforcing their image and reputation, as commented by Pedro *et al*. (2017:131). Students are HEIs' most

important customers, which denotes that they should become the main target of all marketing strategies, aspiring to meet their needs and expectations. HEIs have begun to understand the 'value' of their students and are realising the need to be acquainted with whatever motivates alumni to remain in touch (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001:24).

Relationship marketing is fruitful in developing and maintaining long-term relationships between stakeholders, HEIs, students, alumni, and communities. The core principles of relationship marketing, i.e. trust, satisfaction, and commitment, are applicable to foster student engagement and, ultimately, loyal alumni.

Next is a brief overview of social and corporate responsibility.

3.6 Social responsibility

Social responsibility is an ethical model in which individuals must work to benefit the community (Ganti, 2023). Balazs *et al*. (2021:53) reported that social responsibility should not only be the responsibility of non-profit businesses but also that of individuals, local businesses, and public institutions.

Even though it is difficult to separate social responsibility from corporate social responsibility (CSR), social responsibility refers to individuals' awareness of how their decisions affect community members, as opposed to corporate social responsibility, where businesses, in addition to maximising profits and creating shareholder value, have to act in such a manner as to contribute to the welfare of society and the environment (McCloskey *et al*., 2013:3: Mahajan *et al*., 2023:1). CSR refers to a method of conducting business by providing allowances and benefits to employees and stakeholders in order to influence their well-being over the long term (Chang & Lee, 2018:345). Likewise to businesses' CSR, HEIs should also embrace the commitment to such business practices that voluntarily support the well-being of society (Bálázs *et al*., 2021:53). A key principle of corporate social responsibility is voluntary financial and non-financial contributions, which are crucial to increasing competitiveness and even improving brand recognition (Chang & Lee, 2018:345; Bálázs *et al*., 2021:53). This view is supported by Chattu and Yaya (2020:5), who wrote that CSR can be viewed as an effective strategic marketing tool. Additionally, Orcutt *et al*. (2020:11) claim that businesses could use CSR to demonstrate their ethical behaviour and enhance their reputation. The latter also proposes internal CSR initiatives; for example, poverty alleviation through skills development, anti-sexual harassment awareness activities in the workplace, and assistance to low-income employees.

In the study, *Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on environmental awareness, sustainable consumption and social responsibility in Brazil and Portugal,* by Severo *et al.* (2021:3), it is stated that the COVID-19 pandemic did change peoples' behaviour and awareness. Low- and middle-income countries remain vulnerable to pandemics while experiencing dramatic social and economic consequences (Chattu & Yaya, 2020:2). More recently, Severo *et al*. (2021:4) demonstrated the influence of the pandemic on social responsibility where the societies of under-developed countries, such as Brazil, did not influence people's awareness of social responsibility. Citizens of Brazil hold the view that social responsibility is the role of government and educational institutions to pull off donations to care for community members experiencing difficulties (Severo *et al*., 2021:6). As individuals, social responsibility imposes an obligation to work for the benefit of the community. Chattu and Yaya (2020:2) point out that, up to now, moral and ethical issues raised by control policies seem to receive little attention in the economic literature.

More relevant to this study, HEIs should embrace corporate social responsibility (CSR) by voluntarily supporting the well-being of their social micro- and macro-level environments (Purcell *et al*., 2020:2; Bálázs *et al*., 2021:53). Furthermore, TVET colleges provide many different skills programmes such as hospitality, office administration, primary health, and safety in society to train students to engage with their local communities. Students can be cultivated 'to do good' and ultimately, as alumni, liaise with the community as part of corporate social responsibility. The area of community engagement may overlap with the concept of higher education's social responsibility based on the similar or even identical nature of their goals, target audience, and forms of realisation (Bálázs *et al*., 2021:53). The latter, however, profess that there is a fundamental difference between the two terms: HEI social responsibility refers to top-down, transactional activities initiated by HEI authorities concerning certain groups of the local community, whereas community engagement activities are based on equal partnerships and the realisation of mutually beneficial activities (Brunton *et al*., 2017:5). Community engagement (CE) will subsequently be explored in more detail.

3.7 Community engagement

There are many different ways to think about a community, as noted by Brunton *et al*. (2017:5). Besides geographical boundaries, a community may also be described by social or economic characteristics, interests, values or traditions (Doberneck *et al*., 2011:1; Drezner & Huehls, 2015:4; Brunton *et al.,* 2017:5). In a recent case study, three leading Ghanaian tertiary institutions found that HEIs engage with local communities to identify, collaborate and solve local problems (Gymera, 2018:939). As the latter commented, local people are the genuine experts concerning difficulties in their communities.

Why community engagement? Local people and community groups in neighbourhoods experience multiple forms of deprivation (McDougle *et al*., 2016:6; Brunton *et al.,* 2017:10; Habib *et al*., 2021:699) and are often socially excluded alongside low levels of social capabilities. These factors can create problems, namely low social esteem among individuals, deprived households and communities, little sense of community cohesion, and barely evidence of any community infrastructure to foster their future. If unaddressed, these difficulties can lead to more visible forms of social discomfort and possibly higher levels of crime and disorder (Russell, 2008:7; Brown *et al*., 2017:10). Brown *et al*. (2017:7) add a further challenge, namely low education, which poses a favourable opportunity for alumni to get involved. One of the goals of community engagement is to tackle various difficulties.

Community engagement is described as "*the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people"* (Russell, 2008:11). In the same vein, from the health industry's perspective, the USA's Center for Disease Control and Prevention, as stated by McCloskey *et al.* (2013:3), described community engagement as "*the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people."* Purcell *et al*. (2020:3) portray community engagement as a "*process of building long-term relationships with community members who will work side-by-side with stakeholders as ongoing partners."* Similarly, McCloskey *et al*. (2013:7) believe that the act of engagement is similar to an act of relationship building while linking arms with raising awareness and visibility. Gottlieb (2006:2) contends that his data supports the view of Brunton *et al.* (2017:5*), who wrote that community engagement mostly evolves into long-term partnerships that address one of the objectives of this research study – to understand stakeholder behaviour* towards relationship marketing and the link with the community. As mentioned above, many scholars opine that community engagement suffers from many inconsistent and partially conflicting definitions (Brunton *et al*., 2017:11). However, it is important to remember that the long-term benefits of community engagement, such as the establishment of enduring partnerships and the enhancement of stakeholder relationships, are worth the strategic planning and foresight required to navigate its complexities.

More relevant to this study is the application of community engagement in higher education. Higher education community engagement is described as the collaboration between HEIs and communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources within the context of a partnership (Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*., 2018:1077) and, in return, enhancing the work of the HEI (Purcell *et al*., 2020:9). In South Africa, the core business of HEIs is to fulfil three functions,

namely teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, also named the three pillars of education, as stated by Shabalala and Ngcwangu (2021:24) and Habib *et al*. (2021:681). In previous studies on the aforementioned functions, Tapia (2010:24) already advocated that service learning, as a critical fourth pillar, must be added to the key application areas in the higher education community. The United Nations Development Program (Habib *et al*., 2021:682; Shabalala & Ngcwangu, 2021:25) supports ending poverty and other deprivations with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and stimulate economic growth. The South African higher education system has struggled with implementing these ambitions for over a decade. The White Paper for Post-school Education and Training (2013) affirmed that community engagement in its various forms, more specifically in formal learning programmes, should engage students in community work as part of academic programmes. This mentioned paper recommends that HEIs ought to adopt a more comprehensive model with community engagement embedded in academic programmes and research forming part of the core mission of HEIs. McDougle *et al*. (2016:8) and Hafsah (2017:82) have begun examining service-learning principles to prepare students to become civically engaged citizens who will ultimately be motivated to get involved in their communities. Indeed, the *Model of Community Engagement: Learning Empowerment through Public-Student Engagement* refers to a model that fosters community engagement and empowerment through collaborative learning between public communities and students. The mentioned model is an ideal model for HEIs to adopt, empowering students to actively engage in community-based learning, research, and service.

McDougle *et al.* (2016:6) assert that some HEIs in the United States have begun investing resources into an innovative new pedagogy known as experiential philanthropy – which is considered to be a form of service-learning that integrates academic learning with explicit hands-on philanthropic practice. Purcell *et al*. (2020:9) described experiential philanthropy as a "*teaching and learning approach that integrates charitable giving with academic study*." Likewise, in the United States, South African scholars Saidi and Boti (2023:75) have also made significant contributions to this field. Globally, academic institutions are called upon to take on social responsibility as one reason for their being. Since this is an addition to the standing dual university core activities of creating and imparting knowledge, it is called the 'third mission' concept. In South Africa, the 'third mission' concept is often seen as synonymous with community engagement (Saidi & Boti, 2023:77). These mentioned scholars indicated that service-learning activities not only develop students' cognitive abilities but also establish students' understanding and perception of social issues and enhance their knowledge of social issues. Experiential philanthropy is specifically designed to introduce students to the practice of philanthropy and to persist in being philanthropic throughout their lives (McDougle *et al.,* 2016:8). Furthermore, the

findings of McDougle *et al*. (2016:4) demonstrated that students who participated in a course with an experiential philanthropy component were far more aware of social problems and the existence of nonprofit businesses. Some HEIs (including Northlink College) that enrol many public administration students were found to be less likely to gain from service-learning than students from other disciplines, for these students, at their very core, already embrace the idea of community engagement.

Shabalala and Ngcwangu (2021:25) analysed data from a sample of nearly 1 000 students who participated in an experiential philanthropy course and found that the majority of the students believed that the course made them more aware of social problems and charitable organisations and increased their sense of responsibility to help others. Deplorably, data from Hafsah (2017:82) identified that students were significantly less likely to stay in college after participating in an experiential philanthropy class. This could indicate that courses including an experiential philanthropy component may be more demanding than courses without one. Despite the increasing interest in experiential philanthropy, there has been scant empirical evidence concerning the efficacy of this pedagogy. Hafsah (2017:82) purposively suggests that HEIs should place experiential philanthropy to 'strategically' allow students to see how they can make a meaningful difference in their communities.

Relevant to the academic contribution of this study, Campbell and Lavallee (2020:41) boldly state that one of the most notable outcomes of HEIs should be how graduates can apply their knowledge from their education to advance their societies. The latter is of the view that alumni's knowledge, skills, and competence will designate them in a favourable position to help and support members of their communities (Purcell *et al*., 2020:2). Similarly, Hafsah (2017:82) also asserts that individuals are more likely to be of assistance in those areas in which they are personally involved. For a person competent in a field where assistance is requested, the cost of prosocial behaviour is lower than for less competent people who do not possess the skills to intervene (Rad *et al*., 2020:139). Students need to be tutored in the classroom on how they can make a meaningful difference in their community and nonprofit businesses. Over the past decade, Clary and Snyder (1999:158) have found that by engaging HEI students with opportunities to become skilled at and participate in community services, it is now well established by Drezner and Huehls (2015:86) that a cohort of engaged alumni is dedicated to the future service to respective HEIs.

On the other side, Doberneck *et al*. (2011:1) prompt that, empirically, very little research has been conducted to differentiate between ways in which HEIs collaborate with community partners. Gottlieb (2006:2) claims that community engagement is different from marketing in one key way

– community engagement involves an exchange as opposed to the discipline of marketing, as the marketing process itself is the art of telling with the goal of selling. The result of community engagement is – everything! Community engagement builds the community just by the simple act of joining in. However, building relationships between HEIs and prospective donors is arguably the most important aspect of the successful appeal to fundraising (Drezner, 2010:4).

The prosocial behaviour theory suggests that individuals are motivated to engage in behaviours that benefit others and the communities. HEIs that facilitate community engagement can foster prosocial behaviours grounded in helping, protecting, supporting, and developing fellow human beings.

A brief analysis of stakeholders' interests and perceptions of community engagement follows.

3.7.1 Stakeholders' interest in community engagement

New perspectives on education have emerged in the past few years. HEIs have greater access to more people, and the rapid development of technology has increased the opportunity for HEIs to be more involved in their communities (Stocker & Boaventura, 2020:303). Stakeholders are unique sources of information and can provide any business with a wide variety of information that can be combined to create value (Stocker & Boaventura, 2020:300) and generate multiple benefits (Mahajna *et al*., 2023:1) for the parties involved. Furthermore, stakeholders can contribute their knowledge, skills, and experience to increase the exchange of ideas and reduce the likelihood of dissatisfaction (Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*., 2018:1077).

The question remains: What drives these stakeholders to engage with their communities?

Leadership in TVET colleges, comprising the CEO and executives, plays a vital role in initiating and driving community engagement initiatives within the college. Their leadership and commitment are crucial when setting the vision and strategy (Chattu & Yaya, 2020:5) for community engagement. The relationship between TVET colleges and HEIs is important, and TVETs must implement CE as a core function. The culture and values must be clear, communicated, and put into practice. Furthermore, management must allocate resources and budgets to support community activities and encourage and empower staff and students to participate. Orcutt *et al*. (2020:11) claim that businesses, including HEIs, could use CSR to demonstrate their ethical behaviour and enhance their reputation and brand.

Academic institution staff can be motivated to get involved in CE as they can experience job satisfaction and see a clear purpose for engagement. Many staff members might have a drive to

impact society, which underlines their values positively. By being involved, staff members will be blessed with recognition and appreciation.

Students can be motivated to get involved as they can apply theory with practical experience in real-world situations. Service learning allows them to enjoy and be rewarded for participating in community activities, developing their soft skills, and receiving guidance and mentorship from industry professionals. Involving students in community activities allows them to see how they make a meaningful difference.

Chapter 3 comprehensively addresses the topic of alumni. For alumni, lifelong learning is a principle that emphasises that learning is an ongoing, dynamic, and deeply personal process that extends far beyond traditional educational settings. Alumni are driven to contribute through a desire to enhance their reputation, nostalgia, and sentimental value while leaving a legacy.

A community typically wants to engage with stakeholders to share common goals, particularly economic growth, education, and social welfare, to be included in decision-making concerning the welfare of the community, and to address needs, problems, and concerns (McDougle *et al*., 2016:6; Lebakeng, 2018:i). Community-based education has emerged as an instructional approach that attempts to join together academic learning with community engagement, known as service learning (Bryer 2014, as commented by McDougle *et al*., 2016:67). Motivated by a belief that all communities have fundamental educational assets that educators can use to enhance the learning process, community-based education provides students the opportunity to acquire a broader set of knowledge and skills. Lebakeng (2018:ii) indicated that community engagement allows community leaders to influence the curricula and programmes to meet the community's needs.

In summary, several key principles can be shared among stakeholders, motivating them to engage with their communities:

- To contribute to the well-being of all (SR)
- To establish a culture of giving back
- To work together to achieve common goals
- To build long-term relationships and partnerships
- To enhance skills and expertise

- To develop networking opportunities
- To share values

3.7.2 Stakeholders perceptions towards community engagement

Management perceives CE as enhancing the TVET college's reputation and credibility. Management is optimistic that students will have the opportunity to gain practical skills and experience, which is vital to prepare them for job readiness. CE promotes social responsibility and contributes to addressing local economic and social needs. Management also perceives negative perceptions, such as CE is time-consuming and takes away from core academic activities. Furthermore, CE requires significant resources and funding, which involve risks and liabilities. Staff (academic and non-academic) perceive CE as enriching teaching and learning experiences and can provide opportunities for staff to engage in research and innovation.

Staff also have negative perceptions toward CE as they already experience heavy workloads. Sadly, CE is not recognised in performance evaluations. Academic staff find it ambitious to integrate CE into curricula as it can be challenging for lecturers to complete the curriculum when faced with heavy administrative tasks and student absenteeism.

Students perceive CE as positive as it provides practical experiences to enhance employability. A student clearly expressed that Northlink College must give her a job. Many interviewers were concerned about the need for soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, that students perceive that CE might expose them to. When students can be *au fait* with the industry environment, CE provides them with entrepreneurial opportunities and innovations. The subject of entrepreneurship provides students with hands-on experiences in starting and running a business, covering various functions and aspects of entrepreneurship. For worried students already suffering from heavy workloads, CE can be perceived as distracting from core academic responsibilities. Many students see CE as an add-on rather than an integral part of education.

Alumni experience CE as valuable networking opportunities to understand industry and community needs. CE assists in staying connected with the college and community to give back. Moreover, CE did not provide sufficient benefits, namely career advancement, social connections, mentorship opportunities, lifelong learning, personal fulfilment, and recognition.

Community members may perceive engagement from stakeholders in various ways, depending on their individual experiences, expectations, and needs. They may see a TVET college as a trusted partner, collaborating to address local needs and challenges. They may recognise the college's contribution to local economic growth through workforce development and

entrepreneurship. Moreover, they may view the college as a responsible corporate role player engaging in activities that benefit the community. There are also negative perceptions, particularly a lack of awareness that they may be unaware of the college's activities. They might believe the college primarily serves its interest, with limited benefits for the broader community. Moreover, community members might experience stakeholders looking down upon those perceived as inferior to their elite circle.

Management and staff see CE as a way to achieve institutional goals and increase brand identity. At the same time, students view CE as a very positive way to gain practical experience and skills. Alumni are in a favoured position to give back to their alma mater and the community. Community members see CE as a partnership and look forward to a relationship to address local needs, economic growth, and fostering social responsibility. Community members may perceive the college as elitist if CE efforts are not responsive to community needs.

The next section assesses individuals' state of mind about helping others.

3.7.3 Attitude towards helping others

In modest terms, a helping attitude (also referred to as altruism) is a concern for the well-being of other people (Hafsah, 2017:82; Riantiarno *et al*., 2020:346). The concept of altruism exists when a donor disregards his/her self-interest to lend a hand to others, entailing unselfishness (Drezner & Huehls, 2015:2; Hafsah, 2017:82). Other scholars, specifically Zboja *et al*. (2020:493), found that donors see themselves in the 'needs and aspirations of others', which infers that when donors identify with a cause, this identification can possibly trigger their motivation to give. Drezner and Huehls (2015:83) argue that young adult volunteerism has increased over the past few decades due to increased community service requirements by HEIs. In the same vein, Brunton *et al*. (2017:6) and Riantiarno *et al*. (2020:346) opine that developmental and moral reasoning can evolve regarding helping others as a person ages.

COVID-19 profoundly changed many people's lives – some distanced themselves and deviated from social norms and values. In contrast, others were placed on the opposite spectrum of this behaviour by strengthening their social norms and values. On the contrary, the latter not only protects but also strengthens social norms and values and develops prosocial behaviour (volunteering actions), representing psychosociology's object (Rad *et al*., 2020:137). Emerging adults (in this case referred to as students) are at a unique point in their lives, characterised by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations (Arnett, 2007:69; Hafsah, 2017:82). Data from several sources (Arnett, 2007:69; Drezner & Huehls, 2015:83 & Hafsah, 2017:82) indicates that as emerging adolescents move into adulthood, many psychological

dimensions, such as prosocial behaviours, become more prominent and will present an opportunity for lecturers, mentors, and students to embed principles such as volunteering and doing good to others.

An integrated approach to students and support during emerging adulthood could increase retention rates dramatically and deliver far more value to students to become conscious that helping others means helping yourself (Arnett, 2007:69). The pro-social behaviour theory (PSBT), as described by the Polish sociologist Lanusz Reykowski (Drezner & Huehls, 2015:2; Hafsah, 2017:82), proposes that social behaviour is oriented towards helping, protecting, supporting and developing others, without expecting any reward. Rad *et al*. (2020:138) point out that prosocial behaviour should not be confused with altruism, which is only the former. Helping behaviour has been studied extensively in the social psychology literature (Piliavian & Charng, 1990:28). Drezner contends that many individuals engage in prosocial behaviour out of a want to help others, referred to as the concept of altruism. Therefore, increasing students' necessary skills increases their prosocial behaviour frequency. Drezner (2008:3) and Rad *et al*. (2020:140) agree that a culture of giving, teaching students the importance of philanthropy, and the skills to raise funds will encourage greater prosocial behaviour among students. Drezner (2010:128) is convinced that prosocial behaviour can be realised through direct reinforcement, observation, and discussions. Therefore, giving to one's alma mater can be taught. Students need to understand that fundraising and relationship building are long-term processes (Shaker & Nathan, 2017:4; Purcell *et al*., 2020:3). Farley (2016:176), Shaker and Nathan (2017:8) and Rad *et al*. (2020:140) propose that the training and development of helping behaviour is a chance to influence students and alumni to help others, building relationships, raising their level of personal happiness, and even enhancing positive self-esteem (Hafsah, 2017:82).

HEIs often lobby alumni for donations using extrinsic and intrinsic benefits as motivation. *Extrinsic* benefits may include small gifts, invitations to campus activities, membership in giving societies, a listing of names in widely read annual reports, and increasing their alumni's reputation and, therefore, the value of their qualification (Drezner, 2010:130). *Intrinsic* motivations may include alumni giving scholarships to help others to attend an HEI. Within a philanthropic and volunteerism context, mutual benefit is when the donor obtains either some form of intrinsic or extrinsic value from their actions to assist others, while the other party benefits as well, either in time or wealth benefits (Newman & Petrosko 2011:742; Drezner & Huehls, 2015:2; Brunton *et al*., 2017:6). By developing a more reciprocal relationship, scholars take note of the significance of relationship marketing as well as the potential for long-term and boundless intensity in relationships, as per Hunt and Morgan (1994:4).

Within the context of philanthropic giving, more enduring relationships give rise to greater participation in fundraising (Brunton *et al*., 2017:6). Commenting on Drezner and Huehls (2015:2), Zboja *et al*. (2020:495) debate that volunteers are people who carry out services without gaining any compensation. Volunteers often point out that they do not do anything special other than being with someone else as a friend, which they describe as a relationship (Brunton *et al*., 2017:6). Clary and Snyder (1999:158) and Riantiarno *et al*. (2020:346) believe that volunteers are motivated by a combination of altruism, individuals' responsibility to help others, doing something good to others and personal growth. The scholars mentioned above and Drezner and Huehls (2015:2) further state that people's motivations for volunteering are diverse, complex, and likely multifaceted. McCloskey *et al*. (2013:3) claim that many volunteers feel appreciated and even view volunteering as happiness.

To augment, Drezner (2010:2) categorises an exchange relationship between an individual and a nonprofit, including HEIs, as a social exchange. The social exchange theory (SET) assumes that individuals' desire to get involved to assist others is exclusively based on the counter-offer of personal economic benefits. More applicable to this case study, applying SET, alumni, and CE initiatives can foster a mutually beneficial partnership that fosters community engagement, leadership development, and networking opportunities while achieving their respective goals and objectives. Furthermore, Drezner (2010:4) explored the business identity theories to explain the cultivation and relationships necessary for successful engagement from alumni. The business identity theory transpires when an individual defines himself or herself with a business, in this case: 'I am a student at Northlink College'. Mael and Ashforth (1992:105) predict that alumni identification with their alma mater matches participating in fundraising campaigns and alumni social events, encouraging others to attend the academic institution following the organisation identification theory. Mael and Ashforth (1992:105) further identified particular individual characteristics, namely time spent at HEIs, the existence of a mentor, and overall satisfaction that may affect a person's business identity. Drezner and Garvey (2016:526) refer to the 'bond to alma mater' that has to be developed and enhanced by stimulating the interest and participation of students enrolled at academic institutions. Drezner (2010:3) used the social exchange theory to explain the interdependent relationship between donor and alma mater. Relationships are the key to fundraising (Skari, 2014:26; Shaker & Nathan 2017:2). Therefore, the relationship marketing theory, the social exchange theory, and the pro-social behaviour theory are often experienced as conceptual foundations for understanding fundraising and philanthropic giving (Cropanzano & Mitchel, 2005:874; Skari, 2014:26).

Affective communication may further lead to a comprehensive understanding of others' suffering, which nourishes feelings of sympathy and compassion without judgement (Drezner, 2010:137).

Riantiarno *et al*. (2020:349) contend that their data supports Rad *et al*.'s (2020:137), who demonstrated that students could be taught to communicate in different situations to relate more easily with others, engage in altruistic behaviours to be kind, do good, being compassionate and even develop feelings of gratitude. Effective communication is necessary to develop close rapport with donors through effective face-to-face interaction (Webb Farley, 2016:176). Communication is vital for alumni interested in how their donations will be used for the benefit of the HEIs.

Many theories suggest that through instilling a culture of giving, which can be tutored, HEIs can establish relationships that can continue well after graduation. There are many different reasons why alumni contribute not only by donations but also by using their time to invest in students to give back to HEIs out of gratitude, to help students out of pride to be associated with an HEI, and to have a deeper understanding of the needs of their alma mater. Following is a concise discussion of the attitudes towards charitable businesses.

3.7.4 Attitude towards charitable businesses

Charitable businesses play a key role in society, representing an important element in the economy and development of countries (Da Silva *et al*., 2020:354). Charitable businesses exist to support and raise funds for many different reasons (Sanchez, 2021:542). With the expansion of these charitable businesses, there has been an increase in disputes over resources. Fundraising became a more challenging task, leading non-profit businesses to become conscious of employing marketing practices such as brand orientation to influence fundraising. Donors make donations to support social causes related to education, poverty, health, shelter, malnutrition, human behaviour, and many more (Graca & Zwick, 2020:1; Rasel & Hassan, 2020:98). Additionally, donations can be made in the form of investing time (Chetioui *et al*., 2020:1), providing clothes, food, and medication, but preferably in cash because it gives the non-profit businesses much more 'freedom' (Rasel & Hassan, 2020:100). Some of these charitable businesses are funded by governments, but the rest depend on the generosity of the common community (Rasel & Hassan, 2020:98; Sanchez, 2021:542).

From a cultural perspective, Chetioui *et al*. (2020:2) stated that giving to charitable businesses has great importance and value within the Moroccan community. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were illustrations of Muslim communities fundraising to offset the considerable socio-economic consequences, especially for vulnerable populations (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011:337). Similarly, Graca and Zwick (2020:1) contend that nonprofits worldwide must cultivate a donor base that values a relationship with a charitable business beyond one-time transactions as an alternative, building long-term relationships. Relationship marketing is a sustainable strategy even for nonprofit organisations to foster a long-term bond with donors (Drezner,

2010:139). Some time ago, Morgan and Hunt (1994:7) demonstrated that long-term relationships (as discussed in Chapter 2) are based on trust, commitment, and satisfaction, which endorse the aim of this research study: to foster alumni loyalty. Nonprofit businesses are facing abundant competition, and therefore, seeking strategies that can contribute to building long-term relationships with younger donors to enhance donor loyalty is critical (da Silva *et al*., 2020:354). Consequently, donor retention is all about building relationships and the acknowledgement of the lifetime value of donors (Sargeant *et al.,* 2006:156*).*

The importance of the application of the principles of relationship marketing continues to increase charitable giving, particularly millennial donors' perceived value has become increasingly critical (Graca & Zwick, 2020:1). Millennials, also known as Generation Y, were born between 1981 and 2000 and data from several studies, such as that of Sargeant *et al*. (2006:156*),* Bekkers and Wiepking (2011:337) and Graca and Zwick (2020:1), explored the personality traits and morals of millennials to demonstrate how and if they differ from previous generations. Graca and Zwick (2020:3) describe millennials as 'Generation Me*'* and contend that they are primarily concerned with and motivated by extrinsic factors such as money, fame, and image that enhance their social status. Graca and Zwick (2020:3) are convinced that 'Generation Me' is selfish and even narcissistic. These findings point out that their involvement in charitable organisations is partially used to enhance their image in the eyes of others. Contrasting to Twenge (2006), research by Arnett (2007:70) established that millennials indeed possess values and attitudes, which the latter described as 'Generation We', an exceptionally generous generation that holds great promise for making the world a better place. For that reason, Arnette's view of 'Generation We' engaging in charitable work is motivated by intrinsic factors and seeking to help others in an altruistic manner. Perceived value relates to the satisfaction donors experience from their relationships and involvement with charitable organisations. Donors' perceived value from their involvement with charitable organisations answers the following question: 'What is in it for me?' which is essential for building a long-term relationship (Graca & Zwick, 2020:3).

In today's changing world, charitable organisations are to keep up with the pace of society. Currently, technology dominates society, such as smartphones, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc., searching for consumers to post messages in exchange for money (Rassel & Hassan, 2020:101). This view is supported by Graca and Zwick (2020:1), who write that the impact of technology has a considerable influence on millennial donors and volunteers in shaping their identity. As such, millennials prefer to engage through social media. As people spend more time online, charitable organisations should incorporate these latest trends into their marketing plans.

The younger generation contends for intrinsic and extrinsic factors that may influence their motivation to help others and charitable businesses in an altruistic manner. Following are several motivating factors, according to Graca and Zwick (2020:1), which influence donations to charitable organisations:

- **Tax benefits** motivate giving among upper-income groups, as giving money to charitable organisations can lower taxes (Sanchez, 2021:542).

- **Functional and social benefits** are benefits donors receive that can help them advance their careers, such as experience and skills (functional) or enjoying socialisation with others (social). From a functional perspective, charitable involvement is expected by employers and is a way to network with new business contacts. It can even appear good for those seeking promotion or recognition (Da Silva *et al*., 2020:354). Social aspects include interacting with others and discussing the perceived value of charitable involvement.

- **Social recognition:** Chetioui *et al*. (2020:1) detected that social norms and pressure influence charity involvement. If society's norms encourage involvement with charitable giving, individuals will be more likely to give, demonstrating that norms play an important role in the donor's behaviour. Kasri (2013:307) conducted a study, *Giving behavior in Indonesia: Motives and marketing implications for Islamic charities,* and determined that individuals concerned with their social appearance will donate to those charitable organisations that they believe will improve their current social status. Donors are motivated by recognition from their peers, family, friends, and the organisation. Social recognition is the most important factor in motivating others to help others.

- **Guilt mitigation:** Guilt is a well-documented motivational factor that enhances prosocial behaviour (Piliavin *et al*., 1990:29). Existential guilt stems from living a certain way while being aware others are disadvantaged. Results from a study conducted by Chetioui *et al*. (2020:6) indicated that past behaviour, subjective norms, attitude toward giving, and the intention to donate are key antecedents of giving in a Muslim country. These results also suggest a significant impact of Islamic religiosity on individuals' behaviour, such as a favourable attitude towards giving. Islam urges believers to balance their benefits and responsibility toward society (Chetioui *et al*., 2020:6).

- **Attitude towards and trust in charitable organisations:** Donor trust is related to the evaluation concerning nonprofits helping others. These donors' trust is also related to how well they think a charitable organisation spends its resources. Transparency is vital because donors are motivated to trust an organisation only if they can fully understand it and have

proof that it is reliable (Hlefana *et al*., 2019:8). In the same vein, Sanchez (2021:545) indicated that to avoid people not trusting the donation was granted to a particular organisation, an email address was sent to donors to confirm the donation was received.

- **Attitude towards helping others:** Theoretically, when individuals believe that helping the less fortunate is the right thing to do, they will more likely support those organisations to increase the welfare of others.

- **Communication:** Nonprofits should focus on communication that demonstrates to donors that their money and time are being effectively utilised to improve the lives of the needy. Using statistical results and specific examples illustrating how the nonprofit organisation makes a difference in society is essential (Kiyak *et al*., 2015:76).

Lapsed donors are a first-order concern for organisations that depend heavily on private donations (Jackson, 2015:920). Since these individuals know nonprofit organisations' needs, efforts to reactivate lapsed donors may be more fruitful than those to obtain new donors.

Stakeholders of TVET colleges share a strong interest in CE to achieve common goals. As Robert Ingersoll puts it, "*We rise by lifting others*".

Overall, there is an overwhelmingly positive sentiment among TVET stakeholders who perceive CE as highly valuable.

3.8 Summary

This chapter describes the higher education landscape and other aspects, including the latest industry trends that will persuade HEIs to adapt curriculums to stay abreast of competition. It also explores a brief overview of the history, mission, vision, and values of TVET colleges, particularly Northlink College. TVET colleges offer many 'vital' courses to ensure the achievement of the skills and training needed to be essential to the South African economy.

Loyal alumni are indispensable for any HEI, including TVET colleges, to support their alma mater by donating their time and monetary contributions. HEIs employ engagement strategies, such as newsletters, reunions, and social media platforms, to build and maintain relationships with alumni. Furthermore, the different roles accomplished by alumni were discussed. Branding as a management tool was explored more to determine its influence on education.

Various studies have indicated that academic institutions engage with local communities to identify, collaborate, and solve local problems. Much of the current literature on community

engagement pays particular attention to this. It links up with the principles of relationship marketing, which entails long-term relationships based on trust, commitment, and satisfaction, working collaboratively towards common goals. Lastly, a brief overview of an attitude toward helping others and charitable organisations was discussed.

The ensuing chapter focuses on the research methods and elaborates on the research methodology by describing how it was used for this study.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The literature presented in the previous chapters offers an in-depth review of the research topic, which is focused on the relationship marketing model within the context of the different stakeholders (students, alumni, marketing, and management teams) of Northlink College. It was discovered that shared values, the college's identity, students' experiences, financial support, and proposed community engagement influence the loyalty of alumni. The in-depth literature exploration also led to the construction of the conceptual model that guided this study, along with the hypothesised relationships between the different variables.

The focus of this chapter is on addressing the research method and the necessary steps embraced to collect data required to attain the research objectives. This chapter commences with a concise description of what the marketing research process entails, the importance of researchers' beliefs and values to provide worthy arguments for obtaining reliable results, and how research philosophies portray the bigger picture. Furthermore, the research approaches, research strategies, research methods, and methodology are scrutinised. This is followed by the data collection processes for the qualitative and quantitative components. Finally, triangulation and the ethical concepts that guided the research process are delineated. The exposition of marketing research subsequently follows.

4.2 Marketing research

Marketing research is generally described as decisions that pose unique needs for information on a phenomenon gathered through marketing research and the relevant strategies to be developed based on the information gathered (Aaker *et al*., 2004:5; Karimjanova & Soliyeva, 2022:220). Similarly, contemporary scholars such as Lankova *et al*. (2018:170), Alturki (2021:2), and Karimjanovan and Soliyeva (2022:220) describe marketing research as the pursuit of knowledge to establish innovative facts, solving existing problems, discovering new ideas, or developing new theories employing various objective methods, and procedures done employing any methodical investigation. Much of current literature on the description of marketing research pays particular attention to information, the use of intelligence systems, systematic analysis of collected material, theoretical and practical conclusions and lastly, forecasts (Karimjanovan & Soliyeva, 2022:220). As the scholars mentioned, statistical and marketing observation methodologies include sampling, sales, surveys, and expert evaluations.

Table 4.1 provides a synopsis of the description of marketing research according to various scholars.

Table 4 1: Description of marketing research

Author	Description
Peter & Donnelly (2008)	"Procedure by which information about marketing environment is generated, analysed and interpreted to implement in marketing decision-making procedure."
McDaniel & Gates (2010)	"Planning, collection and analysis of data relevant to marketing decision-making and communication of results of this analysis to management."
Meylivey et al. (2022)	"Association with the concept of information intelligence systems."
Rashidovn (2022)	"Systematic collection analysis information carried to management to reduce the uncertainty associated with marketing decisions."

Following is a synthesised description of marketing research based on the variations above:

> *Marketing research is the systematic collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of data through the use of accurate scientific methods to assist marketers with the decision-making process*.

Subsequently, the importance of marketing research is examined.

4.2.1 Importance of marketing research

Marketers must employ opportunities to address marketing difficulties while diminishing risk to survive in today's competitive marketplace (Wiid & Diggines, 2009:32; Karimjanova & Soliyeva, 2022:220). Therefore, marketing managers need timely, reliable, and useful information regarding the marketing environment to be able to make informed decisions (Peter & Donnelly, 2008:28). Marketing research allows researchers to test and assess marketing concepts that can offer a competitive advantage in an unstable marketplace (Irshaidat, 2019:129) and this includes academic institutions. A variety of information can be obtained and analysed to assist in the decision-making process where information from stakeholders can be obtained to determine what the latter perceive as important to establish consumers' satisfaction and loyalty (Newman & Petrosko, 2011:738; Abubakar & Mokhtar, 2015:466; Rust, 2015:37).

4.2.2 Marketing research process

A well-premeditated research process is essential, as emphasised by Sahay (2016) and Karimjanova and Soliyeva (2022:221), as it outlines the steps that need to be undertaken to ensure that the research aim and objectives are achieved. This study aimed to gather information to develop a proposed model that can be used by the management of TVET colleges to establish

active alumni associations to the benefit of all partners involved. As stated in section 1.5, the research objectives of this study include the examination of the perceptions of stakeholders in terms of efforts to attract, maintain, and enhance ongoing relationships with alumni and to determine the key components constituting a loyal relationship with different stakeholders. More so, this study strived to understand stakeholders' behaviour towards the application of the principles that constitute relationship marketing and the link with community engagement activities. The succeeding section explores the different steps in the research process.

Table 4.2 presents an outline of the marketing research process proposed by scholars and referred to in order to determine the most suitable for this study.

Table 4.2: Steps in the research process

Malhotra *et al.* (1996)	**Saunders *et al*. (2007)**	**McDaniel & Gates (2010)**	**Quinlan (2011)**	**Creswell *et al*. (2016)**	**Van Heerden *et al*. (2021)**
1. Problem definition 2. Approach 3. Research design 4. Fieldwork 5. Data analysis 6. Report presentation	1. Philosophies 2. Approaches 3. Strategies 4. Choices 5. Time 6. Techniques & procedures	1. Identify problem 2. Research design 3. Data collection method 4. Implement method 5. Analyse data 6. Present results & implications	1. Idea 2. Research question 3. Aim & objectives 4. Literature review 5. Select methodology 6. Devise data 7. Gather data 8. Analyse data 9. Draw conclusions 10. Write-up report	1. Philosophies 2. Research design 3. Mixed method 4. Research instruments 5. Research population 6. Data analysis 7. Reliability 8. Ethical considerations	1. Research problem 2. Theory development 3. Research design 4. Analysis 5. Reporting

Derived from the descriptions listed in Table 4.2, it is apparent that the marketing research process entails several steps. Some researchers divide the marketing research process into more detailed sections, while other scholars provide mainly a broad outline of the major steps. The research process of Creswell *et al*. (2016) was adopted and adjusted for this study as it is similar to one of the most common, comprehensive, and multidisciplinary applications, as presented by Saunders *et al*. (2019:130), known as the research onion. The research onion's six major layers match favourably with the steps of the research process indicated by Creswell *et al.* (2016) to obtain the primary objective of a study.

The research onion does not aim to become the 'one and only' approach for developing the research design – on the contrary, it aims to use existing methodologies and approaches already developed to serve as a guide for future studies (Melnikovas, 2018:29). Moreover, Melnikovas

(2018:29) recently proposed a new layer called, 'approaches for future research', which could be logically included into the original model. The layers of the research onion will be examined in more detail further in this chapter.

Before the execution of research, a researcher has to contemplate underlying assumptions, namely: ontology, epistemology, and axiology to distinguish between different research philosophies – positivism, realism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism (Sahay, 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2019:133; Alturki, 2021:2; Nha, 2021:2), which ultimately affect the research methodology (Sutrisna, 2009; Alturki, 2021:2; Jaksic *et al*., 2021:1). The term research philosophy, according to Saunders *et al*. (2019:133), refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge. For the purpose of this study, ontology, epistemology and axiology will be referred to as philosophical assumptions. Furthermore, each philosophy has differences in terms of its ontology, epistemology, and axiology assumptions. Following is a concise overview of the three mentioned assumptions.

- **Ontology**: O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015:55), Sahay (2016) and Saunders *et al*. (2019:133) describe the term ontology as the study of being, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up, and how these units interact with each other (Sutrisna, 2009). This assumption holds that the nature of reality can be observed and measured – and therefore be known – and that a researcher has to discover the laws that govern reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:108; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:23; Gunbayi, 2020:39). O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015:55) and Nha (2021:2) contend that in academic research, stating the ontological position is crucial since this sets out the basis on which a researcher views reality. Regarding a research study, it is important to realise how a researcher perceives reality. A researcher's perception of reality is how knowledge is gained and how to act within it (Guba & Lincoln, 1998:200; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015:52; Saunders *et al*. 2019:133). However, the continuing intellectual debate on what constitutes reality and how it ought to be discovered has resulted in research paradigm wars (Moller & Halinen, 2022:289).

- **Epistemology** is made up of two Greek words 'episteme*',* which means knowledge, and 'logos', which means clear and logical connections between ideas, which include the use of statistics (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:23; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015:58; Gunbayi, 2020:39). Epistemology concerns how scholars obtain valid knowledge (Antwi & Hamza, 2015:219; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015:58; Saunders *et al*., 2019:133). Therefore, epistemology is regarded as the study of knowledge and it is pivotal for researchers to find evidence to either support or reject their hypotheses (Sutrisna, 2009; Creswell, 2014:35). All

research is about knowledge, and each research study is expected to contribute to the body of existing knowledge.

- **Axiology** is also made up of two Greek words, i.e. 'axios*',* which means worthy, and 'logos*'*, as previously mentioned, clear and logical connections between ideas, which include the use of statistics (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:23). Axiology refers to the role of values and ethics within the research process and therefore incorporates questions about how researchers deal with both their values and those of the research participants. Chilisa and Kawulich (2012:1) and Gunbayi (2020:39) are of the view that honesty and personal integrity are of utmost importance as these values have the function of creating trust. Furthermore, O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015:52), as well as Saunders *et al*. (2019:134), accentuate the fondness of biases, which any researcher can bring to the research project. All researchers have biases; it is how researchers deal with them or at least acknowledge them that is of relevance.

Marketing research and the three assumptions of research were presented above and following is a synopsis of a paradigmatic perspective of research.

4.3 Paradigmatic perspective

The term research paradigm (also referred to as a theoretical model within which research is conducted) was developed by Khun (Creswell, 2014:37; Saunders *et al*., 2019:133), and Saunders *et al*. (2019:133) describe a paradigm as a "*fundamental belief that directs the process of research*". Lor (2010:4), Quinlan (2011:95), Creswell (2014:37), and Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:19) state that paradigms are regarded as worldviews because they bring together the totality of researchers' perceptions, choice of study and the methods involved in conducting research. In the same vein, Guba and Lincoln (1994:114) and Moller and Halinen (2022:290) found that a research paradigm is essentially associated with the concepts of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. The research paradigm and philosophy depend on various factors, such as a researcher's mental model, his/her worldview, different perceptions, as well as many beliefs and attitudes related to the perception of reality by following a particular paradigm, and researchers adopt a specific way of studying phenomena relevant to their field. Gorman and MacIntosh (2015:52) assert that once a paradigm is chosen, it is then advisable to remain within it. As Sutrisna (2009) wisely articulates, the danger of adopting another approach is that a researcher could become inconsistent if he/she simply changes his/her beliefs about reality from one research project to another. This view is supported by Moller and Halinen (2022:290), who wrote that if a researcher fails to contemplate philosophical issues, it can

seriously affect the quality of the research conducted. Being thoughtful by selecting a relevant philosophy is an important step in planning and conducting research.

Information from several sources (Saunders *et al*., 2019:133; Jaksic *et al*., 2021:1) demonstrate that the classification and terminology of philosophical stances differ from author to author, specifically within the realms of the mixed-method approach, which was adopted for this study. Business and management scholars and academia have spent decades debating whether this multiplicity of research philosophies, paradigms and methods are applicable, though academia agrees that no one best philosophy occurs. Scotland's study, titled *Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive and critical research paradigms* (Scotland, 2012:3) is complemented by Saunders *et al*. (2019:132) and proposed to reach for a pluralist approach by detecting that each research philosophy and paradigm contributes something unique and valuable to either business or management research. Furthermore, Sahay (2016) and Saunders *et al*. (2019:134) claim that many doctoral students expressed their confusion and difficulty in understanding philosophical debates and even show some form of predicament or even view it as a 'puzzlement'. Since all assumptions are conjecture, the philosophical underpinnings of each paradigm can never be empirically proven or disproven (Scotland, 2012:9).

The research design employed in this study was guided by the research onion model of Saunders *et al*. (2009:130). An identified research method determines how data is collected, and analysed, and how the findings are presented (Saunders *et al*., 2019:134). Figure 4.1 outlines the stages in the research onion, which are sequential and interdependent. Researchers have to embark on the different layers to derive the findings of their research projects, as in this case.

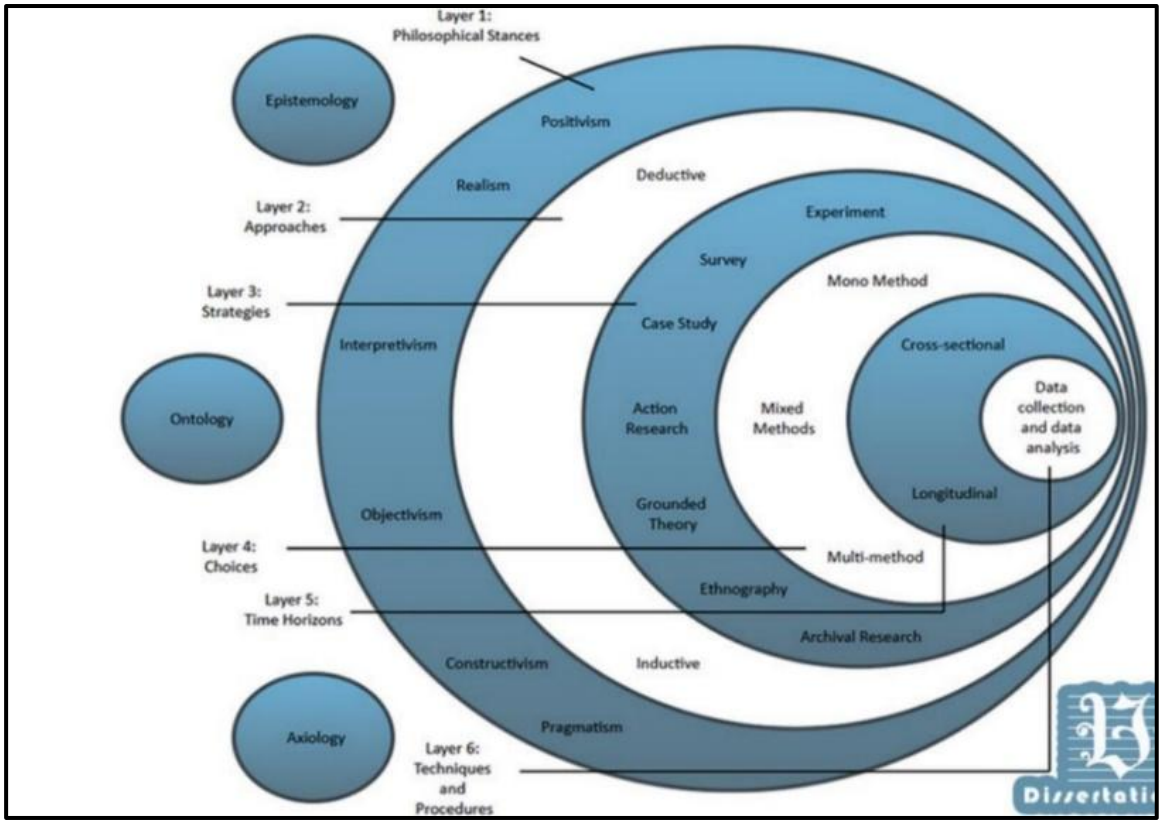


Figure 4.1: Research onion

Source: Saunders *et al*. (2009)

4.4 Philosophical stances

All research builds on philosophical fundamentals (Gunbayi, 2020:38). The first layer of the research onion constitutes research philosophies that can be seen as a comprehensive term that is related to the character, nature, and development of knowledge (Jaksic *et al*., 2021:1). The following section presents a detailed discussion of six dominant research philosophies, as indicated in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Five major research philosophies

Research philosophy	Description
1. Positivism	Positivism relates to the philosophical stance of the natural scientist and entails working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations.
2. Post-positivism	Post-positivism research principles emphasise meaning and the creation of new knowledge.
3. Interpretivism	Interpretivism emphasises that humans are different from physical phenomena because they generate meanings.
4. Critical realism	This philosophy focuses on explaining what the researcher observes and experiences in terms of the underlying structures of reality that shape the observable events.

Research philosophy	Description
5. Postmodernism	Emphasises the role of language and of power relations, seeking to question accepted ways of thinking and give voice to alternative marginalised views.
6. Pragmatism	Strives to reconcile objectivism and subjectivism, facts & values, accurate and rigorous knowledge and different contextualised experiences. Reality matters to pragmatists as practical effects of ideas, and knowledge is valued for enabling actions to be carried out successfully.

The philosophies tabled above are explored in more detail in the succeeding section.

4.4.1 Positivism

Currently, there is a 'bewildering array of positivisms*',* even as many as 12 varieties (Moller & Halinen, 2022:290). But, what is positivism? It is the belief that the real world, which is made up of social phenomena, exists independently from whoever is looking at it. The main purpose of a positivistic study is to predict, control, and manipulate phenomena in the natural and social environments (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:65; Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012:1; Saunders *et al*., 2019: 130). Saunders *et al*. (2019:130) reported that positivists focus on accurate scientific methods designed to yield pure data and facts unswayed by human interpretation. Positivists value objective and value-free research that is not contaminated by personal bias (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:27; Saunders *et al*., 2019:146). Therefore, positivist researchers value honesty and personal integrity more than anything else. The latter aspire to trust their findings, which imitate an accurate consideration of an objective reality.

In the same vein, O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015:61) noted that the popularity of positivism in business research intensifies as the data used is highly precise and accurate. Furthermore, Sahay (2016) and Saunders *et al*. (2019:146) affirm that the philosophy of positivism involves hefty quantitative data as well as statistical hypotheses. Those who consider themselves to be positivist researchers argue that finding out what happens in the real and independent world requires impartial, value-free (Scotland, 2012:9), logical and scientific research. The positivist research paradigm underpins the quantitative methodology, where the emphasis is on measuring variables and testing hypotheses that are linked to general causal explanations (Antwi & Hamza, 2015:220). Causal relationships between dependent and independent variables form the basis of research problems in this tradition (Sahay, 2016; Scotland, 2012:10). In the case of this study, there is an unanswered question: Do independent variables, specifically student experiences, the HEI's identity, culture and values and financial support have a significant positive influence on the dependent variable, alumni loyalty?

The succeeding section explores one of the varieties of positivism, namely post-positivism. Post-positivism emerged from positivism (Scotland, 2012:9) – though it is important to note that post-positivists have a great deal in common with positivists.

4.4.2 Post-positivism

Similar to positivists, post-positivists also believe that reality is known through the application of standardised laws and rules (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:25; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:13; Vasileiou, 2018:2). Chilisa and Kawulich (2012:1) portray this scientist as one who constructs knowledge, instead of just passively noting the laws of nature. Post-positivism research principles emphasise meaning and the creation of new knowledge. They argue that "*no matter how faithfully the scientist adheres to scientific method research, research outcomes are neither totally objective nor unquestionably certain."*

Physicists Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr adopted the rigid view of positivism, turning the emphasis from absolute certainty to probability (Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012:1; Bhattacherjee, 2012:18). Logical empiricists (or post-positivists) support the idea that social scientists and natural scientists share the same goals for research and use similar methods of investigation (Lor, 2010:4). In positivist and post-positivist research, data is examined within the context of some pre-formulated hypothesis and subject to reliability and validity procedures so that the original hypothesis will either be confirmed or rejected, as in the case of this study.

4.4.3 Interpretivism

Interpretivism, as well as critical realism, developed as an assessment of positivism, but from a subjective perspective (Saunders *et al*., 2019:148; Alturki, 2021:2). Interpretivism emphasises that human beings are different from objects since humans generate connotations. According to Sahay (2016), Irshaidat (2019:132), and Saunders *et al*. (2019:148), interpretivism contends that human beings cannot be studied in the same way as the study of objects in the natural sciences. Unlike objects, human beings adjust all the time, and hazardous environments constantly have an impact on them (Sahay, 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2019:149).

The purpose of interpretivist research is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds (Saunders *et al*., 2019:149). Similarly, Sahay (2016) reported that interpretivists have the desire to understand the social world and present meaning from their point of view. This entails that business and management researchers are looking at a phenomenon from the perspective of different groups of people. The investigation used in this study was in-depth interviews (qualitative approach) with a small sample size comprising former students,

management, and marketing teams of Northlink College. The collected data was analysed by applying statistical techniques (Sahay, 2016).

4.4.4 Critical realism

The philosophy of critical realism focuses on expounding what is seen and experienced in terms of the underlying structures of reality that shape observable events. Critical realism recognises that observations may involve errors and that theories can be modified. According to O'Gorman and MacIntosh (2015:62), interpretations are based on theories and influenced by an observer's interpretations. Reality cannot be known with certainty. However, critical realists suggest that knowledge of reality is a result of social conditioning (Scotland, 2012:13; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015:61; Saunders *et al.,* 2019: 147).

Critical realism was borne out of frustration with positivism's non-humanistic, narrow focus and its emphasis on causal relationships (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:31). For critical realists, reality is the most important philosophical consideration, and they view reality as peripheral and independent and not directly accessible through observation and information (Saunders *et al.,* 2019:147). Furthermore, the latter indicated that the focal point for critical realists is how often researchers' senses deceive them, which is not a presentation of what is real. The main aim of critical realism is, therefore, by exposing myths, to transform society and free people (Gunbayi, 2020:43) from all forms of oppression and to empower people to build a better world for themselves (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:31). Saunders *et al*. (2019:148) reported that critical realists do differ from positivists where the latter try to discover casual relationships to predict as opposed to critical realists who attempt to understand and explain.

4.4.5 Postmodernism

Postmodernism highlights the significance of language and power dynamics, aiming to challenge dominant ideologies and amplify marginalised perspectives, thereby giving voice to alternative views that have been overlooked (Saunders *et al*., 2019:148). They reject the modern objectivist, realist ontology of things and instead highlight the inherent turbulence and fluidity of existence, emphasising the primacy of change, movement and flux over fixed structures and static entities. Furthermore, they argue that any perceived sense of order is temporary, lacks a solid foundation, and can only be constructed and maintained through the use of language, which imposes its own categories and structures on our understanding of reality (Chia, 2003 as cited by Saunders *et al*., 2019:148). Simultaneously, they acknowledge that language is inherently incomplete and imperfect, always falling short of fully capturing the complexity of human experience. Since the social world lacks an inherent order beyond what we construct through language, there is no

objective means of determining the correct way to describe the world. The goal of postmodern research is therefore to challenge profoundly the well-known way of thinking and knowing (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015:63).

4.4.6 Pragmatism

Pragmatic research can be described as research that aims to find solutions to specific problems by exploiting both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:31). Pragmatic research does not simply employ both the mentioned methods, but selects specific methods in a corresponding way to find answers and solutions to problems (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, as mentioned by Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:31). Moreover, by having a positive attitude towards both methods, pragmatic researchers are in a better position to use qualitative research to inform the quantitative portion of the research study, and *vice versa* (Saunders *et al*., 2019:148; Alturki, 2021:2).

The dominant research traditions discussed above have one thing in common: many scholars agree that research is a systematic process whereby data is collected and analysed through scientific procedures (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:31; O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015:61; Sahay, 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2019:148). However, scholars differ from each other in terms of the purpose of research, what counts as knowledge, and which methods of data collection and analyses are to be obeyed to contribute to the body of knowledge. In the quest to address the research problem of this study, both positivism (associated with the quantitative component) and the interpretivism paradigms (associated with the qualitative component) were exploited to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Sahay, 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2019:149). In a recent study by Sanchez *et al*. (2023:1), these scholars refer to multi-paradigm research that combines positivist and interpretivism paradigms to capture both the objective and subjective meanings of these philosophies. The study of English and Nielsen (2023:9) orates that while these two paradigms seem contradictory, it is increasingly common to adopt an eclectic approach that draws on elements of both positivism and interpretivism. Furthermore, this mixed-methods research was decided upon and included both quantitative and qualitative approaches to strengthen the content of the study.

Subsequently, an exploration of the approaches to theory development is provided, as this follows the philosophical stance of a researcher.

4.5 Research approaches

A research approach relates to the nature of reasoning that forms the basis for establishing the relationships between data, theory, concepts, and constructs in a given discipline (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013:24; Alturki, 2021:3). There are essentially two contrasting directions of theorising, namely the inductive and deductive approaches (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:34; Antwi & Hamza, 2015:220; Sahay, 2016). These two approaches form the second layer of the research onion and all research studies embrace the use of theories as mentioned in Chapter 1.

Firstly, the deductive approach is considered a top-down approach (Alturki, 2021:3) as the conclusion must arise reasonably from the premise.

4.5.1 Deductive approach

Deductive theorising allows for the 'building' of an existing or even a new theory (Sutrisna, 2009; Du-Plooy *et al*., 2014:48; Saunders *et al*., 2019:152), as depicted in Figure 4.2.

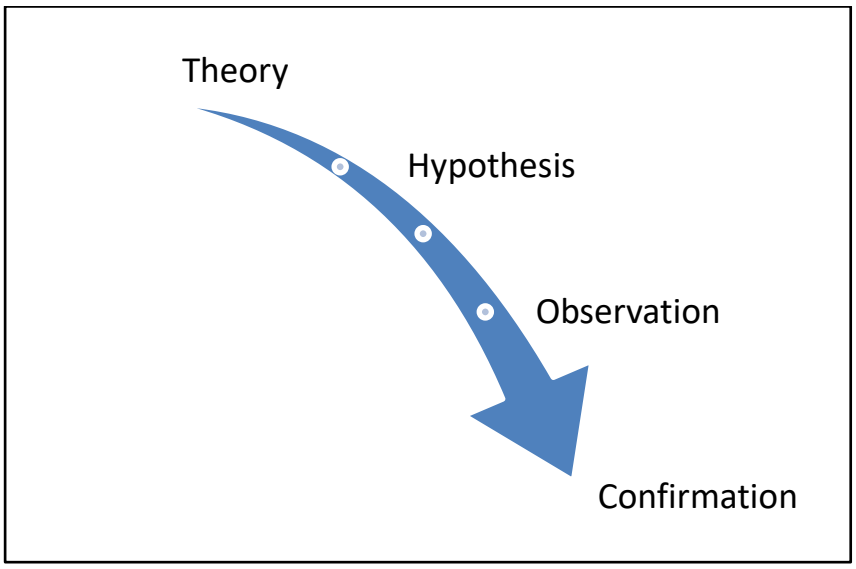


Figure 4.2: Deductive approach

Source: Alturki (2021)

Deductive theorising involves reasoning from general assumptions to more specific assumptions and the move is from exploring the broad and general aspects of a theory to applying it to a specific topic under investigation. Knowledge about the phenomenon under study and the supporting theory is established prior to data collection (Sutrisna, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016:54). With the aid of previous theories, researchers employ deductive reasoning to develop hypotheses and identify constructs for the development of a survey questionnaire (Zikmund *et al*., 2013:134). As a scientific approach that accentuates structure, quantification, generalisability and

testable hypotheses (quantitative approach), the deductive approach is most likely supported by the positivist philosophy (Saunders *et al*., 2019:154).

Secondly, as an alternative approach to developing theory, the inductive approach is considered a bottom-up approach as explained below.

4.5.2 Inductive approach

In inductive theorising, theoretical concepts are inferred from data collected and thereafter analysed in a specific way. There is a movement from the specific to the general (Bryman, 1984:82; Sutrisna, 2009; Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:13; Alturki, 2021:3) in order to apply the findings to more conceptual and extensive theoretical constructs (Sahay, 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2019:155). Marshall and Rossman (2016:54) and Cully *et al*. (2022:95) portray that the inductive approach is concerned with the generation of new theory emerging from data, as presented in Figure 4.3.

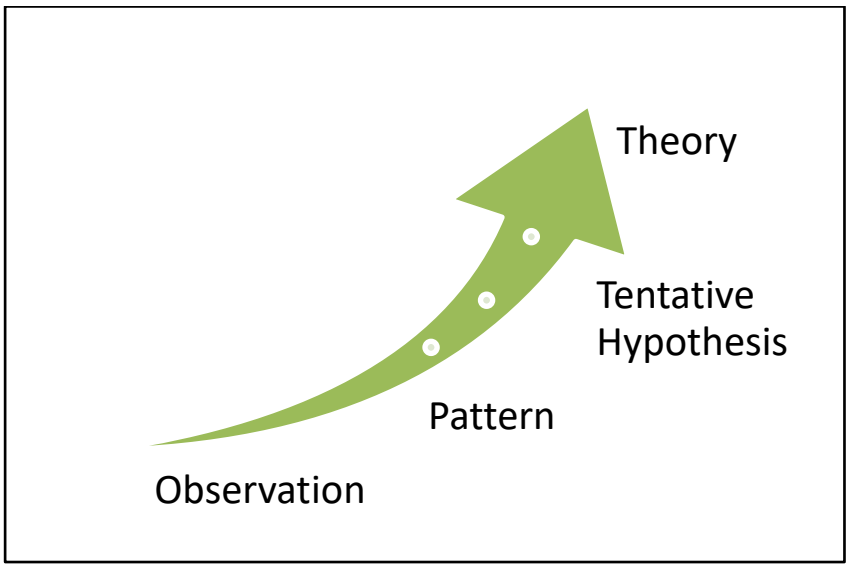


Figure 4.3: Inductive approach

Source: Alturki (2021)

Researchers who use an inductive approach, which is commonly used in qualitative studies, are interested in gaining detailed and in-depth comments from respondents, as in this study – from alumni as well as the management and marketing teams of Northlink College. Researchers use inductive reasoning when searching for patterns in particular data, or when generalisations are made from samples to populations (Sutrisna, 2009; Antwi & Hamza, 2015:220; Alturki, 2021:3). The major criticism of the inductive approach is that it generates data from relatively small samples, which may not always be adequate for theory building (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:13;

Bhattacherjee, 2012:40). The latter mentioned scholars profess that if researchers use an inductive process and develop theory from specific data collected, then the social setting is being explored. Community engagement is included for the purpose of this study to expand on existing alumni and relationship marketing models in academic literature.

A research approach eventually determines whether a researcher employs the qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods approach in collecting data. In line with the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1, and consistent with the positivist and interpretivism paradigms (Harrison & Reilly, 2011:8), this study adopted both the deductive approach (to test hypotheses) and the inductive approach (to explore and generate new theories or insights) by means of the mixed-methods research approach.

Flaking away the first and second layer of the research onion leads to the next layer, the research strategy, which is presented in the ensuing section.

4.6 Research strategies

Researchers use one or more strategies in creating their research design, which is nothing but an all-encompassing structure of the research with details for numerous elements of the design (Sahay, 2016). This view is supported by Widd and Diggines (2009:53), who wrote that research design simply means outlining or planning the research project to be followed to realise the research objectives as unambiguously as possible (Bryman, 1984:89; Aaker *et al*., 2004:341; Bhattacherjee, 2012:4; Zikmund *et al*., 2013:45; Saunders *et al*., 2019:175). Similarly, the affirmations of Bhattacherjee (2012:45) state that a research design involves the process of data collection, the data collection instruments, the sampling process, and data analysis to realise the objectives of a study. Researchers have the choice of a range of strategies to embrace, from an experiment to archival research or even a combination of different strategies, which will be addressed next. Primarily, researchers need to associate particular research strategies with particular research philosophies although the margins between them are permeable; there is legroom for flexibility (Sahay, 2016). The main research strategies outlined by the research onion include an experiment, survey, case study, action research, grounded theory, ethnography and archival strategies (Saunders *et al*., 2019:83). These research strategies are briefly expounded.

- **Experiments** are used by positivists to establish cause and effect relationships between variables (Sahay, 2016; Alturki, 2021:5). Sahay (2016) claims that experimentation as a research methodology has been used in many works related to usableness. There are various advantages of using experimentation as a strategy; if it is properly conducted, then it is considered one of the most accurate and efficient ways to reach conclusions. This research

strategy can be utilised in a wide range of research studies from pharmaceutics (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:210; Alturki, 2021:5) to education (Sahay, 2016). This view was also articulated by Owen and Hill (2011:7) who wrote that extensive research concerning in-depth explorations of innovative learning models is most effective when studies reach beyond the classroom. On the other side of the coin, experimentation has various disadvantages, as the latter is subjected to errors such as human, systematic, or random errors. Subsequently, at times it can affect the validity of the results. In the same vein, Alturki (2021:6) noted that this research strategy, at times, by controlling variables that are irrelevant, can create situations that are unrealistic. McMillan and Schumachers' (2014:29) conclusions of experiments are complemented by Alturki (2021:6), who also argues that a researcher does have some control over what will happen to findings by systematically withholding quantified interventions.

- **Surveys** refer to a data collection tool that consists of a series of questions designed to gather information from a relatively large group of people (Bagheri & Behesti, 2010:11; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:148) in a relatively cost-effective manner. Therefore, surveys are ever so often used to provide a quantitative description of demographic information, trends, attitudes, and opinions to enhance a phenomenon under study. Surveys can range from highly structured questionnaires to unstructured in-depth interviews (Hofstee, 20016:115). Therefore, survey research can be quantitative, qualitative, or even both (which is referred to as mixed-methods research). Surveys were found to be relevant to this study, and McMillan and Schumacher (2014:30) confirmed that surveys are frequently used in educational research. There are a few ways that a survey can be utilised in case study research. Applicable to the study, a survey with a questionnaire was used to obtain the data required from students of Northlink College. Data was also gathered from the marketing and management teams and former students by means of interviews. Furthermore, surveys collect quantitative data for the purpose of comparative analysis (as discussed in Chapter 5). The mixed-methods approach was adopted, and it culminated into triangulation to achieve the goals stipulated for the purpose of this study.

- **A case study** examines a restricted system or a case, over time, in depth, employing multiple sources of data found in a given situation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:32). A case study, as described by Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:178), is a detailed portrayal of a social phenomenon that exists within a real-world context. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014:32), a case study is often selected because of its uniqueness or used to illuminate an issue. This study is based on a specific case, the Northlink College in the Western Cape of South Africa.

- **Action research** involves the use of research methods by practitioners to study contemporary issues (Sahay, 2016). This is a systematic process in which a problem is studied scientifically, and the results are then used to take particular action to alleviate the problem. The focus though is on a solution to collective problems to be uncovered in academic institutions – therefore, the results tend to be confined within an area.

- **The grounded theory** approach is when theories on a certain topic are scarce and in need of development. Grounded theory is a research method that is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed (Rutberg & Bouikidis,2018:211). It is largely applied to qualitative research studies that involve the application of inductive reasoning.

- **Ethnography** is a research approach that involves the description of a particular culture that a researcher is interested in exploring. As a process, ethnography involves extended fieldwork typically employing observation and casual interviews of a shared group activity (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:31). The ultimate product of this research strategy is a comprehensive, holistic narrative description and interpretation that amalgamates all facets for the performance of a group that demonstrates complexity (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:176; Rutberg & Bouikidis,2018:211).

- **Archival research** involves the use of secondary data sources to give rise to knowledge. Relevant to this study, archival research was accomplished in the form of systematic reviews of literature concerning those factors that would contribute towards influencing students of an HEI to become loyal alumni (as in this case). Archival research includes historical documents, records or other sources related to activities and claims of individuals, businesses or even both (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:211).

Furthermore, a research strategy also describes the nature of a study – whether it is descriptive, exploratory or casual (Bhattacherjee, 2012:4; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:29) and this is subsequently deliberated.

- **Descriptive research** designs entail procedures aimed at describing methods and procedures to gather data on variables of interest. In the same vein, Bagheri and Beheshti (2010:13) and Cooper and Schindler (2014:25) hold the view that descriptive research designs are scientific and seek to observe and describe the behaviour of people, phenomena, or other entities without establishing a connotation between factors. Descriptive studies tend to be primarily concerned with finding answers to what, when, and where to find solutions to these questions. However, it does not seek to establish causal linkages between various variables engaged in circumstances (Gravetter & Forzano, 2016:315). Methods used for

descriptive research include longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, as identified by Bagheri and Beheshti (2010:13), Wilson (2010:103) and Sahay (2016), and these are:

- *Longitudinal* studies consist of the repetitive measurement of the same sample on a continual basis. The measurements are conducted at numerous points in time, throughout which the sections remain relatively constant.

- *Cross-sectional* studies involve obtaining information only once from a given sample (Wiid & Diggines, 2009:56). The cross-sectional approach was adopted for the purpose of this study because respondents were contacted only once during the data collection period, similar to the study of Enwereji (2019:11). In such cases, strategies such as surveys, case studies or grounded theory are employed (Sahay, 2016).

- **Exploratory designs** are a methodology approach that investigates research questions that have not previously been studied in depth. The main goal is to gain more precision or to aid in the further definition of a topic (Wiid & Diggines, 2009:57). Exploratory research designs are characterised by being unstructured, informal, and flexible, and are often engaged when researchers want to widen knowledge, detect problem areas, and develop hypotheses on a research topic (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:14; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:75). Bhattacherjee (2012:4) asserts that exploratory research designs tend to use more qualitative methods including literature searches, surveys, and interviews as was relevant in this study.

- **Causal research** designs seek to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between a dependent and independent variable (Malhotra, 2007:79; Wiid & Diggines, 2009:56). Previous studies have found that, in contrast to descriptive or exploratory research, casual research presents a significant level of control (Zikmund & Babin, 2012:44), evaluating marketing initiatives, and even invent more operative long-term planning. Casual research is strongly linked to quantitative studies.

A combination of the exploratory and the causal research designs was expounded upon for the purpose of this study. The mixed research design was adopted for the purpose of this study, where an exploratory research path was followed due to the lack of scholarly information on the specific topic at Northlink College, and this most probably applies to most TVET colleges in the Western Cape, South Africa. Thereafter, the causal research design, which is closely associated with the exploratory research design, was undertaken to determine whether there are cause-and-effect relationships between the different variables identified. In this study, four independent variables (student experiences, HEI identity, culture and values and financial support) were identified to verify whether these have a significant and positive influence on the dependent

variable, alumni loyalty. Refer to Figure 1.3 for the conceptual model devised for the purpose of the study. Furthermore, relationship marketing is identified as a mediator to foster and enhance alumni loyalty. The dimensions of relationship marketing include trust, commitment and satisfaction.

In the following section, research methods are discussed as well as their applicability to this study.

4.7 Research methods

Research methods are placed into two categories: qualitative or quantitative (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:11; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209). The main differences that separate the two methods are the procedures and techniques that focus on either comments or numerical data (Sutrisna, 2009; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209; Alturki, 2021:6). Academic literature on research methods further revealed that the fundamental divergence between qualitative and quantitative inquiry lies in the logic of justification and not methods as techniques (Sutrisna, 2009; Antwi & Hamza, 2015:223). The latter scholars reasoned that the two methodologies in question were developed from two completely different ontological and epistemological perspectives, which represent two distinct paradigms. Table 4.4 presents a compendium of the different research methods.

Table 4.4: Differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods

Orientation	Quantitative method	Qualitative method
Paradigm	Positivism	Interpretivism
Research purpose	Numerical description Causal explanation Prediction	Subjective description Empathetic understanding Exploration
Epistemology	Objectivist	Subjectivist
Methodology	Experimental	Dialectical
Research methods	Empirical examination Measurement Hypotheses testing Questionnaires	Case studies Focus groups Interviews Narrative research Field notes
Scientific method	Deductive approach Testing of theory	Inductive approach Generation of theory
Nature of data instruments	Variables Structured Validated data	Words and images In-depth interviews Open-ended questions
Data analysis	Identify statistical relationships among variables	Use descriptive data Search for patterns Holistic features

Orientation	Quantitative method	Qualitative method
Results	Generalisable findings	Particular findings Insider viewpoint
Final report	Formal statistical report: Correlations Comparisons of means Reporting of statistical significance	Informal narrative report

Subsequently, a detailed walk through the key sections of research methods is provided, namely qualitative, quantitative and mixed research designs. The selection of a research method is influenced by the research objectives (Harrison & Reilly, 2011:8; Antwi & Hamza, 2015:223; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209), as well as the research philosophies, designs and methods adopted for a study. The research onion categorises the research choices into mono-, mixed- and multi-methods (Rutberg & Bouikidis 2018:209; Saunders *et al*. 2019:83; Alturki, 2021:6). The *mono* method uses only one approach for an empirical study (Dupin & Borglin, 2020:1), either quantitative or qualitative. McMillan and Schumacher (2014:33) and Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018:209) state that the *mixed* methods collect both quantitative and qualitative data, as opposed to the *multi-method* that either collects multiple types of quantitative or qualitative data (Harrison & Reilly, 2011:8). The mixed-methods research approach was thought through and found suitable for the purpose of this study. A survey was used for the purpose of this study to obtain quantitative data from the students of Northlink College. For the qualitative data, interviews were conducted to gather data from former students, as well as marketing and management teams. Mixed-methods research combines elements of qualitative and quantitative approaches for the purpose of the extensiveness of understanding the phenomenon to be examined. For the sake of clarity, the three approaches, i.e. qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods will be further explained in the ensuing sections.

The subsequent discussion expounds on the meaning of a qualitative research method.

4.7.1 Qualitative method

Acknowledged scholars, i.e. Kumar (1996:10), McMillan and Schumacher (2014:347), Guetterman *et al*. (2015:556) and Chae *et al*. (2022:4), categorically state that the purpose of a qualitative study is primarily to describe a situation, phenomenon, or problem. Widd and Diggines (2009:86), McMillan and Schumacher (2014:347) and Antwi and Hamza (2015:217) opine that one of the most important goals of the qualitative method is to understand participants from their own point of view, in their own voice, which complements the use of in-depth interviews. This view is supported by Creswell *et al*. (2016:13), who confirmed that the goals of the qualitative method are the relevance of understanding, interpretation, and explanation of the immense development

of social phenomena. In addition, Guetterman *et al*. (2015:556) observed that qualitative research is 'true-to-life' and McMillan and Schumacher's (2014:345) view of social life is in terms of processes that occur rather than in secure terms.

Qualitative research has been considered conducive to studying complex situations, yielding rich findings and it is particularly suitable when involving human behaviour (Sutrisna, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:345). In the same way, qualitative researchers often view human behaviour as being fluid, dynamic and forever changing. Furthermore, qualitative researchers are not captivated in generalising their findings beyond participants who are reviewed, and it is further acknowledged that there is no single accepted way of doing qualitative research. Sutrisna (2009) claims that conducting qualitative research may appear laidback, but consequently warns that a complex association of terms, concepts and assumptions frames the term qualitative research. McMillan and Schumacher (2014:347) even termed qualitative research as an "*attractive nuisance"*.

Every single piece of qualitative research must be informed by a certain philosophical, methodological, and technical criterion that makes it scientific (Antwi & Hamza, 2015:217; Gutterman *et al*., 2015:555; Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015:110). Researchers who carry out qualitative research depend upon a range of factors such as: the researchers' beliefs about the nature of the social world, what can be known about it (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and how it can be acquired (axiology), the goals of research, the characteristics of the research participants and lastly, the audience for the research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Nha, 2021:2). Some scholars (Sutrisna, 2009; Widd & Diggines, 2009:86; Gutterman *et al*., 2015:560; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209; Bell *et al*., 2022:362) stated that the distinguishing feature of qualitative research is that it relies on words, rather than numerical data, and the use of meaning-based rather than statistical forms of data analysis.

Qualitative research seeks in-depth information to discover the 'what', the 'how' and the 'why' of a phenomenon (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209). Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018:209) hold the view that the keyword in the qualitative approach is 'perception*'* as opposed to the quantitative approach's equivalence as 'measure*'*. A qualitative approach was found suitable to acquire relevant information from stakeholders around the relevance and significance of relationship marketing at a TVET college, as well as their involvement in communities by being helpful and kind to others.

Following are the *advantages* of using a qualitative approach (Sutrisna, 2009; Widd & Diggines, 2009:86; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209):

- Encourages the achievement of all-encompassing understanding through interaction with participants.

- A qualitative approach enhances the use of interviews as a data collection instrument, promising the understanding of the historical occurrence of the problem under investigation.

- The findings obtained from the qualitative approach are presented in a narrative account, establishing the central ideas and submitting solutions there from.

Following are the *disadvantage*s listed by Sutrisna (2009), Widd and Diggines (2009:86) and Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018:209):

- Qualitative research does not emphasise the cause and effect of a study problem and it could be difficult to draw conclusions that can be universal beyond the study setting.

- In the same vein, Creswell (2014:35) and Truong (2020:1564) noted that a qualitative study does have limitations in describing the distribution of some variables in a population.

The preceding section elaborated on the nature of a qualitative study and the subsequent section expounds on the meaning of a quantitative research approach.

4.7.2 Quantitative method

For several decades, the research choice that was traditionally used in social sciences was the quantitative method, which is concerned with investigating 'things' that can be observed and measured in some way (Antwi & Hamza, 2015:217). Quantitative research was the generally accepted research approach until the early 1980s, when the 'paradigm wars' between advocates of quantitative and qualitative research reached a new peak (Nha, 2021:2), when researchers argued that their respective approaches were untouchable.

Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.* (2014:148) and Brynard *et al*. (2014:39) affirmed that a quantitative research approach provides systematic steps in a scientific inquiry and is objective in its ways of using numerical data from a selected group to generalise findings that is being studied. Quantitative research is used to explain, predict and control a phenomenon that is perceived as a true manifestation that can be understood, identified, measured, generalised and controlled (Leedy *et al*., 2019:229). A typical type of research study employing quantitative research, as suggested by Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.* (2014:148) and MacMillan and Schumacher (2014:20), would be quasi-experimental, non-experimental, an experiment and a survey study (which was adopted for the purpose of this study).

Sutrisna (2009), Antwi and Hamza (2015:217), as well as Bell *et al*. (2022:365) elucidated that quantitative research permits the testing of theories, and observes probable cause-and-effect explanations to gather data to respond to research questions. Creswell (2014:19) reported that the distinction between quantitative research is on variables and testing of hypotheses that are linked to general causal explanations. To enhance the focus on only one or a few causal factors at the same time, Antwi and Hamza (2015:217), as well as Dereje *et al*. (2022:5), refer to quantitative research as a "*narrow-angle lens"* approach as opposed to qualitative research that uses a "*wide- and deep-angel lens"* examining human choice and behaviour as it occurs naturally.

Quantitative research is conducted in a more structured environment that often allows a researcher to have control over study variables and research questions. In survey research, attitudes are usually measured by using rating scales. Variables are related to determining the extent and frequency to describe trends or to explain relationships between variables (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:209). Contrary to the aforementioned relationships between variables, Antwi and Hamza (2015:221) highlighted that it does not explain what lies behind such relationships nor does it explain people's behaviours, experiences, or feelings. Indeed, the claim from researchers that the quantitative approach views human behaviour differently from qualitative researchers, as the first-mentioned approach's perception of human behaviour is highly predictable and explainable. As in the case of this study, hypotheses were developed as recommended by Chae *et al*. (2022:2), and standardised questionnaires were used to collect the data, intended to yield highly reliable and valid results. According to Wilson (2014:222), Bagheri and Beheshti (2010:21) and Chae *et al*. (2022:7), the sample size should typically be large and sample members should ideally be randomly selected from a large population to ensure that the results can be generalised (Chae, 2022:3).

Quantitative researchers attempt to operate under the belief of objectivity (Sutrisna, 2009) when they assume that reality is to be observed and that reasonable observers who look at the same phenomenon will basically agree on its existence and its characteristics. Literature on quantitative approaches highlights the capability of isolation from reality without compromising the cause and effect being researched. Sutrisna (2009) concluded that results from quantitative approaches are achieved through the verification and replication of observable findings.

The *advantages* of using a quantitative approach, as pinpointed by Creswell (2014:35), Kumar (2019:21) and Chae (2022:3), are:

- The quantitative method enables researchers to find relationships among interactive variables.

- It inspires the presentation of findings using graphs, charts and tables.
- Data can be collected using questionnaires that augment the collection of facts, opinions, and feelings of respondents.
- The quantitative approach saves costs.
- It provides wider exposure and responses can be collected within a short time due to the use of questionnaires.

Contrary to the afore-mentioned advantages of a quantitative study, the following *disadvantages* are confirmed by Chae *et al*. (2022:3):

- Quantitative research gathers information from a wide range of respondents but lacks the ability to construct in-depth analysis.
- It also lacks the capacity to submit in-depth elucidations and explanations due to the inability to interact intensely with respondents.

Johnson *et al*. (2017:130) contend that in a quantitative study, a researcher starts with a problem statement, moving to the hypotheses, into a discussion of data collection, population and the relevant data analysis. However, Gutterman *et al*. (2015:559) claim that for a qualitative study, the flow of logic begins with the purpose of this study, moves through the research question, collects data from a far smaller group and incorporates views in what manner the data will be analysed. Mixed-method researchers view the use of only quantitative or only qualitative research as restrictive and even inadequate to address various research problems.

The subsequent discussion elaborates on the mixed-methods approach.

4.7.3 Mixed-methods research

Mixed-methods research emerged in the 1980s and serves as 'the third methodology*'* in the social behavioural research community (Gunbayi, 2020:40). Much of the current literature describes mixed-methods research as the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the far-reaching purpose of extensiveness and complexity of understanding and affirmation (Gunbayi, 2020:40; Dupin & Borglin, 2020:2; Cully *et al*., 2022:93). The mixed-methods research links qualitative and quantitative approaches and gained greater prominence in the twentieth century when the development of mixed-methods research was enthused by introducing the triangulation concept.

There are three different mixed-methods research design types, according to Harrison and Reilly (2011:9), Dupin and Borglin (2020:2) and Zhou and Wu (2022:52), namely the *exploratory sequential* mixed-methods design (where the qualitative study is conducted before the quantitative research); the *explanatory sequential* mixed-methods design (where the quantitative study is conducted before the qualitative research), and *convergent parallel* mixed-methods research (where both qualitative and quantitative research is conducted at the same time). Hesse-Biber (2015:469) points out that timing or sequence in mixed-methods designs refers to the order in which the two data components are used. With convergent parallel mixed-methods designs, researchers collect both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously, analyse both data strands separately and then mix the databases to provide a comprehensive analysis (Harrison & Reilly, 2011:19; Creswell, 2014:37). For the purpose of this study, the convergent parallel mixed-methods research approach was thought through and found suitable.

The convergent parallel mixed-methods design includes the difficulty in merging the quantitative data collected from students with the qualitative data collected from management, marketing teams and alumni of Northlink College. However, Enwereji (2019:11) and Bell and Bryman (2022:420) reported that there may be incidences of irrationality in the findings from the two separate sets of data. In the convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the researcher collects the quantitative data and qualitative data at the same time and analyses the two data strands separately. After the analyses are completed, results are compared to draw conclusions, as illustrated in Figure 4.4. This enables arriving at an undoubted conclusion to disentangle a study problem.

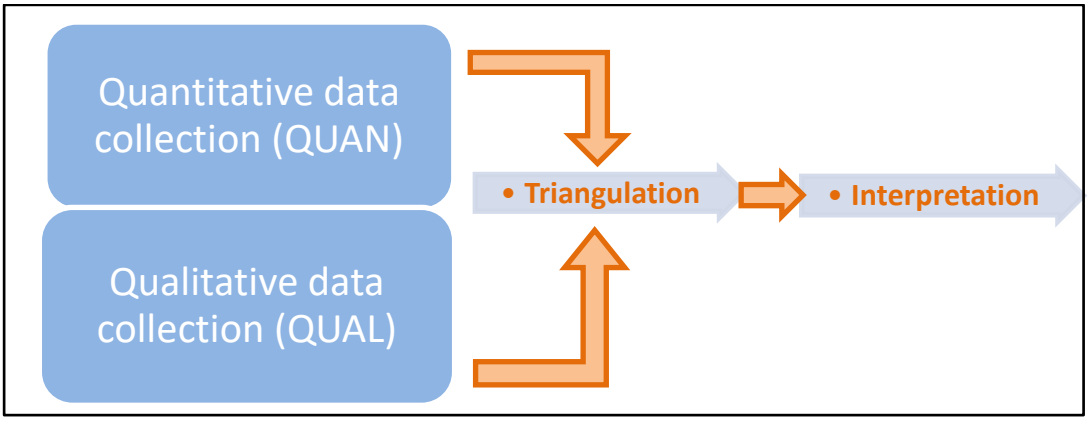


Figure 4.4: Convergent parallel mixed methods design

Source: Adapted from Creswell (2014)

Reilly (2011:8) opines that, in the marketing discipline, multi-method research and mixed-method research are the most used, though both qualitative and quantitative methods have their own

limitations given that single methodologies can result in biases. There is a relatively small body of literature that embarks on expressing concerns about the mixing of quantitative and qualitative data without explaining defensible reasons (Harrison & Reilly, 2011:8). Some researchers, though, argue that the two approaches cannot be used together because of the differences in philosophies associated with the mentioned two choices. This view is supported by Freshwater (2007:138). Freshwater warns against the uncritical acceptance of the mixed-methods design, as nonconformities do take place in the mixed-methods design. This is based on the seeming goal of grasping the 'whole' through mixed-methods inquiry. The latter stated that the mixed-method approach conveys different opinions, but do not allow for competing interpretations to coexist. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:23) maintain that qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods are "*all superior under different circumstances and researchers must determine how to apply the different approaches".*

Many research studies published in recent years, such as that of Angeli and Valanides (2009:156), Ballamingie and Johnson (2011:712), Yilmaz (2013:315), Thammapol *et al*. (2019:33) and Harper and Smithers (2023) indicate that a growing number of researchers apprehend the need to expose and discuss methodological issues. In contrast to some mixed-methods studies, a different perspective has been adopted by the Mixed-Methods International Research Association, which started off in 2016, to address the obstacles in expanding mixed-methods design in a wide range of countries and disciplines (Zhou & Wu, 2022:47). Zhou and Wu (2022:47) conveyed that only a few articles have been published where particular challenges were associated with the concept of integration, the centrality of the mixed-methods design approaches, which is the unique quality that distinguishes mixed methods from other approaches (Harrison & Reilly, 2011:8). Dupin and Borglin (2020:2) commented that "*throughout the research project, there were significant obstacles in terms of establishing and maintaining a consistently clear methodological standpoint, moving between methodologies, presenting data, overcoming objections and dealing with inherent time restraints".*

Mixed-methods research builds on both quantitative and qualitative data, methods, methodologies, and paradigms. Hunt (1994:15), Harrison and Reilly (2011:8) and Truong *et al*. (2020:1564) strongly agree that research studies using quantitative methods could rightfully complement qualitative analyses. The scholars Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018:210), Truong *et al*. (2020:1564), Cully *et al*. (2022:93), as well as Dupin and Borglin (2020:2), are all of the view that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches poses a more complete understanding of trends, patterns and insight into variables. The combination of data, called triangulation, as described by Guetterman *et al*. (2015:559), combines several designs to study the same occurrence. This view was more recently supported by Leedy *et al*. (2019:235).

McMillan (2014:427), Dupin and Borglin (2020:2) and Bell *et al*. (2022:421) implicitly made known that the marketing discipline encourages mixed-methods research, as the emphasis is on reliable research. The *advantages* of choosing a mixed-methods approach in a study, as identified by Harrison and Reilly (2011:8) and Antwi and Hamza (2015:217) and Guetterman *et al*. (2015:559), are:

- Contents: The adoption of the mixed-method approach facilitates the richness of data, thereby strengthening the content of the study by exploring both sets of results obtained from the surveys accomplished by current students (quantitative) and interviews completed with the marketing and management teams and former students of Northlink College (qualitative).

- Triangulation: Various methods to examine the same research question help scholars to verify and enrich their findings.

- Complementary and clarity: The mixed-methods approach encourages clarity of findings, elaborations and illustrations by comparing the results obtained from surveys with the results gathered by means of the interviews. This also enabled obtaining an understanding of the historical cause of the problem and the actions towards enhancing loyal alumni.

- Expansion: The adoption of the mixed-methods approach enables expanding the scope of findings.

- Multiple tools: The use of multiple tools to collect data from the respondents enhanced the abundance of data to cast a solution to the problem under investigation.

Although a mixed-methods research design is considered by many marketing scholars as ideal Ivankova *et al*. (2006:5), Bryman and Bell (2014:25), Creswell (2014:53) and Dupin and Borglin (2020:7) maintain that there are indeed *limitations* attached to mixed-methods designs, namely:

- Mixed-methods research involves excessive data collection by using various means such as questionnaires, interviews, observations and a document analysis, which all need time and resources (Kumar, 2019:21).

- As a result of the previous statement, an expert's experience in the choice of methods for data analysis, is also critical.

- In a mixed-methods study, different sets of research populations need to be contacted, which could be very time-consuming (Truong *et al*., 2020:1566).

- Sometimes disagreements are discovered in a mixed-methods study that tend to limit the findings of the study.

- The researcher must be capable to treat either of the two approaches as important (Lekaota, 2016:9).

- The other challenge of mixed-method research is that researchers may prefer either qualitative or quantitative research (Truong *et al*., 2020:1566), whereas some scholars tend to believe that more effort is needed to collect and manage data. Ivankova *et al*. (2006:7), Lekaota (2016:9) and Truong *et al*. (2020:1566) argue that the two approaches cannot be used together because of the differences in philosophies associated with each method.

Lately, Sanchez *et al*. (2023:1) and English and Nielsen (2023:3) refer to multi-paradigm research as combining interpretivism and positivist paradigms to capture both the objective and subjective meanings of the mentioned philosophies. For the purpose of this study, the convergent parallel mixed-methods design was implemented as the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches posed obtaining a more complete understanding of trends, patterns and insight into the variables included in this study.

The focus of the subsequent discussion is on research methodology.

4.8 Research methodology

Research methodology guides the execution of scientific research and Fellows and Liu (2013:402) describe research methodology as the principles and procedures of logical thought processes that are applied to a scientific investigation. Therefore, research methodology is a well-thought-out overall strategy to achieve the aim of a study. In the same vein, Guetterman *et al*. (2015:557) described research methodology as a plan of action that links the methods used to collect data and the analysis thereof to answer the research questions. Unlike the previously mentioned scholars, Sutrisna (2009) points out that research methods are merely tools. Gunbay (2020:38) claims that although methodology is preceding and more straightforward, it provides the philosophical foundation for methods. Alturki (2021:1) accentuated that the selection process for a research methodology within a related model is without a doubt one of the most confusing phases that challenges most researchers. This is due to each type of research study requiring a specific kind of approach and procedures that are used to collect data to be analysed to achieve the objectives of a study – therefore, to make a contribution to knowledge (Lim *et al*., 2022:484).

Research methodologies and models are endless – each has its own advantages and disadvantages, but none of the mentioned steps in the research process is flawlessly correct or

incorrect (O'Gorman & MacIntosch, 2015:50; Alturki, 2021:1). Once a research problem has been identified and unambiguously specified, the research process logically turns to data collection, which focuses on gathering data that can be processed into evidence for the effective use in marketing decision-making. Data collected is referred to as empirical evidence, which is subjected to qualitative and quantitative evaluation to answer empirical questions (Ivankova *et al*., 2006:7). The methodology employed in this study is a combination of non-empirical and empirical approaches and these will be expounded next. Figure 4.5 is a graphic exhibition of the research methodology.

Ensuing are the non-empirical study components addressed concisely.

4.8.1 Non-empirical research

Zikmund and Babin (2013:123) and Bryman and Bell (2014:267) declared that non-empirical research refers to a collective and comprehensive review of related studies to solve a research problem under investigation. Non-empirical research is typically historical and has already been compiled by previous research studies. Moreover, it is capable of assisting in the formulation of a problem statement and complements primary data as it can be used to validate the results obtained. Referring to Malhotra (2010:106), Zikmund and Babin, (2013:123), as well as Bryman and Bell (2014:267), say that even though non-empirical data is as a rule more cost-effective and quicker to collect than primary data, a researcher has to consider the relevance, accuracy, reliability and timeliness thereof or else the use of non-empirical research data will be in vain. A conventional non-empirical research study includes a literature review and document analysis, which in this case would alone not have resolved the problem specific to this study.

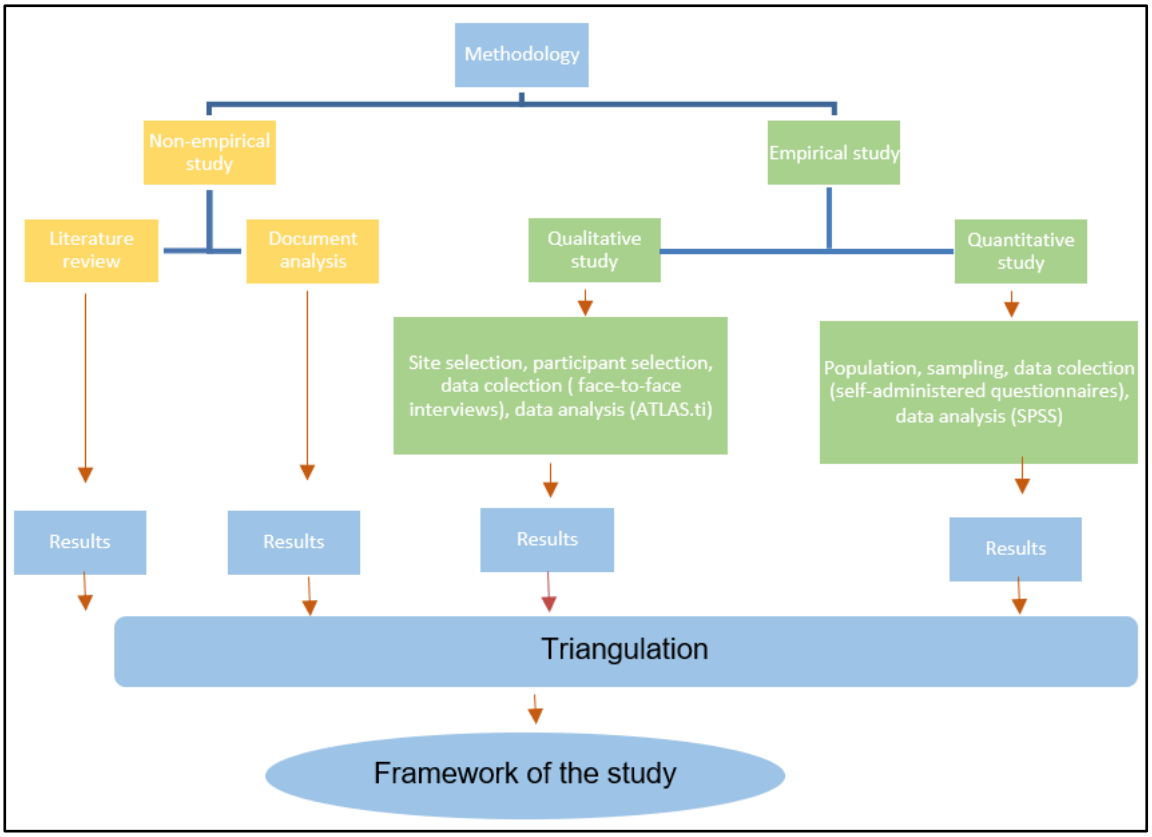


Figure 4.5: Research methodology

Source: Leedy *et al*. (2019)

4.8.1.1 Literature review

A literature review is obtainable from published works, which include academic journal articles, academic books and published empirical studies. The focus of the extensive literature view (Chapters 2 to 3 specific to this study) was on expanding knowledge on theoretical constructs such as marketing, the higher education environment, engagement with communities, and the principles of relationship marketing, such as satisfaction and loyalty.

4.8.1.2 Document analysis

A document analysis, according to Lapan, Rubin and Rubin (as cited by Enwereji, 2019:14), involves a review of secondary sources to collect facts and opinions that will facilitate measures to disentangle a research problem. For the purpose of this study, exhaustive document analysis was undertaken on the Department of Higher Education (DHET, Act 101 of 19970 amended), Northlink College's ministerial programmes: examination statistics, Report 191 of Semester 1 of 2022, Northlink College student information 2022, and the Post School Education and Training Sector (PSET) of 2022.

The subsequent discussion elucidates the empirical research in detail.

4.8.2 Empirical research

Empirical research, according to Leedy *et al*. (2019:245), encompasses first-hand and original data gathered first-hand for a specific study, such as this study. Empirical research includes both qualitative and quantitative research to be incorporated with the finding of a solution of a research problem. Primary data is data that has not been composed previously and must be collected by a formal research investigation. The main advantage of primary data is that data is obtained for a specific research problem – therefore, it ensures researchers of the applicability of data (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:17). However, collecting primary data is usually time-consuming and costly. In the case of this study, primary data was obtained by means of a survey and in-depth interviews with selected participants.

The first component in the empirical research process, as reflected in Figure 4.6, is qualitative in nature and an elucidation of the data collection process subsequently follows.

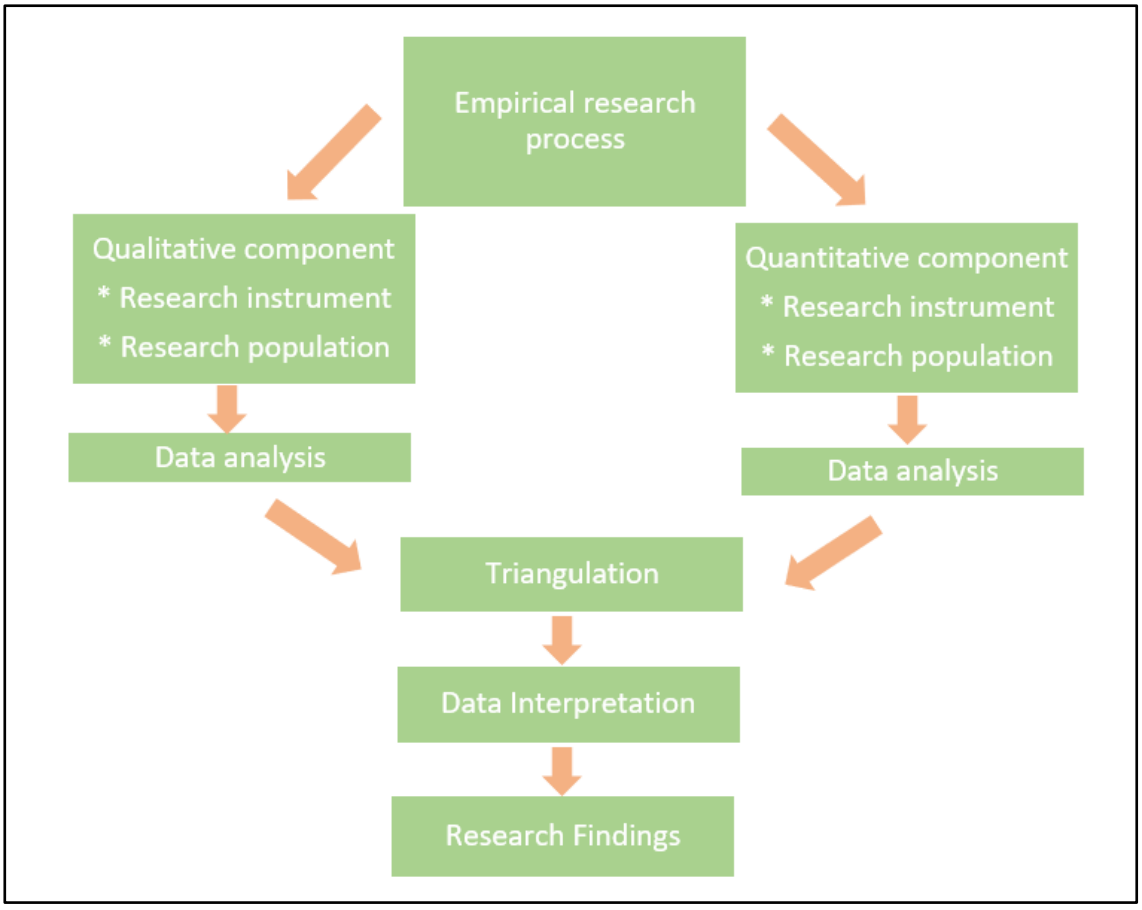


Figure 4.6: Empirical research process

Source: Adapted from Muhoho-Minni (2016)

4.9 Qualitative component – data collection process

Qualitative research demands the interaction between a researcher, the research participants, and the research topic. It is only through such interaction that the profounder meaning of a phenomenon can be discovered (Bell *et al*., 2022:369). Ivankova *et al*. (2006:7) and Bell *et al*. (2022:369) indicated that qualitative methodologies allow a researcher to locate people personally, to see them as they are and to experience their real-life situations. This enables a researcher to interpret and describe the actions of these participants. Qualitative researchers ultimately aim to investigate, understand and describe (Leedy *et al*., 2019:235) as opposed to quantitative researchers who aim to explain, measure, predict or simplify findings. There are numerous techniques to collect qualitative data, as reflected in Figure 4.7.

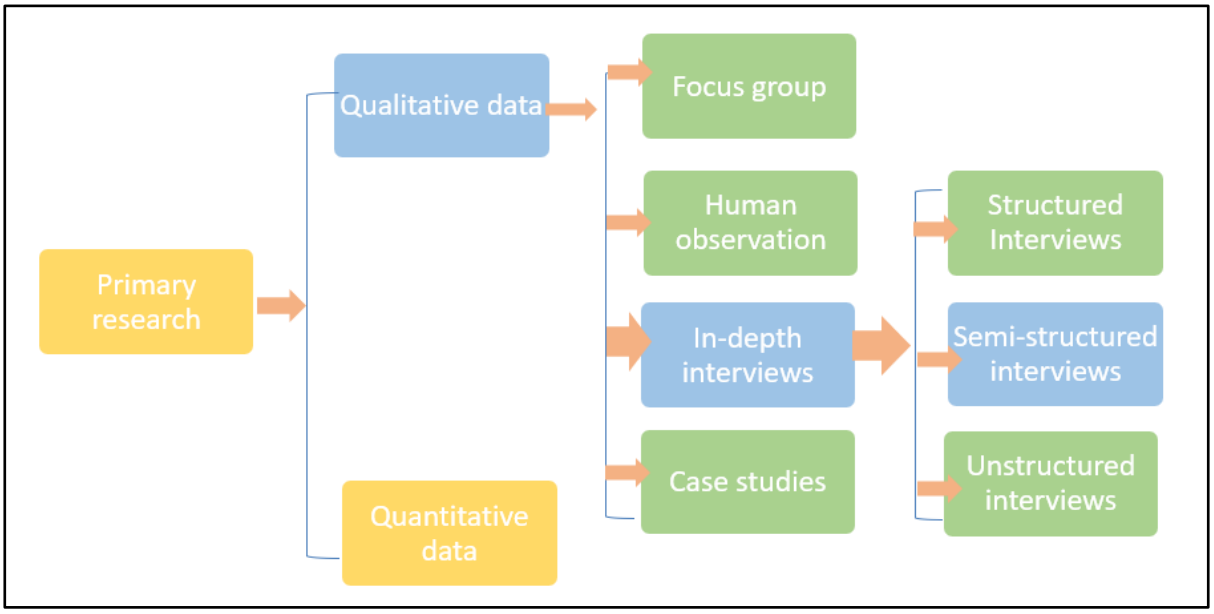


Figure 4.7: Primary research method – qualitative data

Source: Adapted from Morrison (2002)

The techniques used to obtain qualitative data include the following:

- **Focus groups** are conducted by trained moderators who are responsible for directing the discussion. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:183), between eight and 12 respondents gather in a central facility to discuss a research topic.

- **Human observations** are a systematic process of recording the interactive patterns of people, objects and occurrences without questioning them. An observer relies on his/her supervision proficiencies rather than communication to collect information (McMillan, 2014:376; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018:211).

- **In-depth interviews**: Kumar (2019:221) reports that interviews facilitate a real interaction between both respondents and researchers. Individual in-depth interviews can be categorised based on the contents of questions into semi-structured, structured and unstructured interviews.

- **Case studies**: This method examines current real-life situations and applies the findings of the case to the problem under study. Case studies involve detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their relationships. Case studies assist a researcher to understand complex matters and add strength to what is already known through previous research done (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:178), such as in the case of alumni loyalty and Northlink College.

After considering the different techniques to collect qualitative data, the interview was selected as data collection tool as interviews are appropriate when there is a need to collect in-depth information.

4.9.1 Interviews

Interviews are a prominent data collection strategy in both qualitative and quantitative research studies (Vasileiou, 2018:2). However, interviews are more commonly associated with a qualitative research approach (Wilson, 2014:1530). Bryman and Bell (2014:215) argue that the flexibility of interviews makes it a very attractive data collection strategy, especially when combined with observations such as looking, hearing, smelling, or touching. Interviews allow researchers to be accustomed with the associations of everyday activities.

The objectives of the interviews applicable to this study, as recommended by Leedy *et al*. (2019:240) and Bell *et al*. (2022: 365), are as listed below:

- Examine the perceptions of stakeholders in terms of efforts to attract, maintain and enhance ongoing relationships with alumni.

- Obtain an explanation of management, the marketing team and alumni on the current alumni policy.

- Seek a wider perspective on the existence and value of alumni.

- What constitutes the components of a loyal relationship with stakeholders?

- Examine the interest of stakeholders in engaging with communities on the local, national and international levels.

- The respondents' views on the stakeholders' behaviour towards relationships.

There are also several *advantages* associated with in-depth interviews, as per Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:188), Leedy *et al*. (2019:241) and Bell *et al*. (2022: 365), and are:

- The ability to engage in verbal and non-verbal communication.

- The respondents' feedback can be recorded (if permitted), which implies accuracy.

- There is greater flexibility when asking questions.

- The interviewer can probe for in-depth answers.

- The completion is immediate.

- The interviewer is in control of the process, which permits the interviewer to clarify any misunderstanding.

- The interviewer can attend to any queries immediately.

Qualitative research interviews can be structured, semi-structured or even unstructured (Bryman & Bell, 2014:215). In order to embrace information relevant to a specific research study it was necessary to select an appropriate interview method and the options were:

- Structured interviews: An interviewer asks interviewees a series of pre-established questions, allowing only a restricted number of responses. Therefore, structured interviews are rigid as the interviewer reads from a script and deviates from it as little as possible (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:15; Gutterman *et al*., 2015:559).

- Semi-structured interviews: This involves prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner, interposed with probes designed to provoke richer responses, as indicated by Gutterman *et al*. (2015:559). Therefore, the focus is on the interview guide incorporating a series of broad themes to be covered.

- Unstructured interviews: McMillan *et al*. (2014:222), Gutterman *et al*. (2015:559), Kumar (2019:221) and Leedy *et al*. (2019:235) explained that the unstructured interview is a process

that shapes an individual's situation and milieu, intending to make the interviewee feel relaxed and un-evaluated.

An individual semi-structured interview was employed as a research tool as semi-structured interviews encourage two-way communication whereby a small number of participants are interviewed to explore their perspectives on a particular idea or situation. These mentioned interviews enabled going into a great deal of detail with a single participant. Hesse-Biber (2015:468) explained that semi-structured interviews rely on a certain set of questions whereby an interviewer tries to guide the conversation to remain loosely on those questions. An individual semi-structured interview probes interviewees with supplementary questions to generate diverse factual information. Therefore, conducting in-depth interviews, as determined by Leedy *et al*. (2019:235), is not an insignificant operation, as it requires the use of various skills, such as intensive listening and note-making.

Semi-structured interviews make use of open-ended questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:150) allowing for a thorough understanding of participants' opinions referenced to different variables (Vos *et al*., 1997:290; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:188; Marshall & Rossman, 2016:151). In-depth interviews, as reported by Gutterman *et al*. (2015:559), often turn out more information and knowledge that may not have been thought of in advance. When such knowledge emerges, a researcher is likely to allow the conversation to develop into exploring new topics. Consistent with this, Marshall and Rossman (2016:152) uphold that a semi-structured interview is an exchange of ideas based on open-ended questions.

4.9.2 Qualitative research instrument

A research instrument is described as a tool used to collect data from participants (Brynard *et al*., 2014:39; Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:173; Morgan, 2014:47). Litheko (2019:147) points out that research instruments offer many alternatives to choose from, which include a questionnaire, an interview, observation and many more. Research instruments are simply devices to obtain information relevant to a specific research study. Litheko further commented that in his judgement, no single research instrument is inherently superior to any others, because each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

For the enhancement of the authenticity of information, measuring instruments need to be tested for reliability and validity, as advised by Chai *et al*. (2022:1), and this is discussed in the ensuing section.

4.9.2.1 Validity and reliability of research instruments

Validity and reliability are important constructs to justify research quality (Nha, 2021:1; Cha *et al*., 2022:1). The criteria of validity and reliability apply in principle to assess quality for both qualitative and quantitative research, though it differs in the nature and type of processes of ontology and epistemology that differentiate them. The scholars Bong (2002:3), Nowell and Norris (2017:15) and Byrne (2021:1340) all concur that qualitative studies follow a rigorous and precise procedure throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation to make a study reliable and valid. These scholars reason that the intention of qualitative research is not to generalise outcomes, and therefore reliability and validity are not functional terms to use within qualitative studies. A broader perspective has been adopted by Nowell *et al*. (2017:3), who said that qualitative researchers prefer to use the concept of 'trustworthiness' to measure reliability and validity, which is further divided into:

(1) **Credibility** refers to the precision with which the data provided by participants is interpreted. Credibility is also increased by making use of triangulation, where more than one research method is used in the study, where qualitative and quantitative approaches are used to collect data.

(2) **Transferability** is the degree to which the results and analysis can be applied beyond a specific research study (Vasileiou, 2018:14).

(3) **Dependability** refers to the quality of the process of amalgamation that takes place between the data collection method, data analysis and the theory founded on the collected data (Nowell *et al*., 2017:3).

(4) **Confirmability** indicates how well the findings flow from the data. It indicates how well the research process was described in detail to assist other scholars in scrutinising the research design.

Nha (2021:1), though, doubts whether these concepts, i.e. validity and reliability, indeed are important for the qualitative research approach. It is still imperative that all qualitative researchers incorporate validity and reliability to enhance the credibility of a study during the research design and implementation and these two concepts are further explored.

***Firstly,* validity**: Researchers make use of validity in qualitative studies to declare a study's precision, accuracy and trustworthiness (Lawrence & Tar, 2013:30). Cha *et al*. (2022:1) described validity as the extent to which information presented by a study truly reflects the research problem under investigation. Moreover, validity involves a research instrument's ability to measure what it

is supposed to measure. However, Du-Plooy *et al*. (2014:253), Kumar (2019:270) and Nha (2021:6) caution that research instruments used for data collection purposes should be of decent quality, as well as trustworthy, in order to effectively gauge the frame of mind of participants.

***Secondly,* reliability**: Reliability can be obtained in a qualitative study by ensuring that the in-depth semi-structured interviews are conducted with only specified sample members, as prescribed by Kumar (2019:276). To ensure reliability, control measures ought to be undertaken and include a well-designed interview guide that encourages factual commentaries throughout the interviews (Kumar, 2019:272; Nha, 2021:6). Discussions are also to be tape-recorded and made available for clarification. The integrity of the transcribing process is to be tested on the interview transcripts to improve reliability. It is recommended by literature that all interview transcripts are to be kept for the purpose of the verification process (Kumar, 2019:276).

Subsequently, the qualitative research instrument constructed for the purpose of this study was an interview guide in line with the above guidelines and this is deliberated in the ensuing section.

4.9.2.2 Interview guide

Leedy *et al*. (2019:224) and Saunders *et al*. (2019:152) describe an interview guide as a list of themes, issues or questions around the research topic (as in this case, pertaining to the different dimensions of relationship marketing contributing to alumni loyalty) that needs to be covered during the interviews. These themes, issues and questions are based on an extensive review of the literature under investigation. As it was to be semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was deemed ideal to encourage participants to actively take part and it also offered participants an opportunity to talk freely (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:18; Saunders *et al*., 2019 176) on a given theme, in this case, students, relationship marketing, alumni, community engagement and the higher education environment. To ensure validity and reliability as control measures, a well-designed interview guide is vital.

The first section of the interview guide (refer to Annexure C) deals with the demographic profile of the participants and entails three questions. This was followed by the different components of relationship marketing that can influence loyal alumni.

Covered under this section were questions aimed at extracting the following items:

- Student experiences: Starting the discussion with student experiences with regard to NC's user-friendly social media and positive academic experiences.

- College identity: Questions under this section were aimed at reinforcing the importance of distinctiveness.

- Northlink culture and values: Covered under this section were questions to clarify accountability and transparency.

- Financial support: Questions were directed at extracting the needs for a bursary.

- Community engagement: Questions under this section were aimed at the desire to 'give back' to the college and be involved within their own communities.

The different relationship marketing dimensions to be maintained for mutually beneficial long-term relationships were covered in this section through questions aimed at extracting the following items:

- *Satisfaction*: Covered in this section were questions to address the value of satisfaction in order to maintain long-term relationships.

- *Trust*: Questions were directed at attaining the importance of sincerity, reliability and integrity.

- *Commitment*: Questions in this section were aimed at the responsibility to actively participate in alumni activities.

- *Loyal alumni*: Questions were directed at the maintaining of long-term relationships with an alma mater.

Table 4.5 presents the dimensions and probing questions, and indicates the scholars who based their studies on these identified dimensions.

Table 4.5: Dimensions used in the qualitative method

Dimension	Probing questions	References
Student experiences	• Does Northlink College provide students with positive academic experiences? • Do you think students receive support in the transition from high school to college? • Do students experience the website and social media of NC as user-friendly, appealing and informative? • Do you think students develop the ability to work in groups?	McAlexander & Koenig (2001); Sung & Yang (2009); Koenig-Lewis *et al*. (2015); Rust (2015); Schlesinger & Cervera (2015); Carales & Nora (2020); Setiwan *et al*. (2020)

Dimension	Probing questions	References
College identity	• What can be done to reveal the traditions and values of NC students? • Ways to establish and maintain sustainable long-term relationships with the college and other stakeholders? • How does NC promote a culture of integrity, loyalty and ethical values?	Mael & Ashforth (1992); Drezner (2010); Johnson *et al*. (2010); Valitov (2014); Rust (2015); Stephenson & Yerger (2015); Dennis *et al.* (2016); Rauschnabel *et al*. (2016); Drezner (2018); Peruta & Helm (2018); Vidal & Pittz (2018); Khanna *et al*. (2019)
NC culture and values	• Does NC make it clear to students that education is the most important tool for development? • Are the values of NC (accountability, transparency and life-long learning) similar to those of students? • How would you describe the attitude of students concerning the joy of giving to others? • What can be done to improve students reaching their personal goals? • How do students perceive the 'service quality' of NC?	MacMillan *et al*. (2005); Helgesen (2008); Johnson *et al*. (2010); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Vidal & Pittz (2018); Barroso-Méndez *et al*. (2020); Giambatista *et al*. (2020)
Financial support	• How do you think students manage financial burdens? • What are students' challenges if working while learning? • Do you think students need to support their families with money? • Are students grateful for the NSFAS bursary? • Do you experience that students enrol only to receive NSFAS? • What can be done to motivate students to contribute financially as alumni?	Garvey & Drezner (2019); Carales & Nora (2020); Sylvester & Myran (2020)
Community engagement	• Are students aware of the concepts of volunteering and community engagement? In which way can you be involved to encourage these concepts? • Do students have the desire to 'give back' to the college? • How does NC encourage students to be involved in their own communities by being helpful and kind to others? • Do you think NC students will contribute their time and expertise towards NC and the community after completion of studies?	Clary & Snyder (1999); Owen & Hill (2011); Shaker & Nathan (2017); Webb Farley (2018); Campbell & Baxter (2019); Garvey & Drezner (2019); Snijders *et al*. (2019); Campbell *et al*. (2020); Giambatista *et al*. (2020)
Trust	• Does NC teach students how to maintain personal and professional life balance? • Do you think the college reacts quickly and efficiently to students' needs? • How does the college demonstrate friendliness, courtesy and goodwill towards its students? • What are students' perceptions of NC's sincerity to better student trust?	Holdford & White (1997); Ghosh *et al*. (2001); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Bormann & Thies (2019); Acun (2020); Clément *et al*. (2020)

Dimension	Probing questions	References
Commitment	• Are students interested in receiving regular information on the activities of NC? • Do students feel emotionally committed to NC because of their education and individual development? • Why would you think will students recommend NC to friends and relatives? • Does the college discuss the role of alumni to encourage students to actively participate in alumni activities?	Pedro *et al*. (2017); Wilson *et al*. (2018); Azila-Gbettor (2020); Haqka & Setiadi (2020); Yousaf *et al*. (2020)
Satisfaction	• Do positive shared cultural values influence students' overall satisfaction with the college? • Do you think peer mentoring would improve students' satisfaction with the college? • How does NC encourage students to be academically active and believe in life-long learning? • Do you think NC students want to be identified with a successful brand, such as NC? • What can be done to increase students' satisfaction?	Heckman & Guskey (1998); Jurkowitsch *et al*. (2006); Oluseye *et al*. (2014); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Perez-Macias *et al*. (2019); Acun (2020)
Loyal alumni	• Do you experience any loyalty from students? If not, what are the reasons for that? • Do you think NC students want to be in a 'relationship' with NC after graduation? • Will former students be interested in gladly returning to NC to attend other courses? • Do the students' experiences compare favourably with their expectations? • As a student, I value the support services (IT, academic advising/learning) rendered to me by NC.	Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2008); Rojas-Mendéz *et al*. (2009); Johnson *et al*. (2010); Abubakar & Mokhtar (2015); Rust (2015); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Drezner (2018); Gallo (2018); Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018)

The recruitment of participants determines the value of the data obtained and this vital step in the research process is subsequently elaborated on.

4.9.2.3 Recruitment of participants

Recruitment encompasses all the activities engaged in when selecting and approaching suitable sample participants for a research study. The recruitment of study participants indicates the start of the informed consent process and poses one of the greatest challenges for researchers dealing with human subjects. To start off this process, permission was obtained from the principal of Northlink College to conduct research prior to contacting potential participants.

To establish a proficient interview, interviewers need to be acquainted with the background, values and outlooks of respondents (McMillan *et al*., 2014:381). Within this context, the heads of departments and programme managers with eras of experience in education, especially in the TVET sector, former students of Northlink College (as alumni), and members of the marketing

team, who all have experience in the daily operations of Northlink College, were deemed suitable as participants. This view is supported by McMillan *et al*. (2014:381), who confirm that in-depth interviews with individuals who have special knowledge, status or communication skills and who are willing to share, can be prominently employed as participants, as in this case.

A total of 19 participants, ten from management and the marketing department, as well as nine alumni, were contacted individually to arrange for a suitable time and date to conduct the interviews. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, and provided with procedures, as well as any potential risks and benefits associated with their involvement. Their consent was obtained verbally, indicating that an oral consent process was employed. By doing so, participants were able to voluntarily agree/disagree to partake in the study from an informed position. It is known that informed consent of human subjects is essential for an objective study. A follow-up telephone call was made to confirm if the interviewee was still available for the interview.

4.9.2.4 Conducting the interview

On the time of the interview, the following recommended procedures (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:188; Marshall & Rossman, 2016:118; Leedy *et al*., 2019:241; Bell *et al*., 2022: 365; Marshall & Rossman, 2016:118) were upheld:

- Participants were greeted and thanked for the opportunity granted for interviewing.
- The nature of the study, as well as the purpose and relevance of the importance of long-term relationships with alumni was addressed.
- Participants were asked to answer to their best knowledge/opinion on the questions.
- The questions are coherent and asked in understandable English to enhance easy understanding and responses.
- Participants were motivated to answer honestly.
- The participants' responses were recorded with their consent with additional notes to avoid misconceptions of facts to augment the accuracy of data collection.
- Care was taken not to exceed 40 minutes to eliminate possible boredom.
- Lastly, participants were thanked for their cooperation and thoughtful responses.

A smartphone was used to record the conversations and additional handwritten notes were made concurrently with the recording. The digital recording of the data and notetaking in writing took place simultaneously to ensure accuracy and reliability. Interviews were conducted in the participants' natural setting – in the offices of the marketing and management participants, while alumni were interviewed in coffee shops or reached with the aid of telephone calls since it is a quick and relatively cheap way of gathering information, should participants not be available for a face-to-face meeting. Validity and reliability of in-depth interviews depend on the extent to which a researcher is able to extract information from the selected participants.

Following is an expansion of the characteristics of the research population.

4.9.3 Research population

Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:132) and Brynard *et al*. (2014:57) describe a research population as the total group of people or entities from whom information is required. The ultimate research population is able to include everyone within an area of study, but the goal of including everyone just is not pragmatic (Widd & Diggines, 2009:195; Leedy *et al*., 2019:236; Cash *et al*., 2022:2).

The target population for the purpose of the qualitative component of this study is portrayed as the management and marketing teams, as well as alumni of Northlink College. Currently, Northlink College does not maintain any archives of alumni.

The three phases in selecting a sample for the qualitative research component were followed: (1) sampling techniques; (2) sample size; and (3) sample frame. Following is an assessment of these three stages.

4.9.3.1 Sampling

A sample, according to Malhotra (2010:336), Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:137), Zikmund and Babin (2012:58), and more recently Chae *et al*. (2022:7), is made up of some members of the research population. Therefore, conclusions and generalities referring to the research population will be as reputable as those samples assembled. In the same vein, Chae (2022:8) advocates that the quality indicator for the sampling process is whether researchers are unblemished about the representativeness of their sample populations. A crucial concept, namely power analysis, is also tied to sampling when researchers need to determine an appropriate sample size necessary to employ particular statistical methodologies (Cash *et al*., 2022:2). Cash *et al*. (2022:2) confirmed the importance of a power analysis as imperative since it points out the required sample size to prevent false, nonsignificant findings.

4.9.3.2 Sampling techniques

There are two main categories of sampling, according to Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:132) and Chae *et al*. (2022:7).

Probability sampling: This design requires that every respondent in the population has an equal and independent chance of being selected for inclusion. This method is scientific, preferred, systematic and often used in quantitative studies, because it removes human bias from the sampling process (Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:137; Enwereji, 2019:26). Four methods of sampling can be classified under probability sampling, namely simple random, systematic, stratified and cluster sampling, as indicated in Table 4.7. The primary requirement for a probability sample though is a sample frame.

Table 4.6: Description of probability sampling techniques

Method	Description
Simple random	Assign a number to each member of the sampling frame, then select sample units by random methods.
Systematic	Natural ordering of the sample frame; select an arbitrary starting point, and select items at a preselected interval.
Stratified	Divide the population into groups and randomly select subsamples from each group. Variations include proportional and optimal allocation of subsample sizes.
Cluster	Select sampling units at random, then do a complete observation of all units or draw a probability sample in the group.

Non-probability sampling: This design, according to Blumberg *et al*. (2011:243) and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2014:137), is used when it is nearly impossible to determine who the entire population is, or when it is difficult to gain access to the entire population. Non-probability sampling is based on a researcher's subjective consideration and does not provide all members of the targeted populations with the same likelihood of being chosen. However, it allows generating samples based on participant qualities relevant to a study (Rafail, 2018:197; Cash *et al*., 2022:3). A sample will be carefully selected from an accessible population, though the focus is on how many participants are needed to gain an in-depth understanding of the research problem (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014:137; Vasileiou, 2018:3). Non-probability sampling methods include quota, convenience, purposive sampling (also known as judgemental), and snowball sampling as indicated in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Description of non-probability sampling techniques

Method	Description
Convenience	Use the most convenient sample.
Purposive sampling (judgemental)	Select a sample to fulfil a purpose, such as ensuring that all members have a certain characteristic.
Quota	Classify the population by pertinent properties, determine the desired proportion to sample each class, and fix quotas for each interviewer.
Snowball	Initial respondents are selected by probability samples; additional respondents are obtained by referral from initial respondents.

A non-probability sampling method was embraced for the qualitative research component of this study due to the absence of a research sample frame. According to Wiid and Diggines (2009:199) and Vasileiou (2018:9), if it is nearly impossible to determine the entire population, applying non-probability techniques does not denote worthy results and trustworthiness cannot be confirmed. The most appropriate type of sampling method suitable to the nature and scope of the qualitative study was convenience sampling. Sreejesh *et al*. (2014:74) confirmed this method of sampling as effective as it relies on data collection from a population that is convenient, available to take part, and possesses geographical nearness.

What differentiates these designs, for a qualitative or quantitative approach, is the predetermined sample size, as mentioned by Creswell (2014:75) as well as Kumar (2019:292). Although it is generally acknowledged that qualitative analyses require a smaller sample size than quantitative analyses, the sample size should still be large enough to obtain responses that represent the views of the population.

4.9.3.3 Sample size

Sample size in qualitative research has been the subject of continuing discussions (Cash *et al*., 2022) as research experts reason that there is no straightforward solution to the requirements of how many participants should be included as a sample size. Bryman and Bell (2014:176) maintain sampling can never be 100% correct and these authors opine that the sample to be used is often a case of judgement, rather than a calculation. According to Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:135), there are no fixed rules for determining sample sizes and recommend choosing a sample that is big enough to yield a relatively precise estimate of a population's values, which is financially viable, and easily put into practice. Conferring to these scholars, Leedy *et al*. (2019:245) emphasise that sample size is not a simple matter given that sample size governs the reliability and validity of the research conclusions.

Bryman and Bell (2014:176) and Leedy *et al*. (2019:245) categorically state that samples, even as small as four participants, can extract extremely accurate statistics and therefore are key to making research affordable and if done with integrity, also credible. For many years, scholars such as Bryman and Bell (2014:176) and Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:135) have opined that small samples can be quite sufficient in providing complete and accurate information within a particular subject matter, as long as the participants possess a certain degree of expertise about the domain of inquiry, as in this case, the management and marketing employees and alumni of Northlink College. This view is supported by Hazra (2017) who posits that the more useable data is collected from each participant, the fewer participants are needed.

Green and Thorogood (2005:89) maintain that the experience of most qualitative researchers conducting in-depth interviews is that little new information is generated after interviewing 20 participants. To verify the 19 participants guideline for qualitative studies, a study titled *Characterizing and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: Systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a fifteen-year period* by Vasileiou (2018:11) conveyed that a sample of eight participants is appropriate since the exploratory nature of the research study is applicable, as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, to date, no consensus has been reached on specific rules to determine an appropriate sample size in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2014:176). In terms of principles, some time ago, Lincoln and Guba (1985:289) already proposed that sample size determination is to be guided by the criterion of 'informational redundancy'. That is, sampling can be dismissed when no supplementary information is extracted by sampling more elements. Undoubtedly, the most widely used principle for determining sample size is 'saturation' – a qualitative methodological approach unambiguously concerned with empirically-derived theory development when it becomes obvious that gathering repeated data no longer triggers new theoretical insights – saturation emerged as the 'gold standard' in qualitative research (Vasileiou, 2018:3).

Creswell *et al.* (2014:35) and Kumar (2019:272) contend that a small sample size threatens the content validity of results. Similarly, Vasileiou (2018:14) asserts a major concern from a small sample size pertaining to the internal validity of findings. Unlike the aforementioned scholars, Lawrence and Tar (2013:32) and Devlin (2018:17) claim that the validity of the qualitative sample depends not so much on the small sample size, but on the degree of expertise participating in the study. These scholars hold the view that a small number of specifically chosen participants can bring in a higher quality of information than larger groups. Participants selected for this specific study included members of management, marketing and alumni who are all considered to be well-informed with many years of expertise in the education sector.

The last stage in selecting a sample for qualitative research constitutes the sample frame, which will now be addressed.

4.9.3.4 Sample frame

Ivankova (2006:10) and Beukes (2014:165) describe a sample frame as a list that identifies the units of a target population. When evaluating the usefulness and proficiency of any sample frame for qualitative research, it is important, as with quantitative research, to consider whether the frame is all-embracing, meaning the sample selected signifies the target population. The sample frame should contain a sufficient number to provide the sample size required. However, a sample frame could not be constructed for the purpose of the qualitative component of this study and non-probability sampling was exploited. A set of criteria was determined for sample members to be considered and this is indicated in Table 4.8. The following section discusses the qualitative data analysis.

Table 4:8: Participants' profile criteria

Quality	Purpose
Name of participant	Recording and keeping the names and contact details of participants are important should elucidation be needed at a later stage. However, pseudo names were assigned to every participant.
Position held	To ensure that the position held is at a level that exposes the participant to issues regarding alumni development and has an adequate understanding of the issues relevant to the study.
Length of time in TVET colleges	To ensure the work experience of participants is adequate to justify his/her opinion as an expert.

4.9.4 Qualitative data analysis

The objective of qualitative data analysis is to examine the intensity and significant content of qualitative data. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships and underlying themes; it investigates, describes and builds understanding as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006:95) and Marshall and Rossman (2016:180). Qualitative data analysis requires making own interpretations and highlighting patterns established in the data in a way that it can be recognised and straightforwardly understood (Ivankova *et al*., 2006:4; Lawrence & Tar, 2013:32). Some time ago, Bong (2002:1) identified 26 different methodologies to qualitative analysis. This variety of qualitative approaches denotes that there is no single methodological model to analyse qualitative data and the approach followed by a researcher depends on the goal of the research. Leedy *et al.* (2019:24) and Saunders *et al*. (2019:185) noted that qualitative data analysis should follow definite steps to ensure reliable and credible results. Braun and Clarke

(2006:95) proposed a six-stage process for analysing qualitative data enabling the identification and tending to the most important aspects of a thematic analysis. It is important to realise that the six-phase process is only a guideline that should be applied in an accommodating manner to analyse qualitative data (Byrne, 2021:1393). A synopsis of the six phases is subsequently provided.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data. Firstly, a researcher has to be familiar with the data by actively listening to each interview recording before transcribing the recording. Active listening is imperative to capture the key points to develop an understanding of the primary areas addressed in each interview

Phase 2: Generating initial codes: Codes are elementary building blocks that will later become themes (Byrne, 2021:1393). The process of coding is undertaken to produce short and snappy descriptions of labels for pieces of information that may be of relevance to the research questions. Nowell and Norris (2017:4) opine that coding refers to a process of breaking qualitative data down into themes. Likewise, Lawrence and Tar (2013:30) refer to open coding, which entails grouping interview transcripts with analogous themes into groups and subcategories. Codes should be brief and any item of data that might be useful in attending to the research questions should be coded.

Phase 3: Generating themes: This phase begins when all relevant data items have been coded. The coded data is reviewed and analysed as to how different codes may be combined according to shared meanings so that it may form themes and sub-themes (Nowell *et al*., 2017:3; Byrne, 2021:1394).

Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes: This phase involves theme filtering, which entails a thorough examination of themes and sub-themes in order to look for apparent associations (Byrne, 2021:1394). Chen *et al*. (2012:1331) pronounced that related topics are to be merged to produce a single dominant theme. It is quite normal at this phase that codes as well as themes are amended and even removed to facilitate the most meaningful interpretation of qualitative data.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes: It is at this point required to identify which data items are to be used as data excerpts when composing the findings. Braun and Clark (2006:95) refer to this phase as mapping the themes that emerged from the investigation. The aforementioned scholars state that the mapping process entails recognising and describing the themes that emerged from data analysis.

Phase 6: Producing the report: The final phase is to identify themes that were linked to the research question and study objectives and inferences are enticed from the findings.

To facilitate the analysis of qualitative data, computer software packages were developed and Atlas.ti was used for the purpose of this study. The subsequent discussion disentangles the quantitative component as applicable to this study.

4.10 Quantitative component: data collection process

Creswell *et al*. (2014:82) and Antwi and Hamza (2015:221) contend that quantitative research is a process that is systematic and objective in its ways of using numerical data from a selected group. It further attempts to be independent of the studied phenomena and tries to generalise findings. Quantitative research is based on the post-positivist paradigm. Kumar (2014:189) and Morgan (2014:48) pinpoint that a quantitative approach explores large sample sizes, seeks to determine relationships between variables, explains the reliability and validity of findings, reports findings in analytical and numeric format, and draws conclusions that can be universal. Moreover, Brynard *et al*. (2014:39) point out that quantitative research is used to explain, predict, and control a phenomenon that is perceived as a true occurrence that can be understood, identified, measured and controlled. Quantitative research, according to Quinlan (2011:325) and Dillman *et al*. (2014:56), is independent of a researcher, because a researcher remains emotionally separated, and neutral and studies the research problem without bias. As a result, the data can be used to empirically measure reality. This study involved accumulating and exploring statistical data and intended to draw conclusions based on the hypotheses posited.

Different types of instruments are used in quantitative studies to collect data as depicted in Figure 4.8.

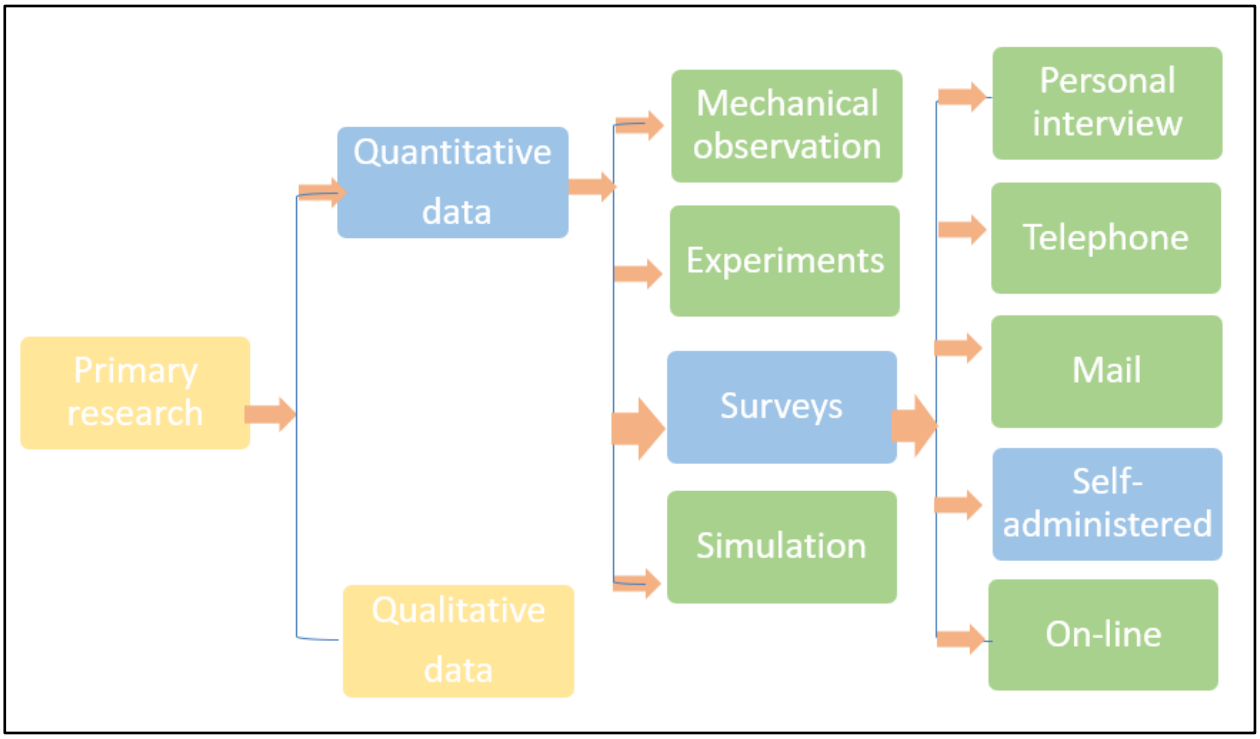


Figure 4.8: Primary research methods: Quantitative data

Source: Litheko (2019)

Following is a synopsis of the types of quantitative data collection tools that can be utilised.

- Mechanical observation: This is the systematic process of recording the behavioural patterns of participants, objects and occurrences without communicating with participants or objects. A broader perspective has been adopted by Creswell (2014:82) who asserts that observation is an everyday activity whereby researchers use their senses and intuition to gather data.

- Experiments are designed to answer a specific kind of research question, namely the cause-and-effect questions (Ang, 2014:155).

- Surveys: Ang (2014:155) and Creswell (2014:82) described a survey as the evaluation of the current status, opinions, beliefs and attitudes with questionnaires or interviews.

- Simulation is any research where researchers create a model of some authentic phenomenon (Ang, 2014:156).

For the purpose of this study, the survey method was featured as the most ideal method for collecting the quantitative data needed.

4.10.1 Surveys

Surveys are mainly used in studies that have individuals as units of analysis, according to Ang (2014:155), who also said that survey research is probably the best method available to accumulate primary data to define a population too large to observe unambiguously. Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:149), and more recently Dereji *et al*. (2021:2), described survey research as a study to determine the prevalence, frequency and distribution of certain characteristics in a population. It was therefore decided to conduct a survey with a research instrument in the form of a questionnaire to gather the quantitative data needed, based on facts and theories to access students' responses to questions. A self-administered questionnaire was regarded as the most appropriate instrument to be used because of its potential to collect large amounts of data from the sample in a short period of time (Dereji *et al*., 2021:2).

The subsequent section explores the research instrument designed for collecting the quantitative data needed for the purpose of this study.

4.10.2 Quantitative research instrument

A research instrument is designed to collect data from a sample population (Crane *et al*., 2017:101). Fundamentally, it should be ensured that the instrument chosen is valid and reliable, as mentioned by Ivankova *et al*. (2006:7) and Dereje *et al*. (2022:2), in order to gather useable data. Whatever procedure is used to collect data must be critically examined to check the extent to which it is likely to provide the expected results. The main instruments used in the mixed-methods approach specifically for this study consisted of a closed-ended questionnaire for the quantitative method, supplemented by in-depth interviews for the qualitative method. The different methods of gathering information supplement each other and consequently boost the validity and reliability of the findings (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:150).

4.10.2.1 Validity and reliability of research instruments

Validity and reliability are two concepts that originated from quantitative research, which follows positivism with the intention to generalise perceived rules. Validity comprises a research instrument's ability to measure what it is supposed to measure (du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:253; Kumar, 2017:270; Nha, 2021:6). Chae *et al*. (2022:1) described validity as the extent to which information presented by a research study truly reflects the research problem under investigation. Kumar (2019:270) prompted scholars that data obtained is based on individuals' replies that may

not be a true reflection of reality due to either misunderstanding, simply not telling the truth, or simply not being interested in taking part. Construct validity was obtained by formulating questionnaires ensuring that all questions were relevant to what was supposed to be investigated. The questions were constructed from the outcome of the extensive literature review as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the documents analysis, and discussions with experienced participants in the TVET sector. In the case of this study, the same questionnaire was used to maintain consistency in responses from respondents. The research instrument was attuned to be 'easy to understand'. For these reasons, the validity of data collected cannot be assured as it would be in the natural sciences. Validity was further sustained by ensuring that questionnaires were administered only to students of Northlink College.

Reliability is the extent to which data collection techniques yield consistent findings, with similar observations and conclusions as other researchers, according to Du-Plooy *et al*. (2014:254) and Nha, (2021:4). Quinlan (2011:42) describes reliability in social science as it "*relates to the degree to which the research can be repeated while obtaining consistent results*". In the same vein, Kumar (2019:270) affirms that reliability ensures that the process of data collection is done in an accurate way to ensure that appropriate data is consistent with research questions. The same questionnaire was used to maintain consistency in answers from participants. However, it should be noted that total reliability is not common in the case of the social sciences, because human beings are dealt with in divergent and ever-changing social circumstances, as stated by Kumar (2019:270). Grounded in the latter statement, this study included participants from different backgrounds, circumstances, and locations.

Questionnaires as research instruments are subsequently scrutinised.

4.10.2.2 Questionnaires

A questionnaire, as explained by Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:152), Dereje *et al*. (2021:2) and Anaesth (2022:1), is a written list of questions used to collect facts, opinions and feelings from participants. There are different types of questions that can be used to obtain specific information about a defined problem. *Firstly*, structured questions with structured responses include: dichotomous, multiple-choice, checklists, ranking and scaled questions (De Wet, 1994:43). *Secondly*, there are structured questions with unstructured responses, also called open-ended questions, and Dillman *et al*. (2014:117) described that open-ended questions are those in which a participant must choose one response from a set of fixed options that best explains the variable being studied.

Furthermore, there are also different types of questionnaires such as self-administered or professionally administered interviews and according to the mode of delivery, paper-based or electronic media-based (Anaesth, 2022:1). For the purpose of this study, a structured self-administered paper-and-pen questionnaire with closed-ended questions were employed as the bulk of participants do not have access to a computer. Only closed-ended questions were included in the questionnaire to save participants time when filling it out and to express freely their own opinions on their perceived role as students of Northlink College. The structured self-administered questionnaire was designed explicitly to be completed by participants without any assistance, as encapsulated by Enwereji (2019:19). The major benefits of using a structured self-administered questionnaire were to obtain a vast amount of data, which was relatively inexpensive, fast and efficient, in accordance with the recommendations of Dereje *et al*. (2021:2).

Du-Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:152) view a questionnaire as a popular data collection tool among researchers engaged in primary research. Additionally, it is comforting to keep in mind that questionnaires are unbiased research tools that produce generalisable conclusions from a broad sample of the population. In this study, a questionnaire was employed as a data collection strategy as questionnaires make use of objective, mathematical and scientific methods that decrease the likelihood of errors, allowing for the achievement of accurate data (Johnson *et al*., 2017:65).

Dereje *et al*. (2021:2) postulated the following advantages of questionnaires over other quantitative data-collection instruments:

- The questionnaire is based on research questions that are related to the study's research problem.
- During the literature review, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, previous research on relationship marketing and the involvement of alumni is consulted.
- The questionnaire designer needs to ensure that sample members fully understand the questions and inhibit respondents' likeliness to reject to answer, be dishonest, or try to disguise their viewpoints.
- It provides greater secrecy because there is no face-to-face interaction.
- It provides opportunities to gather the most complete and accurate information from participants.
- Questionnaires are easy to manage data and relatively cheap to administer.

- Participants can easily answer questions without a researcher's physical command due to easy-to-follow layout.

- Questions can be easily coded and analysed scientifically to present thorough answers to the research problem under investigation.

- A high response rate can be maintained by informing participants of the purpose of a study and asking them if they are willing to be involved, rather than issuing questionnaires erratically.

- Questionnaires bridge and quantify responses and participants usually are more willing to tick boxes than to write or type out extensive answers.

Contrary to these and other advantages, Kumar (2019:154) accentuates that quantitative research lacks the ability to make in-depth analysis and elaborations due to the inability to interact with participants.

The succeeding section explores the design principles and guidelines of questionnaires.

4.10.2.3 Questionnaire design

Designing a questionnaire is an art that is unfortunately neglected by many researchers, as a well-designed questionnaire is complex and time-consuming (Anaesth, 2022:2). The design of a questionnaire is crucial as it is an extremely important aspect of the research process, given that it is the instrument with which the data is generated, and it ultimately governs whether the research objectives will be accomplished. Designing a questionnaire requires attention to the following: (1) appearance, (2) question sequence, (3) wording of questions, and (4) response categories. Feinburg *et al*. (2013:3), Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:150) and Dereje *et al*. (2021:2) accentuated that the design of the layout of a questionnaire should get special attention as it is vital to ensure that it is easy to read, pleasant to the eye, and that the sequence of the questions is easy to follow. Dillman *et al*. (2014:117) hold the view that the most important principle in questionnaire design is to keep questions as short as possible, and as simple as possible to enhance understanding. For the purpose of this study, the questionnaire was designed only in English for consistency.

The goal of questionnaire design is to make sure the research questions are aligned with the research problem of a study and the following apply to this study:

- Previous research performed on the topic was consulted during the literature review chapters of the study.

- In order to reach the study's goal, the objectives were addressed when drafting the questions.
- For quality purposes, questions of the same theme should be included in the quantitative and qualitative data instruments.
- During the questionnaire design process, the research guidelines offered by scholars were taken into account.

A cover letter requesting participants' consent precedes the questionnaire and contains the study's goal, along with the name and contact details of the researcher and title, as recommended by Gomwe (2021:143). Dillman *et al*. (2014:117) indicated that an attractive physical look, as well as a clear introduction to the questionnaire, are critical in gaining participants' assistance. In the design of the questionnaire, clear instructions were given that guided the participants through the process of filling it out.

The questionnaire consists of the following sections, starting with section A obtaining the biographical information of the research population. This section comprises seven questions (A1-A7). Section B follows with a series of itemised scales related to the different components of relationship marketing that can influence loyal alumni consisting of five subdivisions, namely: student experiences (SE1-SE11), college identity (CI1-CI4), culture and values (CV1-CV7), financial support (FS1-FS6) and lastly, community engagement (CE1-CE6). A five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree to strongly disagree was used for all scales. This section was put together consisting of 34 statements. Following was section C, dealing with four selected relationship marketing dimensions, namely satisfaction (S1-S4), trust (T1-T6), commitment (C1-C4) and loyalty (L1-L5) and consists of 19 statements.

Table 4.9 presents a summary of the constructs covered in the questionnaire, the variables measured and the itemised scales used. The itemised scales had been used by other studies and were adopted and some were modified to fit into the context of this study before they could be included in this self-administered questionnaire, as is conventional in research studies.

Table 4.9: Itemised scales used in the quantitative method

Variable	Scale items	References
Student experiences (SE1-SE11)	• The college provides all students with a positive academic experience. • The college develops students' problem-solving skills. • I received support in the transition from high school to college. • The website and social media of NC are user-friendly, appealing and informative. • The quality of interactions between the lecturers and students makes me excited about learning. • I acquired the ability to work in groups teams. • I participated in social events organised by the student organisation.	McAlexander & Koenig (2001); Sung & Yang (2009); Koenig-Lewis *et al*. (2015); Rust (2015); Schlesinger & Cervera (2015); Carales & Nora (2020); Setiwan *et al*. (2020)
College identity (CI1-CI4)	• The traditions and values of NC are well communicated to students. • As a student, I am proud to 'belong' to this college to continue with a long-term relationship. • NC promotes a culture of integrity, loyalty and ethical values.	Mael & Ashforth (1992); Drezner (2010); Johnson *et al*. (2010); Valitov (2014); Rust (2015); Stephenson & Yerger (2015); Dennis *et al.* (2016); Rauschnabel *et al*. (2016); Drezner (2018); Peruta & Helm (2018); Vidal & Pittz (2018); Khanna *et al*. (2019)
NC culture and values (CV1-CV7)	• NC makes an effort to make students aware that education is the most important tool for development. • The values of NC (accountability, transparency and life-long learning) are similar to those of students. • The college teaches us the joy of giving to others. • NC enables students to reach their personal goals. • Students regard 'service quality' as important. • Students value the importance of education.	MacMillan *et al*. (2005); Helgesen (2008); Johnson *et al*. (2010); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Vidal & Pittz (2018); Barroso-Méndez *et al*. (2020); Giambatista *et al*. (2020)
Financial support (FS1-FS6)	• I received leadership and mentorship for counselling, admission and financial aid. • As a student, I am concerned about my education-related expenses. • Students are very grateful for NSFAS bursaries. • I was/am earning while learning. • I will contribute financially when I start earning an income.	Garvey & Drezner (2019); Carales & Nora (2020); Sylvester & Myran (2020)

Variable	Scale items	References
Community engagement (CE1-CE6)	• I want to attend events at the college to meet different stakeholders. • Students have the desire to 'give back' to the college. • As a member of my community, I am willing to be part of unpaid activities called volunteering. • I will contribute my time and expertise towards NC and the community after I complete my studies.	Clary & Snyder (1999); Owen & Hill (2011); Shaker & Nathan (2017); Webb Farley (2018); Campbell & Baxter (2019); Garvey & Drezner (2019); Snijders *et al*. (2019); Campbell *et al*. (2020); Giambatista *et al*. (2020)
Trust (T1-T6)	• NC teaches us how to maintain personal and professional life balance. • The college reacts quickly and efficiently to students' needs. • The college shows friendliness, courtesy and goodwill towards its students. • Students' perceptions of NC's sincerity lead to greater student trust.	Holdford & White (1997); Ghosh *et al*. (2001); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Bormann & Thies (2019); Acun (2020); Clément *et al*. (2020)
Commitment (C1-C4)	• I want to receive regular information on the activities of NC. • I feel emotionally committed to NC because of my education and development. • I do/will recommend NC to friends and relatives. • I want to enrol and will actively participate in alumni activities.	Pedro *et al*. (2017); Wilson *et al*. (2018); Azila-Gbettor (2020); Haqka & Setiadi (2020); Yousaf *et al*. (2020)
Satisfaction (S1-S4)	• Positive shared cultural norms influence my overall satisfaction with the college. • As a student, peer-mentoring would improve my satisfaction with the college. • I am academically active, because I believe in life-long learning. • As a student, I want to be identified with a successful brand, such as NC.	Heckman & Guskey (1998); Jurkowitsch *et al*. (2006); Oluseye *et al*. (2014); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Perez-Macias *et al*. (2019); Acun (2020)
Loyal alumni (L1-L5)	• I believe that NC deserves my loyalty. • I want to be in a 'relationship' with NC after graduation. • I would gladly return to NC to attend other courses. • My college experience compares favourably with my expectations. • As a student, I value the support services (IT, academic advising/learning) rendered to me by NC.	Palmer & Koenig-Lewis (2008); Rojas-Mendéz *et al*. (2009); Johnson *et al*. (2010); Abubakar & Mokhtar (2015); Rust (2015); Schlesinger *et al*. (2017); Drezner (2018); Gallo (2018); Manzuma-Ndaaba *et al*. (2018)

The following disadvantages (Widd & Diggines, 2009:158; Van der Merwe, 2019:85) of using self-administered questionnaires were noted when designing the questionnaire for the purpose of this study:

- The use of questionnaires can be very limited in a study because of variations in academic standards, as in the case of this study where participants had to be literate.

- Self-completion questionnaires do not provide the opportunity to interpret issues due to the inability to interact with the researcher.

- Questionnaire administrators/fieldworkers interact with participants, encouraging them to participate and to complete the questionnaires.

- Poorly designed and badly phrased questionnaires yield unsuitable and/or inaccurate data.

The previous section debated the questionnaire as the data collection instrument among researchers engaged in quantitative research. Wiid and Diggens (2009:158) pronounce that the measuring instrument is most important in the data-collection phase as it has the greatest influence on the reliability and validity of data. To contest several disadvantages of using self-administered questionnaires, an approach to collecting required data is by measuring devices and scaling.

Measurement scales are explored in the subsequent discussion.

4.10.2.4 Scales

In order to attain the research objectives and goals, some form of measuring has to take place (Wiid & Diggens, 2009:158). Data-collection instruments need to be designed to measure participants' responses. This is done by assigning a value to answers so that they can be analysed to give meaning. Before developing a measuring scale, a researcher needs to determine the level of measurement needed to yield the desired information. The levels of measurement include nominal, ordinal, interval and ratio scales. Dillman *et al*. (2014:117) and Du Plooy-Cilliers (2014:159) state that a Likert scale is mostly used when assessing participants' attitudes as well as when a range of replies to a given statement is required. It is a scale with a range of points as answer options with two utmost poles and sometimes a neutral option with a neutral linked/intermediate answer option. A five-point Likert scale was accepted for the purpose of this questionnaire as it enabled obtaining participants' responses without difficulty. For that reason, a five-point response scale (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neutral, (4) disagree and (5) strongly disagree was adopted to research the constructs identified for this study. Employing a Likert scale alleviates biases and ambiguity by offering a range of options instead of a binary yes or no. The Likert scale code is included in the questionnaire, allowing respondents to react to the claims in

the manner specified. Participants were provided with the option to indicate their answer with an 'X' in the suitable block. The scales employed for the purpose of this study were:

- Section A: A nominal scale was employed to obtain a demographic description of the participants and seven descriptors were used for this purpose: gender, age, the preferred form of communication, study level, field of study, enrolment type and funding, and lastly what made participants choose Northlink College. Researchers can use numbers to name variables as recommended by Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:159). Therefore, on a nominal level of measurement, the number is simply numerical, meaning it is only used as a symbol with no mathematical significance within this context.

- Section B: A Likert scale requires participants to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a diversity of statements related to an attitude or object. Eleven items were used to measure student experiences, and four items were used to measure students' awareness of the college identity. This was followed by seven items that were used to measure the culture and values of Northlink College. A further six items were used to measure financial support. Lastly, six items assessed students' perception of participation in community engagement. This scale most frequently constitutes two segments, namely the item/or statement and the evaluation (whether the participant agrees or disagrees with the statement and to what extent).

- Section C: A Likert scale was used to measure participants' perception related to the four selected constructs of relationship marketing. Four items were used to measure the concept *satisfaction*. This was followed by six items that were used to measure *trust*. A further four items to measure *commitment* and lastly, five items to measure *loyal alumni*.

A Likert scale was employed to assess the opinions, attitudes or behaviours of participants taking part in completing the questionnaires. To conclude, some form of measuring has to take place in order to analyse the data collected in order to achieve an immense understanding of the research problem. Ensuing is an elaboration on the population of the quantitative component of this study.

4.10.3 Research population

The target population for the purpose of the quantitative component of this study is portrayed as the students from Northlink College. As indicated in Table 4.10, TVET colleges represent approximately 4% of the total projected students in South Africa, as per the 2022 statistics.

Moreover, Northlink College constitutes 3.4% of students enrolled at TVET colleges in South Africa during 2022.

Table 4. 10: Projected students in South Africa

Students in South Africa (2022)	13 409 249
Students enrolled at TVET colleges (2022/23)	556 415
Students enrolled at Northlink College (7 campuses)	19 152
Number of registered public TVET colleges in SA	50
Number of private TVET colleges in SA	350

The research population applicable to this study consisted of a large number of students and it was not practical for a number of reasons, such as accessibility and the cost factor, to include all and sampling had to be made use of. Sampling within the context of this study is subsequently elaborated on.

4.10.3.1 Sampling

This section of the research process followed three stages in selecting the sample for the quantitative research component for this study: (1) sampling techniques; (2) sample size; and (3), sample frame. Following is an assessment of these three stages.

4.10.3.2 Quantitative sampling techniques

A non-probability sampling method was embraced for the quantitative research component of this study due to the absence of a research sample frame. In non-probability sampling, the probability that not every element of the population has the opportunity of being included in the sample is spot on. Non-probability sampling methods include quota, convenience, purposive (also known as judgemental) and snowball sampling. The most appropriate type of sampling method suitable to the nature and scope of this study was convenience sampling, because the sample members (students in this case) were accessible on campuses. Sreejesh *et al*. (2014:74) confirmed this method of sampling as effective as it relies on data collection from a population who is convenient, available to take part, and geographical nearness. However, there is no way of guaranteeing that the sample, according to Blumberg *et al*. (2011:243), is representative of the population but this is influenced by the sample size. Subsequently, the calculation of the sample size follows.

4.10.3.3 Sample size

The sampling procedure is linked with a statistical overview, and mainly concerns the selection of a specific subset of individuals from a larger population (Bagheri & Beheshti, 2010:21). Bryman and Bell (2014:176) and Kumar (2019:292) opine that sampling can never be 100% precise. These mentioned scholars commented that the sample size to be used is often a case of

judgement, rather than a calculation. In the same vein, Du-Plooy *et al*. (2014:135) and Dereje *et al*. (2022:2) commented that there are no static guidelines for determining sample sizes and recommend choosing a sample that is immense enough to yield a relatively accurate estimate of the population's values, which is financially viable, and easily put into practice at the same time. The Raosoft and Survey Monkey online sample size calculators take into account the following four parameters when calculating the sample size: margin of error, confidence level, population and response distribution (Gomwe, 2021:149). These sample size calculators were set to have a margin error of 5%, are based on a 95% confidence level, and a population size of 19 153 (2022 student statistics). The sample size was calculated and indicated that the minimum number of usable responses amounts to 375 responses in order to obtain a sample that will yield reliable results.

4.10.3.4 Sample frame

Ivankova (2006:10) and Beukes (2014:165) describe a sample frame as a list that identifies the units of a target population. When evaluating the usefulness and proficiency of a sample frame for quantitative research, one has to consider whether the frame is all-embracing, meaning the sample selected signifies the target population. The sample frame should contain a sufficient number to provide the sample size required. The actual sample is drawn from within the sample frame (Widd & Diggines, 2009:196). A sample frame for the purpose of the quantitative component of this study could not be composed as it was not possible to obtain a name list of all the students registered at Northlink College due to the POPI Act. Furthermore, in practice, it is unusual to find a perfect sample frame that meets all the requirements (Widd & Diggines, 2009:196; Anaesty, 2022:3). For the purpose of this study, 500 questionnaires were distributed and non-probability convenience sampling was exploited.

The following discussion briefly condenses the process involved in the quantitative data-collection process.

4.10.3.5 Quantitative data-collection process

In this stage of the research process, the actual process of collecting the data takes place (Van der Merwe, 2019:93). Primary data was collected at Northlink College by making use of four fieldworkers.

4.10.3.5.1 Fieldwork

Fieldwork, as described by Anaesty (2022:3), is the collection of information about something in a real and natural environment rather than in a place such as a laboratory. Careful consideration

must be given to the planning of fieldwork, as well as the recruitment of the fieldworkers as the quality of data collected will have a crucial effect on the quality of the research findings (Wiid & Diggines, 2009:220). Some of the restrictive elements that need to be considered while planning the fieldwork include the availability of time, human resources, funds, and infrastructure (Matima, 2001:55; Van der Merwe, 2019:94).

Ample questionnaires were printed and the researcher recruited four fieldworkers. To ensure that the fieldworkers were equipped for the task, training took place and they received guidance and clear instructions on how to execute the process. Fieldworkers also received the background of the study as well as the objectives and aims. In total, 500 questionnaires were provided to the fieldworkers who had a two-week period for completion as it would have been impossible to collect the completed questionnaires at a later date and/or time. The goal was to obtain 400 usable responses to cater for unusable, incomplete and/or terminated participation. Each fieldworker prearranged the students, time, and venue for the completion of the questionnaires. The fieldworkers explained the objectives of the research study and the content of the questionnaire to facilitate a thorough understanding of the selected students. It was mandatory that participants were well informed with sufficient detail regarding the nature and procedures of the study, as well as disclosing possible dangers and benefits associated with this study. Their consent was obtained verbally, indicating that an oral consent process was employed. By doing so, participants were able to voluntarily agree/disagree to partake in the study from an informed position. Participants' permission was obtained before the completion of the survey. Participation in the quantitative component of the study was anonymous and the names of participants were not recorded at any stage of the research process.

Sample members, students in this case, were requested not to take questionnaires out of the venue. The completed questionnaires were collected by the fieldworkers to ultimately minimise the risk of questionnaires not being returned and there-after handed back to the researcher.

Raw data is meaningless and must be prepared and processed before being analysed (Wiid & Diggines, 2009:2280). Data preparation is explored in more detail in the subsequent discussion.

4.10.3.6 Quantitative data preparation

It is necessary to prepare data for efficient data analysis and limit errors and inaccuracies that can occur in data during processing. The raw data from each questionnaire must be converted into useful information that can be used to accomplish the aim of a research study, which, in this case, was to develop a proposed model that can be used by the management of not only a TVET college but also by HEIs to foster loyal alumni who will invest in their community. There are

different processes, namely (1) editing, (2) coding, (3) capturing and (4) cleaning of data that ought to be executed to improve the quality of data collected (van der Merwe, 2019:119).

(1) Data editing

Ivankova *et al*. (2006:4) and Devlin (2018:17) describe data editing as the application of checks to detect missing, invalid or inconsistent entries or even to the point of data records that are potentially in error. The objectives of data editing are to ensure the accuracy of data; establish the consistency of data; determine whether the data is complete; ensure the coherence of aggregated data; and lastly obtain the best possible data available (Widd & Diggines, 2009:228). Moreover, Widd and Diggines (2009:228) and more recently Van der Merwe (2019:119) state that, if necessary, questionnaires are adjusted and worthless questionnaires are discarded. Data editing can be performed manually, with the assistance of a computer or a combination thereof (Litheko, 2019:187). This process was implemented for the purpose of ensuring the reliability of the data to be used for the purpose of this study.

(2) Data coding

Hammick *et al*. (2010:11), in their paper, *Conducting a best evidence systematic review*, describe that data coding "*allows for the reduction of large quantities of data into a form that can be easily handled, in particular by computer programs*". Quantitative data go through a process that predominantly is aimed at transforming the information into numerical values, called codes, so that the information can be easily analysed, either manually or by a computer program, as explained by Hammick *et al*. (2010:11) and Devlin (2018:17). Coding is another form of adapting data into a form comprehensible by computer software. For the purpose of this study, pre-coding was used where codes were assigned to the responses during the design phase of the questionnaire.

(3) Data capturing

After the data had been coded, it was captured into an Excel spreadsheet and this is known as data capturing (Devlin, 2018:18). Followingly, the data was imported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The last step in the data processing phase is the data cleaning stage.

(4) Data cleaning

Errors, including values that cannot be executed, data transformation, and missing data records that are not in sequence, may occur when entering the data into the computer (Widd & Diggines, 2009:228). Widd and Diggines (2009:235) insinuate that the cleaning of data comprises checking internal consistency. This is the process of altering or removing data in a dataset that is incorrect, incomplete, incorrectly formatted or replicated (Saunders *et al*., 2016:153). Once data has been captured and cleaned, it is stored electronically. Data can be stored in computer components and recording media is used to retain digital data (Litheko, 2019:188). Data cleaning did take place and a few minor capturing errors were corrected before the final database was uploaded into SPSS.

The following discussion briefly condenses the process involved in the analysis of quantitative data.

4.10.4 Quantitative data analysis

The analysis of data commences with the collection of data in order to generate functional information. Students from Northlink College were recruited to complete the questionnaires to acquire the quantitative data needed for the purpose of this study. All the questionnaires were processed according to the pre-assigned codes and subsequently uploaded into SPSS. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistics was used to explore the quantitative data addressing the research problem and objectives. Different statistics were used to make available different insights into the nature of the data obtained.

4.10.4.1 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics focus on describing and shortening all quantitative data to identify trends and patterns in the collected data and to discover relationships among variables (Hammick *et al*., 2010:11; Guetterman *et al.,* 2015:55; Devlin, 2018:17). Furthermore, descriptive statistics combine different responses in each section with the aid of tables, graphs, charts, and calculated frequencies of occurrences. It is often necessary to go further than describing data to rather making inferences about the population and the sample observed.

4.10.4.2 Inferential statistics

The focus of these statistics is on making predictions, generalisations or drawing conclusions about the population under study from the sample selected to ensure it is, in the case of non-probability samples, a reliable reflection of the population. Inferential statistics also comprises

testing hypotheses and additional statistical tests to determine how variables interrelate among themselves. In this study, the main variable to be tested was the loyalty of alumni. The following inferential statistics were included: Cronbach's alpha, cross-tabulation, factor analysis, chi-square test of independents and Pearson's correlation coefficient. These statistics are deliberated on in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

After the statistical analysis of the quantitative component of this study, a confluence of the findings is made and compared with the outcomes of the qualitative study and this is referred to as triangulation. Qualitative and quantitative research in a mixed-methods approach is not stand-alone, but the two research methods ought to be integrated to complement each other and provide richness and detailed evidence that would otherwise have been unavailable should only one method have been employed. The next and last step in the research process is triangulation and this will now be explored in more detail.

4.11 Triangulation

The integration of data, called triangulation and described by Fusch (2018:19), combines several research designs to study the same occurrence. This view is supported by Guetterman *et al* (2015:559) and more recently by Leedy *et al.* (2019:235). The movement towards integrating research was relatively slow until the turn of the century, although a notable contribution in 1966 witnessed the concepts of triangulation entering the research methods terminology, as noted by Leedy *et al.* (2019:235). Scholars such as Strijker *et al*. (2020:10) and Nha (2021:5) described triangulation as a combination of several research methodologies to study the same phenomenon. The latter contend that these two methods are deployed under the assumption that weaknesses inherent in one approach will be eliminated by using another. Central to triangulation is the notion that methods leading to the same results lead to more confidence in the outcomes of the research findings (Guetterman *et al*., 2015:559). Triangulation is critical in facilitating explanatory validity and establishing data credibility and could require researchers to check the degree to which assumptions based on qualitative sources are supported by the quantitative approach and *vice versa* (Nha, 2021:8). Fusch (2018:19) comments that triangulation provides different angels of scrutinising the research problem and reduces the risk of fortuitous associations and methodical bias.

Methodological triangulation was adopted for this study where triangulation was used to refer to the mixed method in which the qualitative and quantitative approaches were combined to present a more thorough set of findings. This technique was employed to crosscheck the credibility of the data collected, to enrich understanding and to achieve objectivity, reliability and validity in both approaches, as recommended by Fusch (2018:19). Triangulation limits personal and

methodological biases and enhances the truthfulness of information (Kumar, 2019:154) that can be employed to solve a research problem. In this study, the responses to the questionnaires administrated to students, the responses of the interviews with management, the marketing team and alumni, as well as the literature review, were brought together to seek solutions to the research problem specific to this study. The product of triangulation enables a researcher to make propositions; specific to this case is the proposition that long-term relationships with stakeholders will most likely enhance loyalty. In the words of Bryden (as cited by Strijker *et al*., 2020:5/10):

> *"triangulation is not so much a strategy for checking validity of findings as a means of capturing and doing justice to that reality".*

The interpretation constructed from both the qualitative and quantitative data analysis during triangulation is deliberated on in detail in the following chapter.

All scientific research should conscientiously follow the guidelines of research ethics and the ethics principles and guidelines of the North-West University and Northlink College were strictly adhered to and are subsequently deliberated on.

4.12 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations, as advised by Kumar (2019:356) and Cash *et al*. (2022:5), are the foundation of any research study. All the ethical values and procedures need to be followed and adhered to in promoting the objectives of the research to disclose knowledge, truth, and the avoidance of errors. This study was steered under the North-West University's name and ethics clearance for the study was acquired through the university's Ethics Committee. This study was conducted at Northlink College and the principal of Northlink College approved the study and consented to collecting data from the staff and students of the college. An ethics certificate (see Annexure A) was issued by the North-West University and was made available to Northlink College.

Participants in both components of this study were assured of their rights and the confidentially and anonymity of the data collected. A cover letter (see Annexure B and C) preceded both the research instruments, providing information concerning the study, the purpose of the study, and why they have been selected to participate. The letter also informed participants that any names were withheld from the questionnaire and that participants' answers were regarded as confidential. Ethical considerations, as emphasised by the researchers Akaranga and Makau (2016:2) and Creswell *et al*. (2014:85), are an utmost important component of a research study and were observed as such for the purpose of this study. All ethical values and procedures were

followed and adhered to in promoting the objectives of the research in an endeavour to impart authentic knowledge and truth.

4.13 Summary

Chapter 4 presents the reader with the importance of marketing research. The researcher had to contemplate underlying assumptions, namely ontology, epistemology and axiology to know how to distinguish between different research philosophies – positivism, realism, interpretivism, objectivism, constructivism and pragmatism as per the research onion. Post-positivism was decided upon to produce more enhancing data.

The qualitative, quantitative and mixed research designs were separately deliberated on. Qualitative and quantitative research in a mixed-methods approach were integrated to complement each other and to provide richness. Furthermore, the rationale for the use of both methods was explained. For the purpose of this study, the convergent parallel mixed-methods research approach was thought through and found suitable. The combination of data, called triangulation, was pursued to achieve the objectives of this study.

A detailed discussion is presented on the data-collection processes and the preferred data-collection tools. Firstly, for the qualitative component, the in-depth interview guide was developed to guide 19 interviews; and secondly, the self-administered questionnaire was distributed for the quantitative component of this study. The validity and reliability of the measuring instruments were justified. Data analysis was briefly mentioned and the ethical considerations that guided the development of this study were also elaborated on in this chapter.

The data results obtained and the interpretation thereof will be discussed in the subsequent chapter where the research results that emanated from the data analysis are presented.

CHAPTER 5 RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 provided an overview of this study, incorporating the research problem statement, primary purpose, and objectives. Chapters 2 and 3 dwelled on a review of related literature, unfolding the concepts of relationship marketing, the higher education landscape, and community engagement. Chapter 4 explored qualitative and quantitative (mixed methods) research approaches, highlighting the collaborative effort to unravel the problem under study.

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the two research instruments: the semi-structured interviews and the survey questionnaires. The results of the semi-structured interviews are described in terms of the three identified/stated themes. Furthermore, the results from analysing the questionnaires are presented using tables, graphs, frequencies, percentages, and discussions. This study employed the Atlas.ti application software for the qualitative theme analysis. The close-ended questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Figure 5.1 depicts the presentation of the results and commences with the qualitative approach: (1) the participants' demographic descriptors; (2) how management, marketing, and alumni perceive how different components influence the composition of a long-term relationship; and (3) how the mentioned parties perceive the dimensions of relationship marketing in fostering a loyal alumni community. This is then pursued by the presentation of the quantitative research results, which are organised as follows: (1) participants' demographic descriptors; (2) components of relationship marketing that can influence long-term relationships, and (3) lastly, how relationship marketing dimensions foster loyal alumni. Triangulation is then dealt with to conclude the presentation of the results, and the presentation process was used to cross-check the conclusions from both sets of data to enhance the validity and credibility of the research results.

Henceforth, Figure 5.1 represents the outline of this chapter.

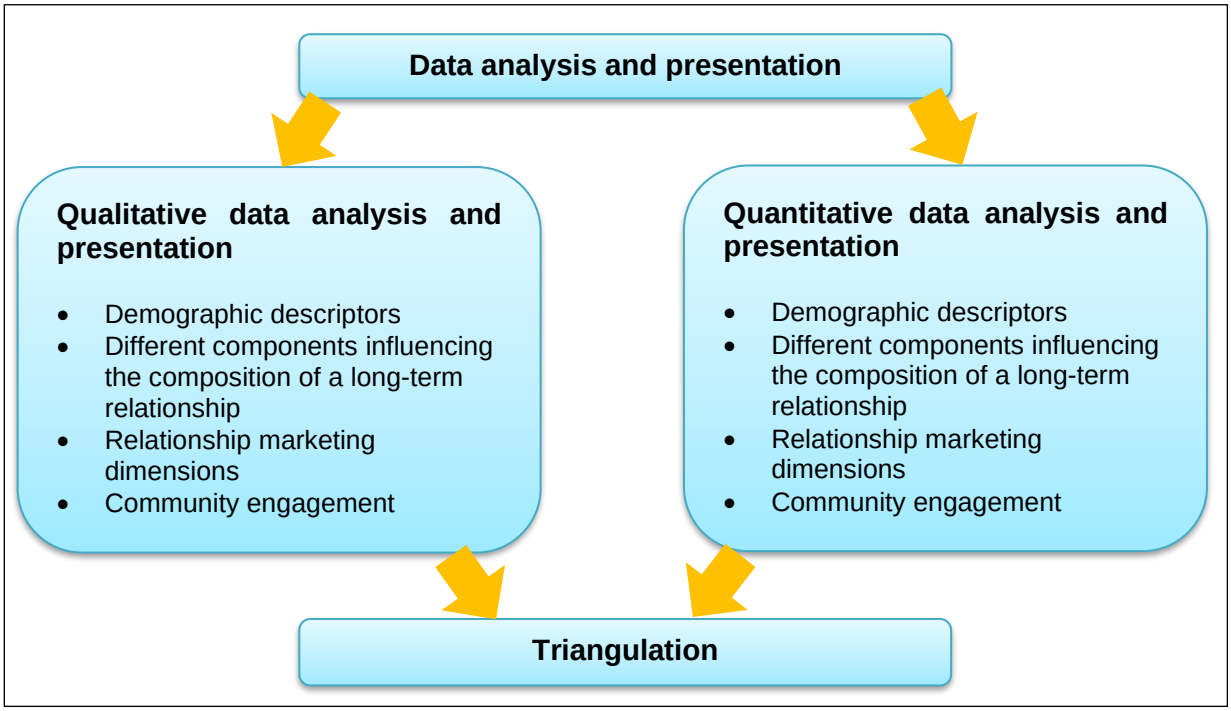


Figure 5.1: Layout of the data analysis and presentation process

Source: Adapted from Gomwe (2021:165)

5.2 Qualitative data analysis and presentation

The purpose of the qualitative phase of this study was to obtain a broader perspective and deeper understanding of how to establish, develop, and maintain long-term relationships with stakeholders to foster loyal alumni in the TVET sector, specifically in the Western Cape. The study aims to answer the phenomenon under study, including the research participants' comments and appropriate literature that forms part of the interpretation and the discussion of the qualitative results. Throughout the debate, indications of this study's literature reviews (Chapters 2 and 3) are made about the research objectives. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 participants, firstly, comprising seven participants from the management team of Northlink College. These participants with years of education experience, especially in the TVET sector, were selected to reach the aim of this study. Secondly, three participants of the marketing team were interviewed, and lastly, nine former students (alumni) of Northlink College. Selected excerpts from these 19 participants are highlighted to provide practical insights and first-hand viewpoints that enrich the qualitative analysis of these research findings.

An interview guide was developed and structured into three core divisions: the participants' demographic descriptors, different components influencing the composition of a long-term relationship, and relationship marketing dimensions.

The interview guide contains several questions relevant to each division to guide the interview process. Interviewees were inspired during the semi-structured interviews to engage in an open conversation to generate diverse, comprehensive information, as suggested by Prince (2019:229). All the interviewees answered all the questions. During the data-gathering procedure, several difficulties were experienced. One of the difficulties discovered was that a few management and marketing team participants were unwilling to convey information for reasons undisclosed. As described in Chapter 4, a thematic content analysis was conducted, and this allowed looking for and identifying generic and recurring themes that materialised from the data collected (Du Plooy *et al.*, 2014:230).

The presentation of the results of the qualitative component is portrayed in Figure 5.2.

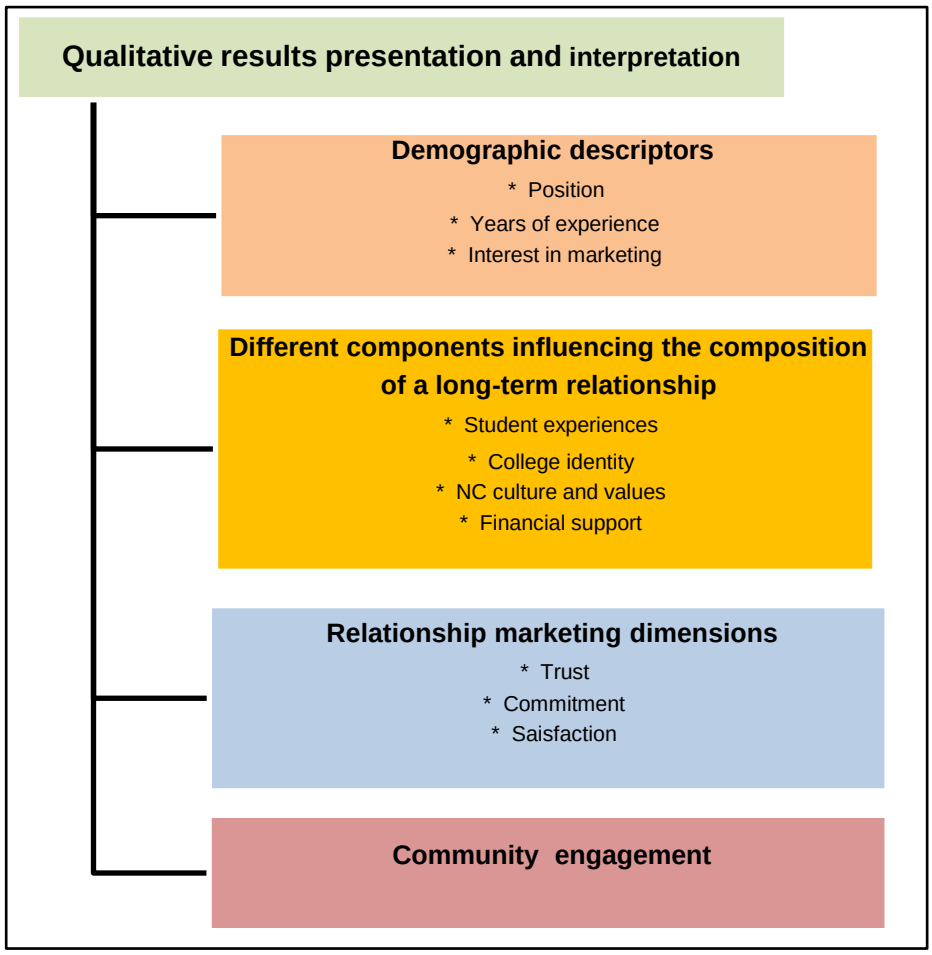


Figure 5.2: Qualitative data analysis and presentation

Source: Adapted from Gombe (2021:165)

The Word Cloud, presented in Figure 5.3, depicts that the central focus of this study was on the students of Northlink College. A word cloud can represent the frequency or importance of words within a given text. The visual representation rapidly identifies the most prominent themes within the text and enhances the presentation and interpretation of the qualitative data analysis.

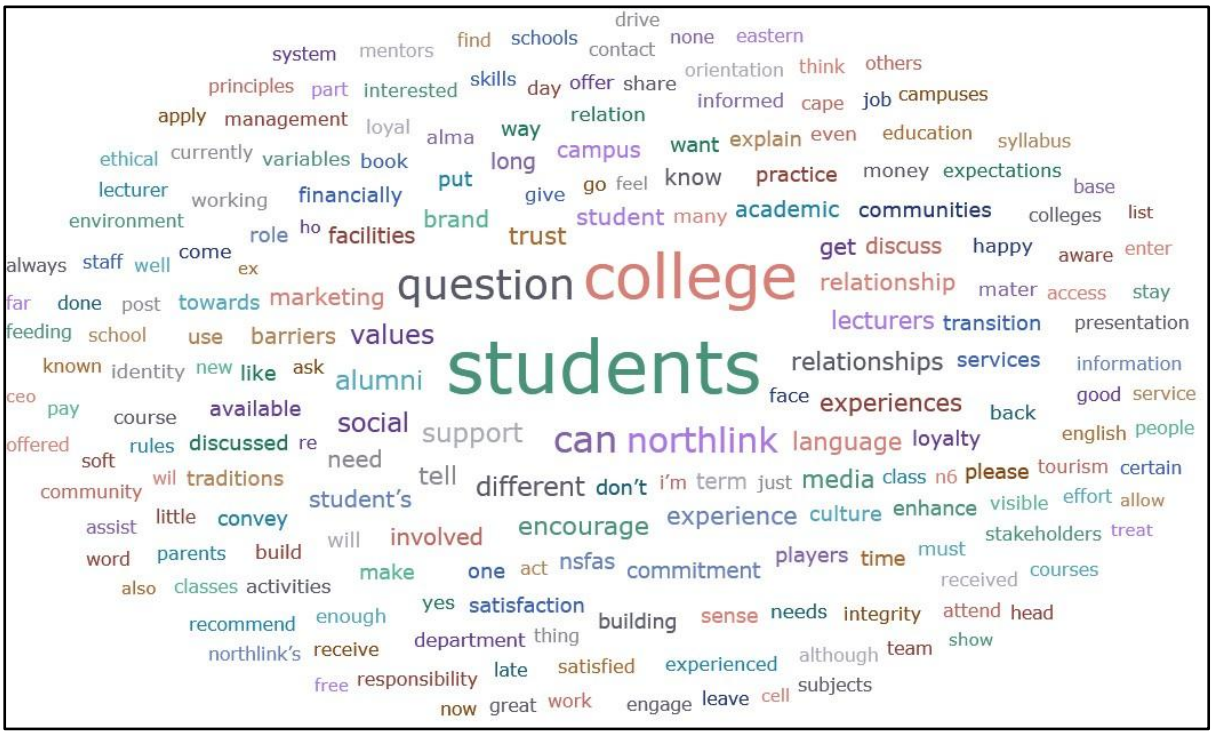


Figure 5.3: Word cloud

Source: Prince (2023:2)

Subsequently a demographic description of the participants in this component of this study is provided.

5.2.1 Demographic descriptors

Three demographic descriptors were used to identify the qualitative participants in this study's qualitative component. In addition to the demographic descriptors, pseudocodes were added in Table 5.1 to anonymise participants' data.

Table 5.1: Demographic descriptors of the qualitative participants

Position	Years of experience (average)	Interest in marketing	Pseudocode
Management	19	Deals with different stakeholders to find internships; strategic planning; brand building; communication	Man 1 Man 2 Man 3 Man 4 Man 5 Man 6 Man 7
Marketing	2	Brand specialist; creative opportunities; diverse responsibilities	Mrk 1 Mrk 2 Mrk 3
Alumni	4	Creativity; diverse career paths; networking opportunities; technology	A 1 A 2 A 3 A 4 A 5 A 6 A 7 A 8 A 9

A concise summary of the participants' profiles will be presented. The qualitative component participants were predominantly female, with 12 (63%) women and seven (37%) men.

The seven management participants included two heads of departments and five programme managers. The average number of years of management experience in an educational setting was 19, which implies admirable expertise. Their responses therefore added significant value to this study. The management team engages with key industry stakeholders to secure student internship opportunities. These internships provide practical industry exposure, which is essential to develop graduates.

Furthermore, three participants of the marketing team of Northlink College were included: two former students who are now interns at Northlink College and a recently appointed lady from the banking sector. The marketing team has been organising roadshows to promote Northlink College by visiting schools in the immediate environment of the campuses. However, these efforts primarily focus on Grade 12 learners, who may have already made choices concerning their future studies and preferred HEI. Staff turnover and limited years of experience greatly influence the marketing team's effectiveness.

As for the nine alumni interviewed – some obtained additional qualifications, some received an internship, some commenced their careers, and some are still unemployed. Alumni left the college approximately two to four years ago. Alumni are of the view that the marketing course offers many diverse career paths. The alumni response was overwhelmingly positive, with numerous individuals exhibiting a keen interest in marketing and aspiring to make a career in this area.

Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*. (2014:232) state that the most general regime to analyse qualitative data involves scrutinising for similarities and dissimilarities and, after that, focusing on those patterns of interactions that are generally common to what is under study. This type of analysis formed the essence of analysing the qualitative data. In an attempt to explain the phenomenon under examination, a discussion of the themes as they relate to the research objectives is subsequently presented. As the analysis proceeded, constant returns to the original transcripts were made to ensure contextual reliability, as recommended by Gomwe (2021:165).

Three main themes emerged from the scrutinised literature chapters, i.e. Chapters 2 and 3. The first theme was the different components influencing the composition of a long-term relationship; the second theme was the relationship dimensions, and the third theme was community engagement, as indicated in Table 5.2. After that, the data was classified, which allowed for probing deeper into the participants' perceptions of fostering loyal alumni.

Table 5.2: The main themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Different components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship	• Student experiences • College brand and identity • Culture and values • Financial support
Relationship marketing dimensions	• Trust • Commitment • Satisfaction
Community engagement	• Stakeholders' interest in CE • Stakeholders' perception toward CE

The ensuing section presents the results for the first theme: the different components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship.

5.2.2 Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship

A large and growing body of literature substantiates that relationship marketing deals with long-term consumer satisfaction, which, in turn, can lead to consumer loyalty. Based on this,

the management of HEIs should develop relationships with students and other stakeholders to convert them into loyal partners. Partners will contribute financially and non-financially to creating value for all stakeholders, as expatiated in Chapter 2. The data obtained from the in-depth interviews was transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti. The results that emerged are presented below. Firstly, that of the management team (Man 1-Man 7), then the marketing team (Mrk 1-Mrk 3), and this is followed by a synopsis of the responses obtained from the alumni (A 1-A 9). The composition of a long-term alumni relationship consists of four categories, as illustrated in Figure 5.2, namely: (1) student experiences, (2) college brand and identity, (3) culture and values, and, lastly, (4) financial support. Each category is dealt with separately to highlight significant discoveries.

5.2.2.1 Participants' view of students' experiences

Understanding students' experiences is vital for building long-term relationships, and this section aims to obtain a deeper understanding of how management and marketing teams view students' experiences related to Northlink College. A network diagram (see Figure 5.4) displays management and marketing perspectives of students' experiences generated on Atlas.ti.

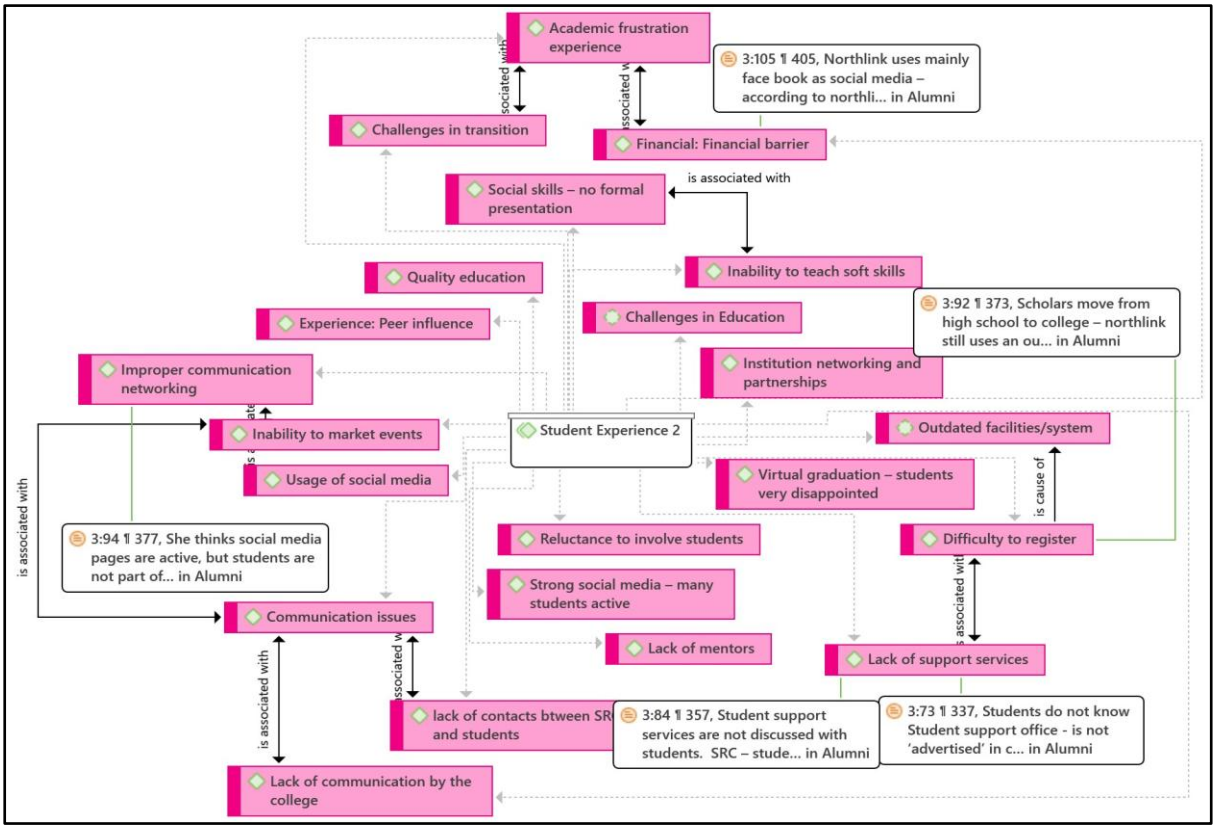


Figure 5.4: Management and marketing perspectives of students' experience

Some excerpts from participant observations are:

- Man 1 declared: "*The college management believes that social media is highly active and engages students extensively. Students constantly complain on Facebook – when are they going to get paid? Students stay away from class because of the lack of funds. Students do not experience any communication from the college side*". In the same vein, Man 4 said: "*Social media presentation – students are not informed about the different social media channels that can be used. Those presentations stay at head office and are not rolled out to campuses*".

- Man 2 confirmed: "*Facilities – there are sporting facilities – but there is no drive to involve students. Northlink College does nothing to engage students in extracurricular activities. I am not even aware of the rugby team. There is no contact between the student council and students*".

- Man 3 pointed out: "*Kids do not listen to parents (authority). Students reacted to peers' advice/information. Bring back students with experience to act as mentors*".

Alumni indicated that they experienced uninspiring college vibes that showed they are less likely to participate in alumni events, reunions, and other activities that foster community engagement. Participants indicated that they experienced a lack of proper social media interaction, extramural activities, language barriers, and a lack of relationships between students and lecturers. The Tygerberg Campus comprises four pillars: business studies, tourism and catering services, management assistants, and public management. A participant mentioned that he experienced a lack of unity – to endorse this:

- A 7 spoke out: "*Although the tourism department is on the same premises where all the other programs are offered – there is no unity on campus – tourism acts completely on its own*".

Research by Makole *et al*. (2023:2033) highlighted departmental silos, further validated by Alumnus A 7.

Alumni indicate that they experienced difficulty transitioning from school to college, possibly due to inadequate orientation and a lack of career guidance, leading them to feel that they missed specific opportunities. Some excerpts from the participants are:

- A 1 said: "*Marketing can re-look at social media – non-existent – who is their target market*?".

- A 3 stated: "*During college, the college never offered any sporting or other activities*".

- A 4 verbalised: "*Did not experience a happy college vibe/atmosphere – students come to college for classes and then just leave*".

- A 5 commented: "*Transition from school to college: students experience significant challenges – a buddy system can be in students favour*".

Most of those polled indicated that students' experiences are not promising enough to encourage long-term relationships and foster loyal alumni. However, both groups explicitly mentioned that the lecturers of Northlink College are experienced and dedicated to offering an intense education.

Communication is the lifeblood of RM – most management and marketing teams concurred that Northlink College has a communication deficit. As illuminated by Ashley *et al*. (2010:750), fostering effective communication channels is pivotal in addressing challenges related to developing and maintaining relationships. As for communication, students are regarded as the consumers of HEIs, which implies that communication is crucial for creating and maintaining relationships with them. What surfaced from the analysis is that management and marketing teams professed that the Student Representative Council (SRC) is not addressing students' needs nor communicating with them. SRC members are unknown, and communication between the groups does not occur. A holistic approach to HE requires institutions to prioritise academic excellence, effective communication, and a well-rounded educational environment that stretches beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Furthermore, a holistic approach would include extracurricular activities such as sports, choir, debate, and more, as various participants remarked on the lack of extracurricular activities. Contradicting responses concerning the role of social media were obtained. Management believes students are very active on social media platforms, whereas alumni feel they are not well informed about the available social media channels. Similarly, participant A 1 deduced that using social media channels is non-existent. The explosive growth in digital technology is fundamentally changing the way of life (Jacobson *et al*., 2020:1) – how people (and especially students, as in this case) operate, communicate, and share information.

The subsequent section expands on the responses from the management and marketing teams regarding Northlink College's brand and identity, as this relates to the literature reviewed in Chapter 3.

5.2.2.2 Participants' perceptions of the brand and identity of Northlink College

Walter *et al.* (2022:2) indicated relatively few historical studies in the HE branding area. HEI branding is complicated and relatively complex to initiate and maintain because of the different stakeholder roles. The overall opinion (ten out of ten) of the *management and the marketing teams* is that the brand Northlink College is well-known. Management, though, expressed their concerns about insecurity and negative publicity about the brand, an unwillingness to establish the college's identity, and the lack of advertising to promote the brand.

The Northlink College brand identity is depicted in Figure 5.5.



Figure 5.5: Northlink College brand identity

Source: Northlink College (2020)

The marketing and communication strategies of Northlink College may not effectively reach its target audiences and coincide with its staff turnover and limited years of experience

Some excerpts in this regard are presented below:

- Man 2 commented: "*Northlink as a college does not make an effort to engage with students to encourage the brand out there*".
- Man 6 opinionated that: "*Northlink only talks and talks. Does not maintain the brand. False Bay College's social media is far ahead – False Bay offers many other subjects – they have an entrepreneurial hub – go green*".
- Mrk 1 said: "*Marketing visits schools only in grade 12 to promote the college. It is suggested to promote the college to earlier grades*".
- Mrk 2 endorsed that: "*The image can be damaged due to negative things like strikes, riots, NSFAS payments – this is all bad publicity that influences the image of the college. Due to potential issues, it might be dangerous for students to attend college*". This implies that some students are too afraid to attend classes.

Selected *alumni* agreed with management and the marketing team and berated that Northlink College fails to convey the brand and identity to them as students. Participant A 7 said: "*Northlink as a college does not make an effort to engage with students to encourage the brand out there*". Contradicting responses concerning the branding of Northlink College were obtained from A 4, who verbalised: "*the brand is well-known – we are very proud to tell others".* A 6 concur: "*people know the brand. Students stick to rules as lecturers teach students the right thing"*. Students are confused about the distinction between rules and branding, suggesting that management and lecturers may not communicate the message.

Management, marketing, and alumni concurred that Northlink College is well-known as a brand, predominantly because of word-of-mouth. A substantial number of participants believe that the marketing department should engage with scholars at an earlier age. Branding in education is usually associated with *firstly*, the quality of education (as Man 4 orated), and

secondly, the corporate identity of the HEI (Walter *et al*., 2020:14). The amalgamation of these mentioned attributes places Northlink College in a favourable position to build long-term relationships to foster alumni loyalty.

Values and culture should be implanted in students' minds to establish long-term relationships with stakeholders, and participants' perceptions of values and culture are deliberated following this.

5.2.2.3 Participants' perception of the values and culture of Northlink College

In a recent 2023 study, *Exploring the relationship between organizational culture and well-being of educational institutions in Jordan*, Alkhodary (2023:1) iterated that organisational culture is a critical factor in shaping companies' overall well-being, which can impact their employees' job satisfaction, loyalty, creativity, and productivity. *This study's management and marketing team members* affirmed that values and culture prepare students to represent themselves suitably in the workplace. On the authority of marketing, marketing sends posters to all the campuses regularly to reiterate to students the significance of the values and culture of the college. However, management is not even aware of these posters. As indicated in Figure 5.7, there is a lack of soft skills in education, values, and culture, which are only briefly discussed during orientation, and there is a lack of networking to communicate essential principles. Management does not clarify values, and students are not well-informed of what this might entail, as discussed in Chapter 3, Table 3.1. Some citations from the participants are:

- Man 1 mentioned that: "*students are not informed. Students do not know what the values of the college are*".
- Man 2 verbalised: "*During orientation, certain departments' program managers discuss what integrity means. To respect each other*".
- Man 4 commented: "*Management must be visible. Our students have not even seen or met the campus manager, including the rest of the management. The CEO is not available – he only comes by invitation. Student support is not visible either*".
- Man 6 affirmed: "*Northlink does not discuss work ethics. Students are always late – blame transport and take no responsibility*".

Alumni enrolled in a marketing communication course were aware of the culture of Northlink College. Likewise, one of the participants posits that the head of a hostel conveyed the culture and rules to the students staying in the hostel. Still, the students who commute daily were not exposed to those mentioned interactions. Some excerpts from the interviews are as follows:

- A 1 wrote: "*Because of the culture, certain students struggle especially with specific terminology. No values and traditions were communicated*".
- A 2 attested: "*Not even the principle of integrity is discussed. The college did not discuss values, nor ethical values*".
- A 3 said: "*I'm not interested in values and culture, but Northlink must give me a job*."
- A 4 stated: "*I'm unaware of Northlink's culture or what they stand for*".

Management, marketing, and former students agree that values and culture are not deliberated with students. Instilling culture and values in students is crucial because it supports their professional and ethical behaviour and mindset. Additionally, emphasising values and culture fosters a sense of responsibility, integrity, and respect, which are fundamental to workplace and community engagement. The absence of a strong cultural foundation and core values impedes the development of lasting relationships and ultimately undermines alumni loyalty, posing a significant concern. Financial support will be deliberated next.

5.2.2.4 Participants' perception of financial support

Participants from the *management* team view the National Student Financial Scheme (NSFAS) as a financial 'threat'. From their perspective, students appear ungrateful and similarly act like the government 'owes' the money to them. Indeed, unrealistic tuition fees could undermine the feeling of gratitude towards an academic institution if a student has to repay a study loan. As indicated in their study, "*Contentment and affect in the estimation of happiness*," Rojas and Veenhoven (2013:2) revealed that happiness and satisfaction often come from within and can be cultivated through gratitude. Moreover, the study conducted by Cownie and Gallow (2020:6) indicates that feelings of gratitude underpin a willingness to give back through alumni engagement activities, as delineated in Chapter 3. Participants from the *marketing team* attested that Northlink College does offer some bursaries to students, though they are not advertised due to limited funds. Students needing bursaries must apply, and after that, the executive team will independently decide which students will be granted a bursary. Management perceives strategic planning as a 'done-to' rather than a 'done-with' process, with the CEO driving the agenda, which is tied to the opinion of the marketing team.

Figure 5.6 displays *management and marketing's* perception of students' financial support as generated in Atlas.ti.

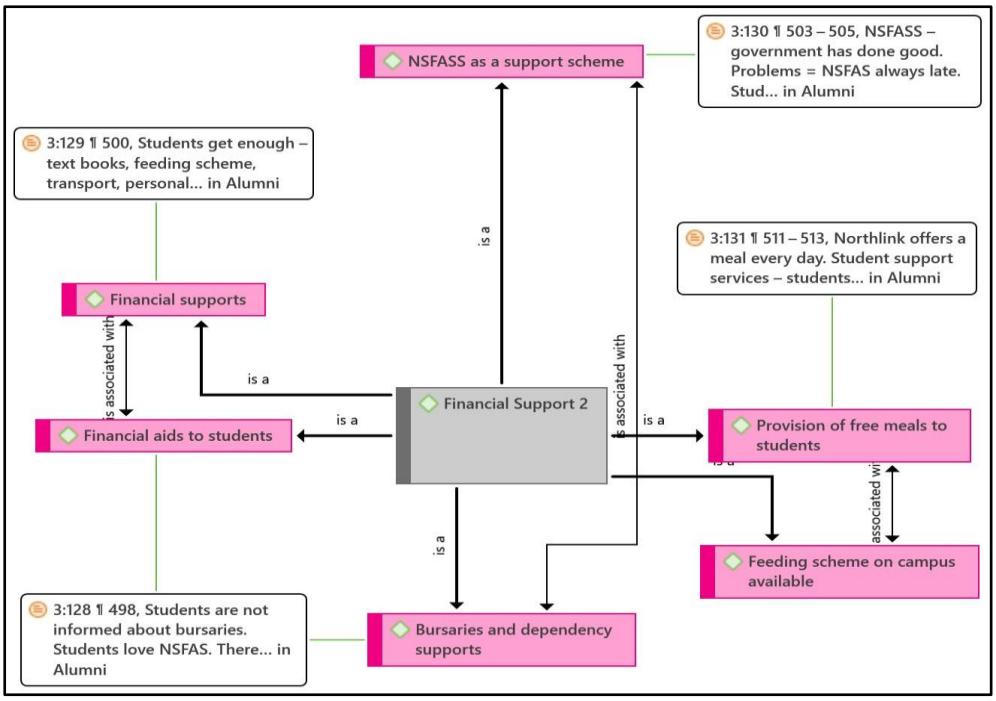


Figure 5.6: Management and marketing's perspectives of students' financial support

Some of the comments made by participants in terms of the financial support to students are as follows:

- Man 2 opinionated that: "*Students get enough – textbooks, a feeding scheme, transport money, personal needs, free education, travel and accommodation allowances. Students do not have any responsibility to pay back any fees*". As indicated in the NSFAS Act (Act 56 of 1999), students benefit from being unplagued by costly tertiary fees.

- Man 3 agrees with participant Man 2: "*The government has done well with NSFAS—unfortunately, these payments are always late. Students have to show up, and the government caters to all*".

- Man 4 affirmed: "*Northlink offers a free meal daily*".

The *alumni* comprehended NSFAS as insufficient for several reasons: to sustain a comfortable standard of living, inflation, unforeseen circumstances, accommodation, transportation, rent, and many more – it was difficult for an average student to prosper. Some respondents highlighted:

- A 3 said: "*Did receive a bursary. Not enough to support/look after yourself*".

- On the contrary, A 7 affirmed: "*I received NSFAS. I was fine with the financial support. I don't know about other students*".

- A 9 supports A 3's view and commented: "*I don't know if the money is enough for an average student. Parents can only now and then support me financially*."

Most stakeholders who participated in this study perceive NSFAS bursaries as inadequate, but the question remains: What additional add-ons can stakeholders implement to provide students with the financial support they need? Scholarships, emergency loans, and sponsorship opportunities might be suggestions. Still, their content depends on various factors, such as ease of access and application process, repayment terms and conditions, communication, and transparency concerning these offerings. By doing so, colleges can enhance students' trust, commitment, and satisfaction, vital for building long-term relationships. Subsequently, the respondents' perceptions of the following three attributes of relationship marketing, trust, commitment, and satisfaction, are deliberated.

5.2.3 Relationship marketing dimensions

As per Table 5.2, the second theme concerns the attributes of relationship marketing, which ought to be present to establish and enhance long-term relationships with stakeholders. The respondents' perceptions of the three dimensions are outlined below.

5.2.3.1 Participants' perception of trust

Trust is a cornerstone in any relationship and is the foundation for building strong connections. Northlink College could embrace values and culture in its endeavours to foster trust among staff and students alike.

Participants of the *management and marketing* teams noted the following:

- Man 2 stated that: "*Students trust the college – lecturers deliver a reliable service*".

  To affirm, Northlink College was nominated as the best tertiary institution in 2019 for its academic accolade in the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) programmes.

- Man 7 commented: "*The college and its stakeholders/industries do trust one another*".

- Man 8 opined: "We *approach different companies to appoint interns. We try to build relationships with different stakeholders. There are too many procedures to be following, which discourages building long-term relationships*". On the contrary, another participant affirmed that: "*there exists little trust between role players*".

- Mrk 3 mentioned that: "*Students receive education and a qualification – students are entitled – no reason for giving back anything to the college*".

Alumni pointed out that trust gives students confidence in their education and future prospects and commented:

- A 1 said: "*A student can rely on the tourism department to deliver up-to-date material to gain a qualification and to be appointed in the industry*".

- A 2 commented: "*I do trust this college – the college treats students respectfully*".

- A 3 affirmed, "*Because I experienced trust, I do need to maintain my relationship with the Tourism department*". Furthermore, A 3 articulated that: "*trust is equal to when students return to lecturers to discuss personal issues*".

- A 5 confirmed, "*I do trust the college – while working as an intern, I got to know some stuff."*

The data analysis shows that management, marketing, and alumni agreed that there is reasonable trust, as interviewees confirmed that Northlink College's 'services' are reliable. Trust extends beyond reliability to include problem-solving, teamwork, and integrity, among other principles. Yet, Northlink College's students' comprehension of trust remains largely confined to academic service reliability. A study conducted by Mbango and Mmatli in 2019 (2019:1) proposed that trust and commitment are to be studied in unification. The subsequent discussion deals with the results of commitment.

5.2.3.2 Participants' perception of commitment

Wong *et al*. (2018:207) found that commitment is well-established in the relationship marketing literature and is essential for creating and preserving long-term relationships. Almost every description of commitment emphasises the 'drive' for continuity to maintain a valuable relationship. Members of *management* articulated:

- Man 1 commented: "*NC does not transfer relationship marketing principles to students. Management does not believe long-term relationships with alumni are possible*".

- On the contrary, Man 2 opined: "*To get emotionally involved with them to gain trust – commitment may follow. Only a few students keep in touch with a few lecturers*".

- Man 3 reported: "*Our department is not aware where students are working – there is no continuity after graduation*".

- Another participant, Man 6, agreed: "*If there is an emotional connection between lecturers and students, it can foster commitment*."

- Man 7 affirmed: "*Commitment follows trust – students rely on Northlink's academic service but are not interested in maintaining continuity – come to college and leave immediately after classes are attended*".

Alumni concurringly indicated they are not committed to the college, as they do not feel valued, and there is no reason to be a committed stakeholder. However, other participants highlighted:

- A 1 commented: "*Students will appreciate individual attention to feel valued".*

- A 3 opined: "*Lecturers go the extra mile, but many students do not try to accept lecturers' support. Students are not committed*".

All participants concur that a crucial element is lacking: There is no drive for continuity to foster long-term loyalty and encourage stakeholders to become valued partners, thereby creating

mutual benefits. However, there is a beacon of light – emotionally committed students are more likely to become loyal alumni.

5.2.3.3 Participants' perception of satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction is one of the best-studied areas in marketing, although Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2180) proclaim that a comparatively small body of literature is specific to satisfaction in HEIs. Previous research by Pedro *et al*. (2017:129) found that consumer satisfaction is a forerunner to consumer loyalty and a willingness to continue a relationship. In addition, Sanchez-Fernandez (2016:671) described satisfaction as an evaluation between a consumer's expectation of a service and actual experiences. Below are some excerpts obtained from the *management and marketing* participants concerning satisfaction:

- Man 1, a management team member, affirmed: "*Students enter and leave. There's nothing on this campus to remind students of pleasant memories to take with them*." In the same vein, as discussed previously, management experienced students' frustration to the lack of communication, financial barriers, difficulty registering, reluctance to involve students, and more.
- Man 5 attested: "*Students do not have any expectations except for money and the qualification that can be given to them. Then they must be given a job*".
- Man 9 said: "*Student representatives meet with management to discuss student difficulties – the student council is not visible and does not interact with students*".
- Mrk 2 reported: "*Students are frustrated – they post on social media their frustrations, but in no relation to the posts from Northlink*".

Alumni experienced diverse feelings. A1 affirmed: "*Northlink needs to post the route you need to take towards the working environment. No one discussed the route to follow for the internship*". *"Student council representatives did not even advise us of the work-integrated learning representative stationed at campus"*. If final-year students are not informed about how to proceed to a working environment, they might feel anxious and unprepared as they transition from academia to the professional world.

- A 5 hoped: "*To gain self-confidence – I feel more secure, capable and motivated to succeed".*
- A 7 confirmed: "*I was delighted with the education I received*".
- A 8 commented: "*We have expectations to be offered a permanent appointment after an internship*." On the contrary, several alumni attested as A 4 commented: "*the expectation of making something of yourself – we are happy with the services we received from the college*".

Many participants' only expectations were to receive a qualification and a job. Therefore, students are unsatisfied, as their most important need – to be offered a job – was unmet. As previously mentioned, students come and go, indicating their dissatisfaction, as nothing other than high-quality education is offered on the campus. Satisfied students are more likely to remain engaged with their alma mater after graduation, contributing to a vibrant alumni network that benefits stakeholders. Next, loyalty will be addressed.

5.2.3.4 Participants' perception of loyalty

Customer loyalty cannot be obtained from a single transaction but rather from a series of satisfactory transactions over a period of time (Little & Marandi, 2003:55). Therefore, loyalty can be seen as a commitment by a consumer to a business based on the consumer's choice. In a competitive market, as in HEIs, with little differentiation, satisfaction is not enough – customer loyalty is required for the sustainability of academic institutions. To be effective, loyalty must be combined with satisfaction (Söderlun & Colliander, 2015:50).

Participants from *management and marketing* affirmed that loyalty could be achieved by encouraging students to keep in contact with the college, maintaining relationships with former students, and making contacts through emails and telephone calls. Some quotes obtained from the study are as follows:

- Man 2 opined: "*Can relationships with alumni in TVET sectors even be possible? Northlink can make an effort and try to educate students from day one to give back to communities*."
- Man 3 said: "*This college does not discuss relationship values with students – currently, the college is not concerned with building relationships – there is no drive for continuity*".
- Man 6 commented: "*There is very little ongoing relationships with alumni – the college receives funds from government. The college can invite alumni as guest speakers to come and share their working experiences*".
- Man 7 agreed: "*Alumni can be encouraged to share their working experiences*".
- Mrk 1 is worried that: "*Even if they become alumni – will they contribute financially? Maybe use emotions and NSFAS bursaries to encourage them to give back*".
- Mrk 2 from the marketing department commented*: "Alumni might become important – but Northlink must make a huge effort to put alumni networks into practice and not only ask for money*".
- Mrk 3 suggested: "*Create an alumni page on the website – build a database. The college can have alumni for different courses presented by different campuses*". Contrary to previous comments, Man 2 said: "*Some lecturers do build relationships with former students, but I don't know how well it is kept up. Students check in with lecturers after N6 to disclose their interviews and internships*".

Responses of former students comprised:

- A 1 said: "*Colleges must stay in contact with alumni—use email and WhatsApp and invite them to attend functions*." Opposingly, A 1 and A 2 suggested: "*that students must keep in contact with the college themselves because their personal details constantly change*.
- A 4 said: "*Northlink do not make any effort to build relationships with former students*".
- A 6 commented: "*This college can use email to contact me – I would like to share my working experiences with students*."
- A 9 also added by commenting: "*I would like to have a relationship with the college, but Northlink did not discuss long-term relationships and loyalty*".

The absence of relationship-building initiatives appears pervasive throughout HEIs, which is crucial for fostering alumni loyalty. Despite persistent communication challenges, a dynamic and active alumni association can serve as a game-changer, bridging gaps and fostering meaningful connections.

As per Table 5.2, the third theme concerns community engagement. Following is an assessment of the community engagement views attained from the interviewees.

5.2.4 Community engagement

Chapter 3 exposed community engagement, which Purcell *et al*. (2020:3) characterised as a "*process of building long-term relationships with community members who will work side-by-side with stakeholders as ongoing partners*" and this is very relevant to this study.

5.2.4.1 Stakeholders' interest in community engagement

Participants in the qualitative component of this study were asked to express their views and interests towards community engagement, and below are some excerpts obtained from the *management* participants:

- Man 1 said: "*Northlink does not encourage activities to involve students to engage in communities*".
- Man 2 reported that: "*The subject Entrepreneurship and Business Management includes a chapter, social responsibility, where the principle 'giving back' is discussed". The incorporation of SR into the students' curricula do not extend beyond the theoretical understanding, falling short of real-world implementation. Students can recite the community engagement principles but without practical experience. The concepts remained abstract and meaningless".*
- Man 3 added: "*Students need to be cultured to get involved. All businesses have social responsibility*".

- Man 5 commented: "*Northlink's vision, mission, and values do not address community engagement ".*

Members of the *marketing* team affirmed they get involved in community services or projects such as Mandela Day, but students are excluded from such projects. Community engagement initiatives are largely confined to the marketing team due to their significant challenges in encouraging students to participate.

- Mrk 1 opined: "*There may be staff members involved in community engagement, but that's a private matter*".

Alumni upheld that Northlink College does not address community issues, as nobody discussed the principles of community engagement. Former students opined that there is far too much to study and no time for community engagement. A 1 reported: "*Northlink needs to encourage or teach community involvement as part of Northlink's culture and even include it in syllabuses*".

- Participant A 2 pointed out: "*Social responsibility is facilitated in classrooms when time permits"*.
- Participant A 6 affirmed: "*Northlink did not discuss any volunteering work*".
- A 9 said: "*No one discussed involvement in communities. If the college discusses involvement in communities – I am willing to get involved*".

5.2.4.2 Stakeholders' perceptions of CE

Participating individuals were requested to provide their insights and perceptions on community engagement initiatives.

Management and marketing: Community engagement promotes the institutional brand.

Alumni**:** Community engagement facilitates giving back to the institution, reciprocating the quality education received.

Following are some relevant extracts obtained from the *management and marketing* participants:

- Man 5 said: "*Northlink does not encourage activities to involve students to engage in communities*".
- Man 7 disclosed that: "*Students are only interested in themselves*".
- Mrk 1 said, "*Northlink runs a hierarchy culture. All decisions and communication are top-down, limiting grassroots initiatives and innovative CE approaches*."

Alumni experienced diverse feelings, which are presented below.

- A 1 commented: "*Community engagement is a valuable platform for professional networking and enthusiastically participate in social responsibility initiatives within the business*".

- A 8 perceives community engagement and stated: "*I did volunteer at a clinic – she did not like that – she was unhappy because customers have to wait very long to be attended to and the way they treat and communicate to people – they do not have any respect for patients*".

Community engagement professionals often refer to community engagement as the '*stepchild'* of higher education and emphasise the absence of government funding as the prominent barrier (Johnson, 2020:94). All the participants had the same opinion that minimal action is taken to encourage students to play an active role in their communities. However, TVET colleges offer many skills programmes to equip students to engage with their local communities. Students can be cultivated 'to do good' to others. Therefore, the findings of community engagement pledge stakeholders to get involved in their communities.

The qualitative data analysis and presentation of the results revealed concurrences and contradictions in the respondents' statements. These are summarised and presented in Table 5.3.

5.2.5 Synthesis of the qualitative results

The repetitive nature of the responses obtained from the participants indicated data saturation for different components influencing the composition of a long-term relationship and for the dimensions of alumni loyalty. As alumni are key academic stakeholders, fostering loyalty should be a priority for the management of HEIs, specifically in the TVET sector in the Western Cape.

Table 5.3: Qualitative data analysis: concurrences and contradictions

Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship	**Concurrences**	**Contradictions**
1. Student experience	• Students' experience is not promising • Lack of relationships • Quality education • Limited communication • No extramural activities	• Social media activities and channels
2. HEI identity and branding	• Well-known • WOM	• No encouragement to promote the brand • Rules as opposed to identity
3. Culture and values	• Unaware of culture • No work ethics • No integrity • Lack of soft skills training	• Briefly discuss culture during the first day of orientation • Hostel discussed rules – no drinking
4. Financial support	• Not sufficient	• Ungrateful
Relationship marketing dimensions	**Concurrences**	**Contradictions**
1. Trust	• Reasonable level of trust • Quality of education • No reason for giving back	• Trust is not equal to nice • NSFAS not on time
2. Commitment	• Not interested in developing relationships • No continuity after graduation	• Emotional commitment
3. Satisfaction	• Satisfied with the quality of education	• Satisfied with NSFAS • No expectations
4. Loyalty	• No relationship building • Create an alumni association • Stay in contact	• Only a few students check in and discuss the internship
Community engagement	**Concurrences**	**Contradictions**
1. Stakeholders' interest in CE	• No encouragement to get involved • No discussions of CE	• Curriculum exhibits limitations in currency and relevance
2 Stakeholders' perceptions of CE	• No initiatives • No innovations	• Offer services at the local clinic

Northlink College's academic delivery aligns with its esteemed brand, providing students with quality education. However, a significant disparity exists between the institution's professed culture and values and their practical application. NSFAS falls short of meeting student needs. Findings from the relationship marketing dimensions verified high levels of trust and satisfaction with the quality of education received. Furthermore, the absence of relationships

correlates with a lack of loyalty. Despite conceptual ambiguity, management-driven community engagement initiatives can yield substantial benefits.

HEIs must engage students from day one to foster lifelong relationships, encourage meaningful connections, and cultivate loyal alumni ambassadors.

The presentation of the quantitative results is deliberated in the ensuing section.5.3

5.3 Quantitative data analysis and presentation

The next step in the data presentation, as indicated in Figure 5.1, is the quantitative data analysis and presentation. This section presents the results obtained after the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire survey was subjected to statistical analysis. The quantitative results are presented in a summarised format and are supported by tables and figures. Data analysis necessitates the scrutiny of data collected to generate useful information. This process involves developing summaries, searching for patterns, applying statistical techniques, and reducing data to a manageable size. In quantitative research, the main emphasis is on analysing information obtained in response to the questions asked of participants. The questionnaire was tested for reliability and validity to ensure that the questions and responses were indisputable.

All the responses from the survey questionnaire were assigned numeric codes and subsequently inserted into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS), firstly comprising descriptive statistics. This is followed by the results of the inferential statistics analysis, which encompass Cronbach's alpha, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), structural equation modelling (SEM), Spearman's rank correlation, and chi-square statistics. Inferential statistics were performed to clarify the statistical significance of the results. The quantitative data analysis was meticulously directed with the expert assistance of a statistician. The layout of this section is presented in Figure 5.7.

5.3.1 Demographic descriptors

Descriptive statistics are procedures that enable a researcher to tabulate and summarise the sample composition with the sole aim of addressing the research problem and objectives (Mohajan, 2020:4), portray descriptive statistics as data collected to describe a group or phenomenon, and show or condense data meaningfully, such as patterns that might emerge from the data. Descriptive research uses words or numbers to portray conditions in a particular location. However, Creswell *et al*. (2014:82) advised that descriptive statistics do not allow conclusions beyond the data analysed – it is simply a way to describe data. Seven

demographic descriptors were used to obtain a better understanding of the research population of this study.

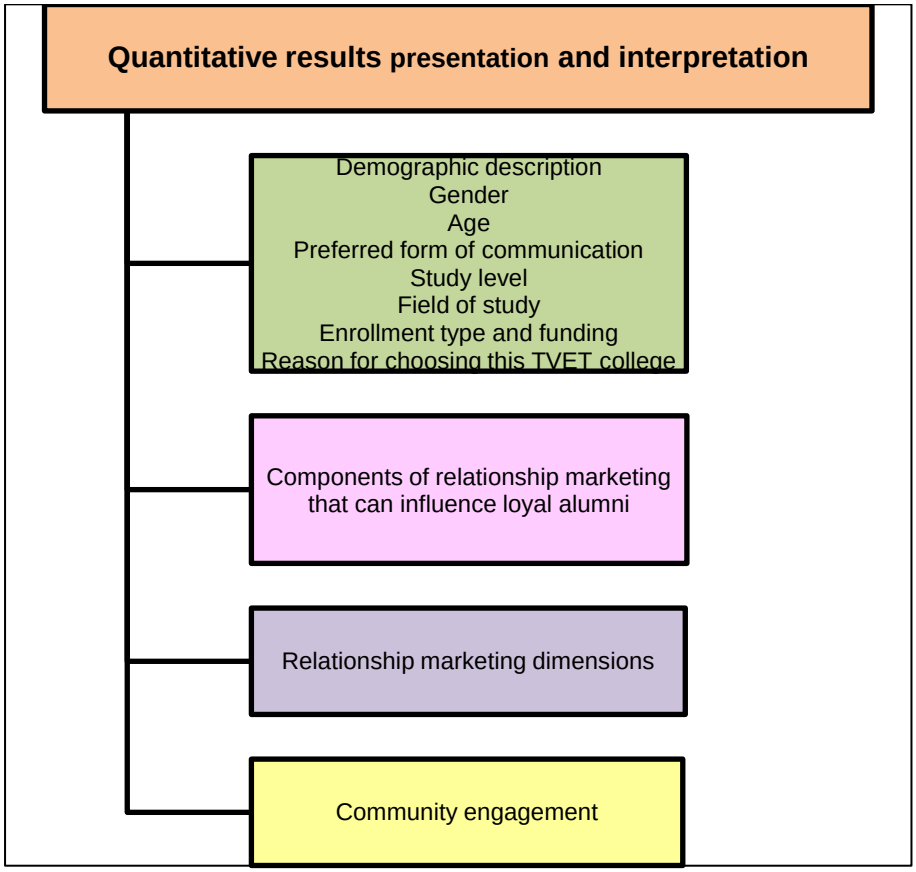


Figure 5.7: Quantitative data analysis and presentation

The sample for the quantitative component of this study consisted of 486 participants, whose demographic characteristics are delineated. All these participants were students of Northlink College. A frequency distribution presents the descriptive data when drawing up a sample's demographic description. Frequency distributions allow for easy-to-read presentations of the seven demographic variables comprising gender, age, preferred form of communication, study level, field of study, enrolment type and funding, and the reason for choosing this TVET college. The frequency distribution is portrayed in Table 5.4 below.

Table 5.4: Demographic descriptors of participants

Measure	Index	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Gender	Male	151	31.1	31.1	31.1
	Female	331	68.1	68.1	99.2
	Non-binary	4	.8	.8	100.0
	Total	486	100	100	

Measure	Index	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Age	18 to 28 years	442	90.9	90.9	90.9
	29 to 39 years	41	8.4	8.4	99.4
	40 to 50 years	2	.4	.4	99.8
	Above 50 years	1	.2	.2	100.0
	Total	486	100.0	100.0	
The preferred form of communication	Email from college	103	21.2	21.2	21.2
	Newsletter	5	1.0	1.0	22.2
	SMS	229	47.1	47.1	69.3
	WhatsApp	79	16.3	16.3	85.6
	Internet website	10	2.1	2.1	87.7
	Social media	60	12.3	12.3	100.0
	Total	486	100.0	100.0	
Study level	N4	44	9.1	9.1	9.1
	N5	100	20.6	20.7	29.9
	N6	338	69.5	70.1	100.0
	Total	482	99.2	100.0	
Missing	System	4	.8		
	Total	486	100.0		
Field of study	Business Management	133	27.4	27.4	27.4
	Human Resources	57	11.7	11.7	39.1
	Financial management	74	15.2	15.2	54.3
	Marketing Management	69	14.2	14.2	68.5
	Sport	42	8.6	8.6	77.2
	Drama	2	.4	.4	77.6
	Public Management	52	10.7	10.7	88.3
	Tourism	57	11.7	11.7	100.0
	Total	486	100.0	100.0	
Enrolment type and funding	Full-time: NSFAS bursary	362	74.5	74.5	74.5
	Full-time: Self-funded	111	22.8	22.8	97.3
	Full-time: Bursary (other)	9	1.9	1.9	99.2
	Part-time: Self-funded	4	.8	.8	100.0
	Total	486	100.0	100.0	

Measure	Index	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Reason for choosing this TVET college	Financial support	19	3.9	3.9	3.9
	Job opportunities	156	32.1	32.1	36.0
	College facilities	16	3.3	3.3	39.3
	Student life	14	2.9	2.9	42.2
	Recommended by friends/family	113	23.3	23.3	65.4
	Word-of-mouth	40	8.2	8.2	73.7
	Accommodation	3	.6	.6	74.6
	Academic achievements	125	25.7	25.7	100.1
	Total	486	100.0	100.0	

Subsequently, the results emanating from the seven demographic variables are presented.

5.3.1.1 Gender

A summary of how the participants are distributed based on gender is presented in Table 5.4. The sample for this study presents twice as many females, namely 68.1%, while males constitute 31.1%. The gender distribution and programmes offered in the TVET sector can differ from region to region. The mentioned above gender split, though, is consistent with the most recent statistics available that confirmed that there has indeed been a higher enrolment of females (63%) compared to males (37%) in TVET colleges for 2021 (DHET, 2021). Furthermore, data also indicated that more females attained a higher education qualification than males in South Africa, despite recent figures showing a higher unemployment rate for women (49.4%) than for men. The total number of TVET college students who completed N6 certificates were females, accounting for 75%, while males accounted for 25% (DHET, 2021). The most significant gender gap was in Educare and Management Assistant, where more females completed than males. To support the trend of having more female than male students in HEIs, in the article, *Women of substance inspires others to advance their education*, issued in the latest NWU alumni magazine, Dr Mahloko professed that further education is essential for personal growth and strongly believes in life-long learning (John, 2024:20).

5.3.1.2 Age

The most represented age group is 18 to 28 (91%), indicating a high concentration of young people. This age range is commonly accepted for students because it typically encompasses the years individuals pursue higher education or vocational training.

The age range allows for diverse experiences and perspectives among students while ensuring they are generally at a stage in their lives where they are focused on academic development. However, this distribution demonstrates a significant demographic skew towards younger age cohorts, which may influence behaviours within the investigated group.

5.3.1.3 Preferred form of communication

The participants' preferred mode of communication is indicated secondly in Table 5.4. SMS appeared as the primary communication medium, accounting for 47.1%. Email follows with a large proportion of 21.2%, demonstrating its continued value in communication. WhatsApp and social media contributed 16.3% and 12.3%, respectively, illustrating the growing importance of messaging apps and online platforms. WhatsApp is primarily a mobile messaging app, and students need to use a smartphone, Wi-Fi, or a mobile data connection to activate WhatsApp. The latter is prevalent among students in South Africa and worldwide. This trend is driven by several factors: costs involved, functionality, social dynamics, and the integration with other services. The findings of this study indicated that SMS appeared as the primary communication medium, which contradicts the conclusions demonstrated by many scholars. Van den Berg and Mudua (2022:113), as well as Venturino and Hsu (2022:401), indicated that WhatsApp groups assisted students in communicating and connecting with fellow students and lecturers because the platform is immediate, fast and easy to use, and creates a sense of belonging.

Not being active on WhatsApp could be due to needing a smartphone and available data. Most lecturers use the WhatsApp group chat feature to keep a class group connected efficiently. Newsletters and internet websites had lesser contributions of 1.0% and 2.1%, indicating lower usage or engagement levels. Moreover, socio-technical marginalisation is the digital divide between those with access to information and communication technologies and those without, as opposed to age-gender or race-related divides. Individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas have access to fewer educational resources (Czerniewicz *et al*., 2020:947). The latter confirmed that among South African students surveyed, 98.5% owned a cell phone, and there was no difference among different socioeconomic groups. However, students had varying levels of access to data and the internet. Figure 5.8 depicts the preferred communication mode.

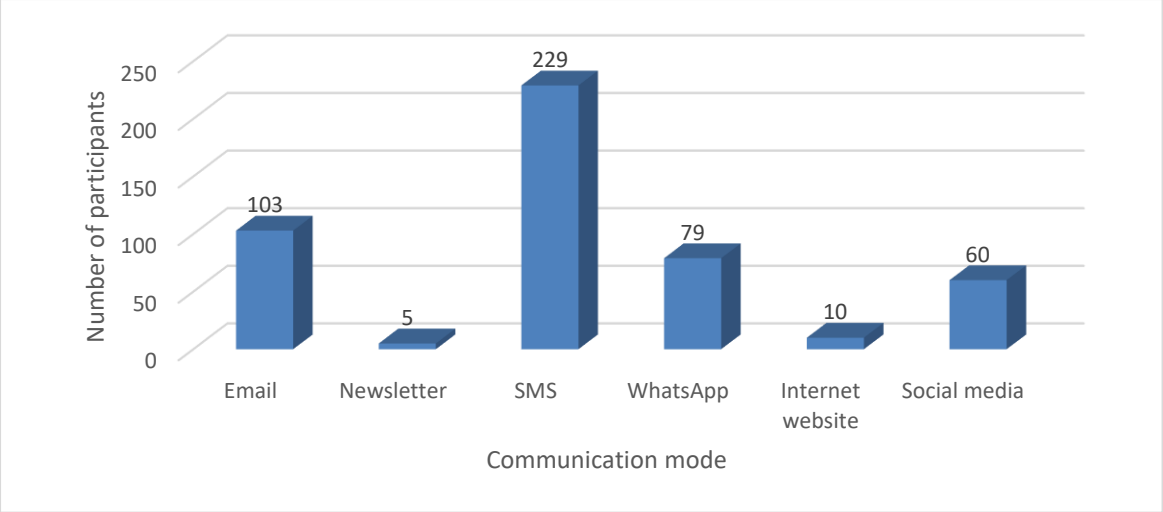


Figure 5.8: Preferred communication mode

5.3.1.4 Study level

The most significant percentage of participants (69.5%), as indicated in Table 5.4, were N6 students. This study targeted the N6 students, who are near the end of their studies; they have had sufficient experience and indicated a more informed understanding than the N4 students who only recently entered the TVET sector. The questionnaires were purposefully distributed to the N6s as they are nearing graduation and were soon to become alumni. This is a notable representation of final-year students who want to acquire a certificate, demonstrate perseverance to complete their studies, and are looking forward to entering the workplace. Building strong relationships with students is crucial to fostering a vibrant community that benefits the HEI and other stakeholders. One way of building and maintaining close connections is by supporting our N6 students on their career journeys – before they leave the campuses. The Alumni Relations office can organise various events to achieve this goal, such as artificial intelligence responsibility, a job hunters market day, and a career empowerment event, as suggested by the NWU (Van der Walt, 2024:6).

5.3.1.5 Field of study

A significant percentage of the participants (27.4%), as indicated in Table 5.4, preferred Business Management as their field of study. This highlights that more participants are interested in the business environment as employees or owning a business to contribute to the economy. Management provides practical skills and knowledge relevant to various industries for them to pursue their internships. Being actively involved in different sectors will expose students to networks and community involvement.

It also equips students with essential business constructs such as marketing, finance, and others, making Management graduates more employable. Financial Management, Marketing Management, and Human Resources scored frequencies of 15.2%, 14.2%, and 11.7%, respectively. Sports, Public Management, and Tourism also contributed to the overall distribution, with Drama having the lowest percentage at 0.4%. Sports and drama, though, are not preferred options since NSFAS does not finance these programmes. The most popular courses were Public Management, Financial Management, Management Assistant, Educare, and Human Resources, accounting for over 50% of all completions.

5.3.1.6 Enrolment type and funding

The results indicated that most participants (74.5%) enrolled full-time and received the NSFAS bursary as financial assistance to support them financially. Many students in South Africa rely on NSFAS bursaries to fund their studies. NSFAS provides financial aid to eligible students who cannot afford the cost of tertiary education. However, NSFAS is facing several challenges, including IT system failures, mismanagement, leadership instability, and funds being plundered (The Burger, 2024:1). Students who qualified for NSFAS funding after 2017 received a bursary, which does not need to be repaid. This funding model, introduced in 2017, provides free education to eligible students. Full-time self-funded students came in second with a frequency of 23%, indicating a sizeable proportion of individuals who paid for their education. Lastly, 2% of the participants used different bursaries to enrol full-time, demonstrating the variety of funding options available to students. However, part-time self-funded enrolment was the least frequent choice, indicating that only a small percentage (1%) of participants pursued education part-time and paid for themselves. If no bursaries or other financial support are available, enrolment at TVET colleges might decline, particularly among students from low-income backgrounds.

5.3.1.7 Reason for choosing this TVET college

Table 5.4 presents that the most significant percentage of participants (32.1%) indicated job opportunities as the most frequent feature for selecting Northlink College. Academic achievements were confirmed as former students had experienced knowledgeable lecturers and quality education. References by friends/family and word-of-mouth are substantial factors (23%), as this is a common phenomenon that people tend to trust. These results indicated a firm reliance on the reputation and academic performance of the college, as well as the influence of personal networks in guiding prospective students' choices. In contrast, financial support, college facilities, and student life play less important roles as they exhibited lower frequencies, suggesting that these aspects are considered by a smaller but still noteworthy

portion of the respondents. Other students prioritise extra factors, such as programme offerings and job placements, as more critical. Accommodation, with a frequency of 0.6%, appears to be the least influential factor among the participants in their decision-making process. However, many students from the Eastern Cape arrive at Northlink College with only a suitcase, no accommodation, and no prior knowledge of programme offerings. They are willing to enrol in any available programme and need a job. Students are desperately searching for employment, as many students unashamedly declared: "*did not expect anything but Northlink must give her a job."*

Overall, the data paints a comprehensive picture of the diverse reasons influencing individuals in selecting this particular TVET college, highlighting the multifaceted nature of decision factors in education choices.

In the upcoming section, constructs' reliability and validity will be attended to. Reliability and validity are most commonly used in quantitative studies to ensure the accuracy and credibility of study findings.

5.3.2 Constructs reliability and validity tests

Firstly, reliability will be portrayed.

5.3.2.1 Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measure, ensures that the results are dependable and repeatable, and minimises errors and biases (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:254). Cronbach alpha was used to determine the consistency of each scale's variables. The reliability analysis results for each construct are listed in Table 5.5 below.

Table 5.5: Construct reliability test results

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
Student experiences	.739	10
College identity	.754	4
Culture and values	.760	7
Financial support	.600	5
Community engagement	.745	6

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
Trust	.810	6
Commitment	.680	4
Satisfaction	.658	4
Alumni loyalty	.801	5

All the Cronbach alpha values in the above table are above 0.6, which is the recommended minimum for acceptable reliability (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011:88; Hajjar, 2018:29). It is worth noting that the construct financial support only achieved acceptable reliability after the variable "*as a student, I am concerned about my education-related expenses*" was excluded from it based on Cronbach's alpha. If the item was deleted, it indicated that removing this variable improved Cronbach's alpha from 0.521 to 0.6. Based on the results in the table above, all the items within each construct are consistent and measure the same construct. That is to say, the constructs are reliable.

Secondly, validity will be presented.

5.3.2.2 Validity

Validity is about determining whether the research measured what it was supposed to measure (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al*., 2014:254). Validity is the extent to which the instrument that was selected (in this case, a questionnaire) reflected the reality of the constructs that were being measured. The validity test was performed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (see Table 5.6) through structural equation modelling (SEM).

Table 5.6: Confirmatory factor analysis

Student experience	Estimate	Std. error	Z-value	P-value
SE1	0.489	0.038	12.957	0.000
SE2	0.455	0.039	11.650	0.000
SE3	0.524	0.052	10.007	0.000
SE4	0.511	0.051	10.078	0.000
SE5	0.508	0.043	11.692	0.000
SE6	0.389	0.043	9.000	0.000
SE7	0.474	0.054	8.829	0.000
SE8	0.520	0.047	11.120	0.000
SE9	0.457	0.050	9.108	0.000
SE10	0.505	0.056	9.096	0.000

College identity				
CI1	0.556	0.042	13.264	0.000
CI2	0.708	0.039	17.928	0.000
CI3	0.659	0.041	15.970	0.000
CI4	0.544	0.039	14.014	0.000
Culture and values				
CV1	0.433	0.036	11.881	0.000
CV2	0.540	0.038	14.358	0.000
CV3	0.570	0.045	12.620	0.000
CV4	0.505	0.043	11.793	0.000
CV5	0.440	0.039	11.291	0.000
CV6	0.419	0.039	10.792	0.000
CV7	0.527	0.040	13.217	0.000
Financial support				
FS1	0.577	0.066	8.395	0.000
FS2	0.392	0.072	5.425	0.000
FS3	0.539	0.085	6.321	0.000
FS4	0.537	0.080	6.737	0.000
FS5	0.783	0.070	11.148	0.000
Community engagement				
CE1	0.521	0.053	9.878	0.000
CE2	0.643	0.050	12.959	0.000
CE3	0.676	0.052	13.037	0.000
CE4	0.507	0.042	11.961	0.000
CE5	0.558	0.048	11.712	0.000
CE6	0.678	0.046	14.838	0.000
Satisfaction				
S1	0.427	0.014	10.369	0.000
S2	0.423	0.040	10.577	0.000
S3	0.485	0.037	13.199	0.000
S4	0.534	0.036	14.702	0.000
Trust				
T1	0.525	0.040	13.010	0.000
T2	0.660	0.048	13.720	0.000
T3	0.639	0.041	15.665	0.000
T4	0.607	0.038	16.006	0.000
T5	0.690	0.041	16.748	0.000
T6	0.575	0.038	15.028	0.000

Commitment				
C1	0.503	0.041	12.357	0.000
C2	0.560	0.044	12.812	0.000
C3	0.456	0.037	12.485	0.000
C4	0.628	0.042	14.910	0.000
Alumni loyalty	**Estimate**	**Std. error**	**Z-value**	**P-value**
L1	0.694	0.036	19.284	0.000
L2	0.726	0.042	17.115	0.000
L3	0.660	0.051	12.995	0.000
L4	0.685	0.040	16.957	0.000
L5	0.553	0.042	13.227	0.000

The standardised factor matrix, presented in Table 5.6, shows that the variables significantly loaded to their respective constructs and corresponding p-values. It is worth noting that all the p-values for each item in the table above are significant at a 5% significance level. This infers that each item significantly belongs to the constructs to which they are allocated.

The following results were generated to confirm whether the structural equation model (SEM) used in generating the previous table fit the data under study.

5.3.2.3 Structural equation model (SEM)

The SEM is a crucial part of the modelling process that allows researchers to examine complex relationships between observed and latent variables. This study's latent factors were student experience, college identity, culture and values, financial support, community engagement, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and alumni loyalty. Latent variables are not directly observed but are inferred from observed variables. The SEM test aims to assess the validity of assumptions, identify distributional differences, and guide data transformation (Streiner, 2006:317; Temizhan *et al*., 2022:266). According to Streiner (2006:317), in his study*, Building a better model: an introduction to structural equation modelling,* developing a more robust model highlighted the significance of the latent variables. By integrating SEM with hypothesis testing, researchers can rigorously test theoretical models and assess the strength and importance of relationships among variables. The structural model enables a researcher to empirically test the hypotheses postulated in the study and test the hypothesised model. Table 5.7 displays the goodness-of-fit tests.

Table 5.7: Goodness-of-fit tests

Fit index	Value for the model under study	Recommended cut-off point
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.833	≥ 0.9 (Zhao *et al*., 2019; Hassim *et al*., 2020)
Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)	0.821	≥ 0.9 (Zhao *et al*., 2019; Hassim *et al*., 2020)
Root mean squared error of estimation (RMSEA)	0.047	≤ 0.08 (Zhao *et al*., 2019; Hassim *et al*., 2020)
Standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)	0.053	≤ 0.08 (Hassim *et al*., 2020)

The results in the table above show that the RMSE and SRMR are less than the upper limit of 0.08, which indicates that they are a good fit. However, the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) are close to but are at least still less than 0.9, which does not show a good fit. The fit indicators gave contradictory results, but considering that the values of CFI and TLI are close enough to 0.9, it can be concluded that the SEM is near a good fit for the data.

5.3.3 Components influencing the composition of a long-term alumni relationship

This section of the questionnaire included 28 items to gather participants' insights into different components of relationship marketing that can manipulate alumni loyalty. A five-point Likert scale was employed to measure participants' responses, with 1 representing *strongly agree* and 5 *strongly disagree*.

Since the variables measure the same construct, the analysis is done per construct rather than per variable. The results for each construct are graphically represented in the following pie charts. The first construct depicted is student experience, followed by college identity, culture and values, and financial support. The experiences of students are graphically summarised in Figure 5.9.

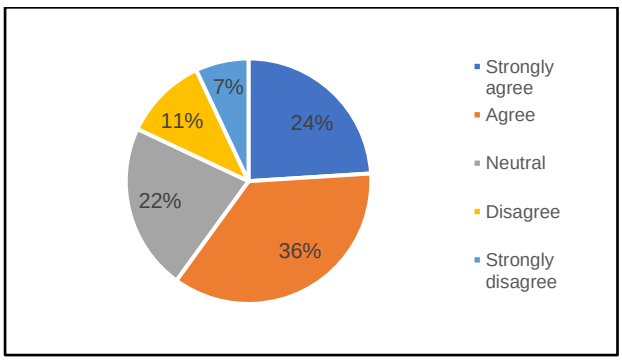


Figure 5.9: Student experience

The pie chart above shows that almost one-third of the participants agreed (36%) with the sentiments that described student experience, followed by those (24%) who strongly agreed, 22% were neutral, and relatively few participants disagreed (11%) or strongly disagreed (7%). Positive experiences during college can lead to a sense of belonging and identity, ultimately influencing greater loyalty. The following pie chart reports the participants' perceptions of college identity.

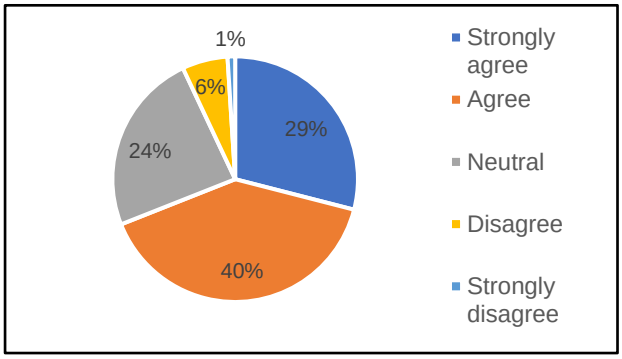


Figure 5.10: College identity

The pie chart above shows that 40% of the participants agreed with the sentiments that described college identity, followed by those who strongly agreed (29%), while 24% stayed neutral. In total, 69% of the participants believed institutions can cultivate lifelong connections with their students by fostering a solid college identity. Only a few participants disagreed (6%) or strongly disagreed (1%) with the statements describing their college identity perception.

Figure 5.11 presents a concise visual presentation of the participants' views of Northlink College's culture and values. A substantial proportion of students (70%) perceive their college's culture and values as pivotal factors influencing their loyalty as alumni. If the college culture and values align with or acknowledge the bulk of the students' heritage, it can promote a sense of loyalty.

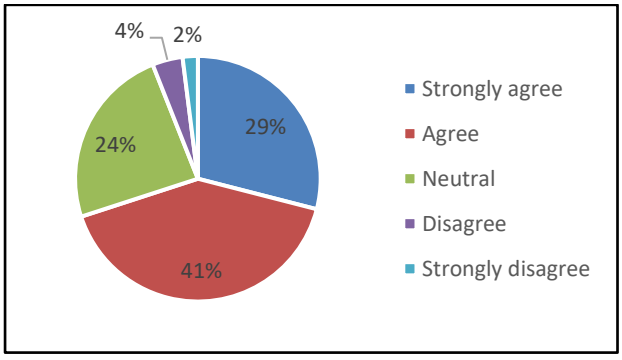


Figure 5.11: Culture and values

Students' perceptions of financial support are graphically summarised in Figure 5.12.

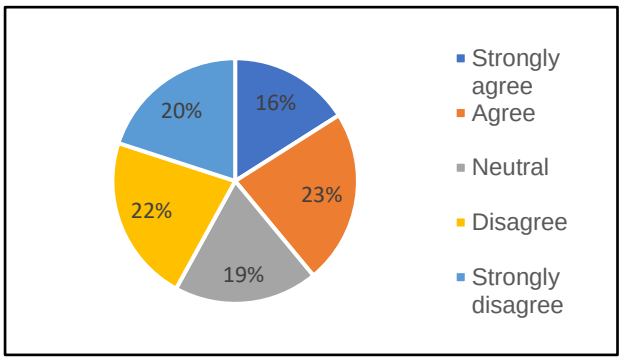


Figure 5.12: Financial support

The pie chart above shows that 23% of the participants agreed with the sentiments describing financial support, followed by those who strongly agreed (16%), and 20% stayed neutral. The participants disagreed (22%) or strongly disagreed (19%), suggesting that the issue is highly contentious, with almost equal numbers. The construct of financial support followed an entirely different pattern than the other constructs. If students perceive NSFAS bursaries as something they are entitled to rather than generous support, their appreciation diminishes. Many students are dissatisfied with NSFAS for several reasons: delayed disbursement of funds; the amount may not cover all necessary expenses; complex and confusing application process; lack of communication; administrative errors; and the mismanagement of funds. A recent report by the United Democratic Movement, Manifesto 2024 affirmed: "*In the recent years, the scheme has become a nightmare of financial mismanagement, incompetence, leaving thousands of students grappling with funding issues and service providers have complained about tardy pay-outs."*

Subsequently, Table 5.8 summarises the components of relationship marketing that can influence alumni loyalty, as per the Likert scale.

Table 5.8: Summary of components

Construct	Strongly agree	Agree	Sub-total	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Student experience	24	36	60	22	11	7	100
College identity	29	40	69	24	6	1	100
Culture & values	29	41	70	24	4	2	100
Financial support	16	23	39	20	22	19	100

The third column in Table 5.8 combines the ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ categories to represent a subtotal of the overall agreement. The sub-totals for the first three categories are 60%, 69%, and 70%, respectively, as the sub-total for financial support equals 39%. This finding indicates that 61% of students face difficulties, comprising heavy course loads, financial burdens, and more, which make balancing work and learning responsibilities unviable. The data reveals a conspicuous anomaly in financial support, serving as a red flag and suggesting underlying issues that warrant attention.

The next component, shown in Figure 5.7, deals with relationship marketing dimensions.

5.3.4 Relationship marketing dimensions

The results per construct presented for the dimensions of relationship marketing are trust, commitment, and satisfaction, which will be addressed hereafter.

The dimension of trust shows that 41% of the participants agreed with the sentiments that described trust, followed by those who strongly agreed, 23%, which equals 64% having trust in Northlink College due to experiencing high-quality education. A significant finding was that 10% of students distrust the college, and 26% stayed neutral. Some possible reasons include demographic factors, perceptions and awareness, experiences and interactions, personal characteristics, or institutional factors. Further research is warranted to explore these factors and their impact on student trust. Trust as a relationship marketing dimension is illustrated in Figure 1.13.

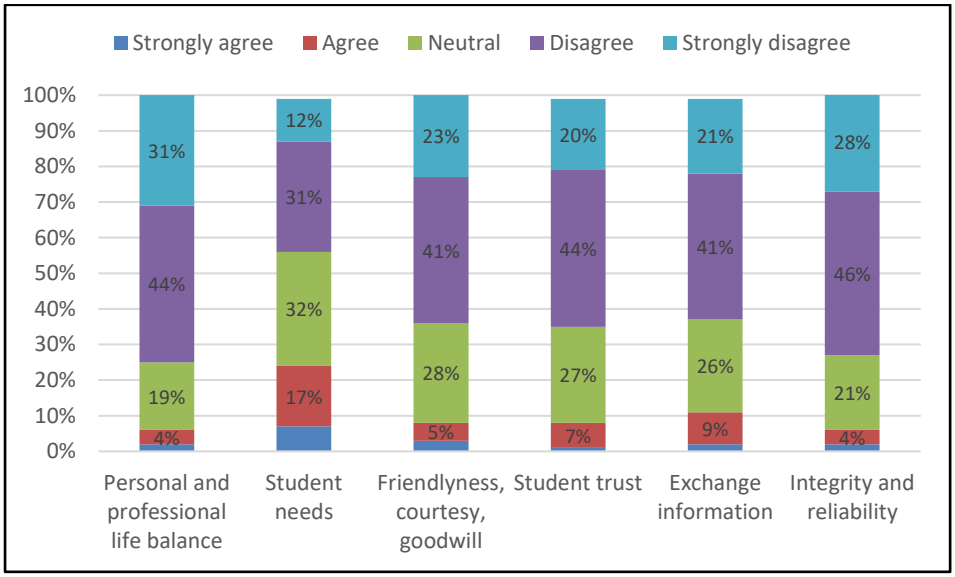


Figure 5.13: Trust

The results for commitment indicate a similar trend as trust, suggesting a strong connection between the two. Trust precedes commitment. 64% of respondents express emotional commitment to Northlink College, indicating a strong affinity. Students are likelier to commit to an academic institution they trust, which builds a sense of security and reliability.

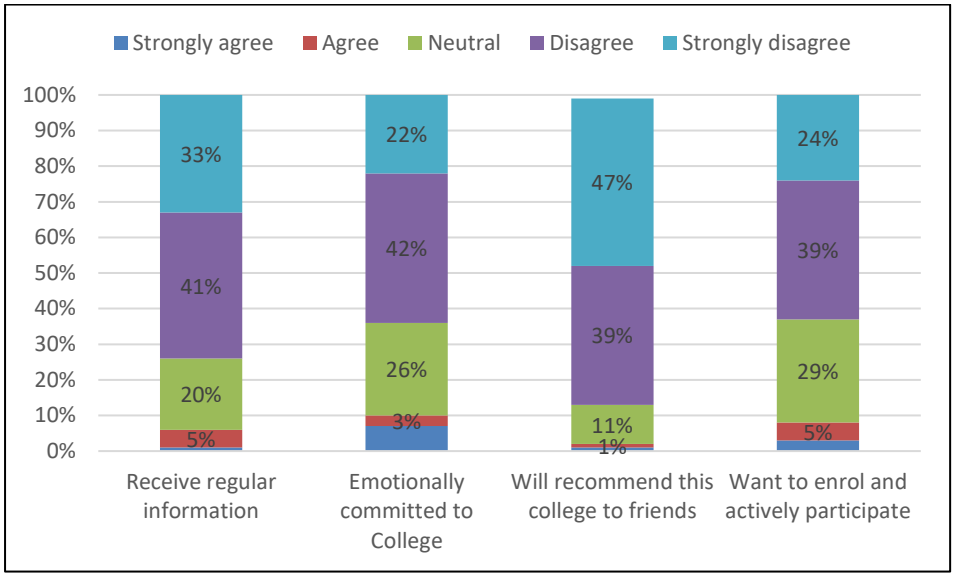


Figure 5.14: Commitment

Satisfaction with HEIs encompasses pleased students (78%) with their overall experiences. Students at Northlink College expressed high satisfaction with the institution's quality education, which exceeds their expectations and aligns with their goals and aspirations. With a satisfaction rate of 78%, the data suggests an exceptionally high likelihood for community engagement, which correlates with the results that indicated that 62% of the participants had faith in community engagement. Figure 5:15 presents a visual representation of their satisfaction with Northlink College.

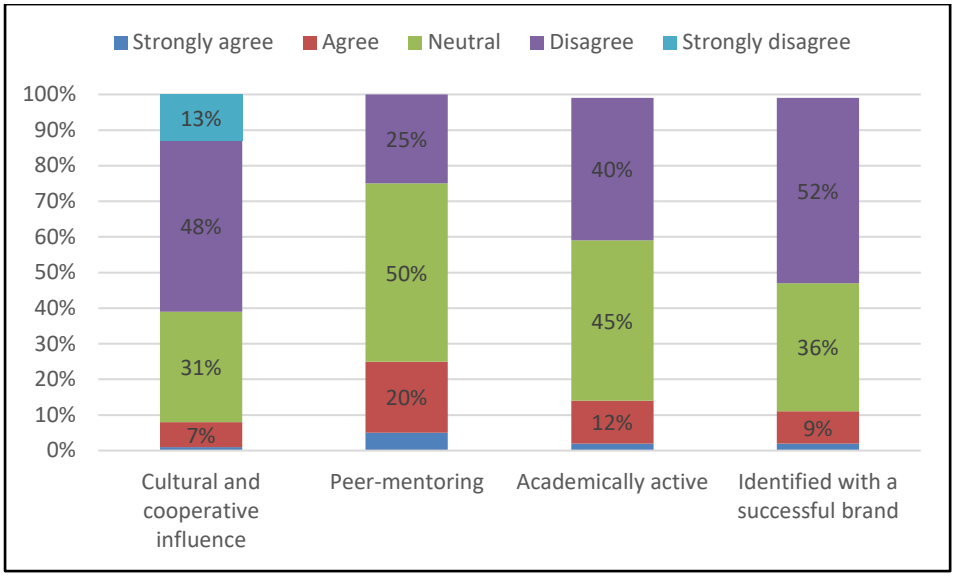


Figure 5.15: Satisfaction

The primary aim of this study is to foster alumni loyalty. To achieve this objective, loyalty was identified as a crucial dependent variable and subsequently included in the questionnaire to measure its prevalence and underlying factors. A minimal 9% of respondents expressed dissent, indicating disagreement with the lack of loyalty. Students' experiences with the dimension of loyalty are reflected in Figure 5.16.

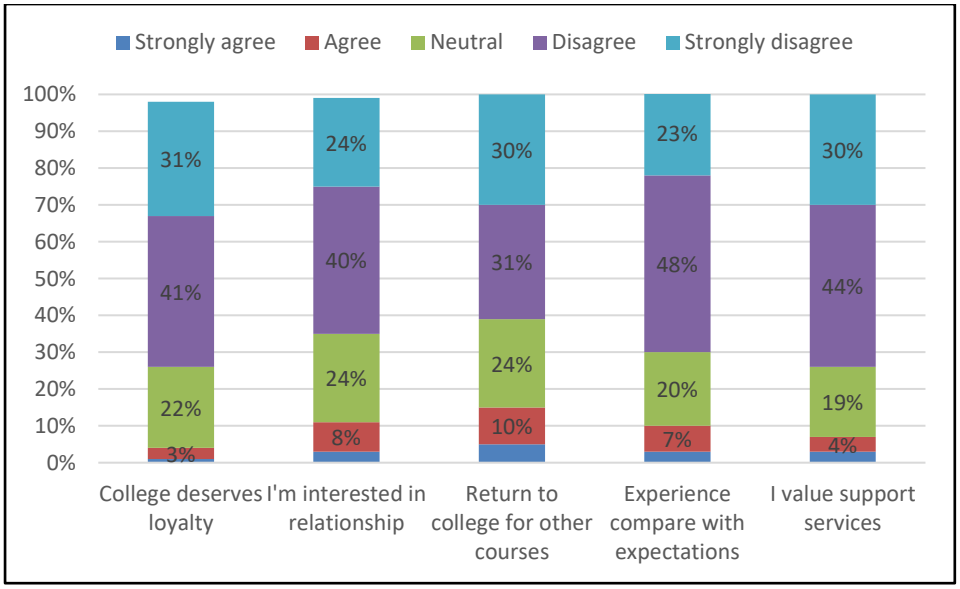


Figure 5.16: Loyalty

The data demonstrated a compelling link between the dimensions of relationship marketing, laying the groundwork for long-term alumni loyalty and engagement. As depicted in Figure 1.3, these dimensions are proposed to positively influence alumni loyalty, serving as a key insight for marketing strategies applicable to TVET colleges and HEIs.

In conclusion, based on the replies of the participants in this study on the relationship marketing dimensions, the majority of the participants (38%) agreed with all the items listed in the different constructs, followed by 27% who strongly agreed, with a total of 65%. Possible reasons for these results might be that the participants wanted to complete the questionnaire as quickly as possible, were uninterested, or needed help interpreting the questions correctly. The results of these findings can limit the ability to draw meaningful conclusions.

Subsequently, community engagement is debated.

5.3.5 Community engagement

This section of the questionnaire gathers participants' insights on stakeholders' interest in and perceptions of community engagement. Although distinct concepts, these two topics are related.

5.3.5.1 Stakeholders' interest in community engagement

Figure 5.17 represents participants' views on community engagement.

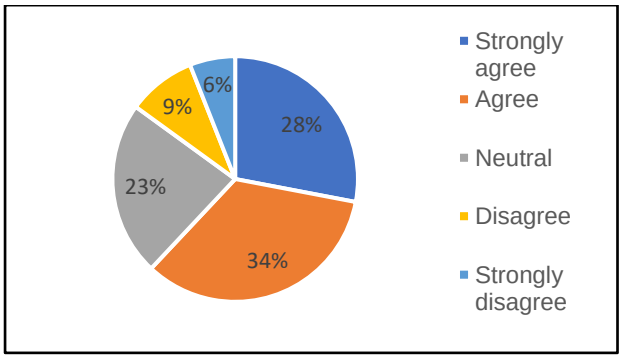


Figure 5.17: Community engagement

The pie chart above shows that 62% of participants believe in community engagement, which undoubtedly underlines their interest in their communities. Unfortunately, Northlink College does not encourage students to get involved. The data indicated enormous potential for HEIs to educate learners to believe and contribute toward their societies' well-being. However, students are often encouraged to focus on personal achievements and career success, sometimes at the expense of altruistic values and 'doing good to others'.

5.3.5.2 Stakeholders' perception of community engagement

The data analysis underscores participants' engagement with the community. Most participants expressed willingness to engage in community activities, demonstrating altruistic

tendencies. However, they reported lacking exposure to opportunities or training on community engagement.

The phenomenon of students only ticking agree or disagree blocks is known as acquiescence bias – a tendency to agree with statements without critically evaluating them. Social desirability bias is a desire to provide socially acceptable answers rather than genuine opinions. Some students may not fully understand the questions due to language barriers, and others might fear a negative response could affect their academic standing.

Community engagement is multifaceted and involves psychological, economic, and social factors. Educational systems and societal structures often do not emphasise community ties. However, the White Paper (Department of Education, 1997) reconceptualised community engagement not as a discreet entity but as integral to and embedded within teaching and research

The subsequent section expands on the correlation of variables.

5.3.6 Correlation of variables: Spearman's rank coefficient

In the study: *Which correlation coefficient should be used for investigating relations between quantitative variables*?, Temizhan *et al*. (2022:265) opined that correlation analysis has become one of the most widely used statistical techniques in all branches of science. There are many different correlation coefficients in literature, namely Pearson, Spearman, Kendall Tau, Winsorized, Permutation-based, distance, Sheapard, percentage-bend, and Blomquvist, where the three most popular are Pearson's coefficient, Spearman's rho coefficient and Kendall's tau (Hauke & Kossowski, 2011:87). Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of which correlation coefficients(s) is/are more appropriate to be used based on: (1) measurement levels, (2) type of variables, (3) distribution of the variables, (4) type of relations, and (5) the presence of outliers or not in a dataset (Rebekic *et al*., 2015:47; Temizhan *et al*., 2022:265).

Spearman's rank correlation coefficient is a non-parametric measure that fits survey design for several reasons: it collects ordinal data; it does not assume normality; it detects monotonic relationships; it is robust to outliers and skewed distributions; it is easy to interpret, and it does not assume equal intervals between consecutive ranks. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was found suitable and was exploited to determine the relationship between the constructs under study. The correlation coefficient is on a scale that varies from +1 through 0 to -1. Once one variable increases as the other increases, the correlation is positive; when one decreases as the other increases, it is negative. Therefore, the closer the association is to zero, the weaker it is. Figure 5.8 displays Spearman's monotonic functions.

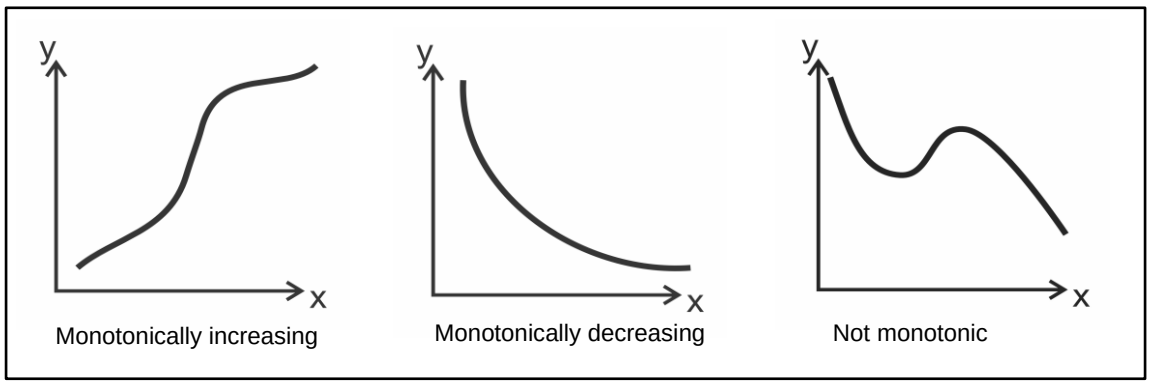


Figure 5.18: Spearman's monotonic functions

Source: Rebekic *et al*. (2015:47)

As indicated in Table 5.9, the strongest positive correlation was recognised between alumni loyalty and commitment (r = 0.571), indicating that, as commitment increases, alumni loyalty also tends to increase. Strong positive correlations were also found between trust and alumni loyalty (r = 0.560), suggesting that commitment and trust are critical drivers of alumni loyalty. Furthermore, the results also revealed a moderate positive relationship between college identity and student experience (0.491), indicating that students with stronger college identities tend to have more positive experiences. There is also a moderate positive correlation between trust and commitment (0.479), meaning that as commitment increases, trust also increases. Therefore, trust is essential for long-term commitments. A promising moderate positive correlation was formed between alumni loyalty and community engagement (0.489), indicating that community engagement also tends to increase as alumni loyalty increases. Therefore, loyal alumni are more likely to engage with the community. The weakest correlation (0.257) was between the constructs of financial support and culture and values, indicating that those constructs do not influence each other. A weak correlation does not imply some relationship; it just signifies that other factors might be more influential within this context. There was a weak correlation between student experiences and community engagement (0.286), signifying that students' experiences do not strongly predict community engagement. This can be ascribed to students not having any experience with community engagement as it is not yet facilitated by Northlink College.

Table 5.9: Spearman's rank coefficient

		Student experience	College identity	Culture and values	Financial support	Community engagement	Satisfaction	Trust	Commitment	Alumni loyalty
Student experience	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.491**	.386**	.309**	.286**	.302**	.510**	.363**	.404**
	P-value	.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
College identity	Correlation coefficient	.491**	1.000	.513**	.327**	.385**	.394**	.547**	.528**	.546**
	P-value	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Culture and values	Correlation coefficient	.386**	.513**	1.000	.257**	.403**	.373**	.503**	.423**	.466**
	P-value	.000	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Financial support	Correlation coefficient	.309**	.327**	.257**	1.000	.300**	.265**	.327**	.258**	.364**
	P-value	.000	.000	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Community engagement	Correlation coefficient	.286**	.385**	.403**	.300**	1.000	.418**	.367**	.485**	.489**
	P-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
Trust	Correlation coefficient	.510**	.547**	.503**	.327**	.367**	.412**	1.000	.479**	.560**
	P-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
Commitment	Correlation coefficient	.363**	.528**	.423**	.258**	.485**	.444**	.479**	1.000	.571**
	P-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
Satisfaction	Correlation coefficient	.302**	.394**	.373**	.265**	.418**	1.000	.412**	.444**	.442**
	P-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
Loyal alumni	Correlation coefficient	.404**	.546**	.466**	.364**	.489**	.442**	.560**	.571**	1.000
	P-value	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	

Followingly, the hypotheses were tested.

5.3.7 Testing of hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested using Spearman's rank correlation coefficients, and the strength of the correlation is interpreted using the commonly used rule of thumb, adapted from Schober *et al*., cited by Litheko (2019:252). Followingly, the posed hypotheses, as set in paragraph 1.5.3.1, were addressed.

<0.10	Negligible correlation
0.10-0.39	Weak
0.40-0.69	Moderate
0.70-0.89	Strong
≥0.90	Very strong

H1 Alumni contact has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

H1-1 Student experience has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.404 between student experience and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05). This implies that student experience has a moderate, positive, and considerable influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H1-1 is accepted.

H1-2 HEI identity has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.546 between college identity (HEI identity) and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05). This implies that HEI identity has a moderate, positive, and noteworthy influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H1-2 is accepted.

H1-3 Culture and values have a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.466 between culture and values and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05), and lies between 0.4 and 0.69. This implies that HEI identity has a moderate, positive, and considerable influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H1-3 is accepted.

H1-4 Financial support has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.364 between financial support and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05) and lies between 0.1 and 0.39. This implies that financial support has a weak, positive, and substantial influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H1-4 is accepted.

H2 Relationship marketing has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

H2-1 Trust has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.560 between trust and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05) and lies between 0.4 and 0.69. This implies that trust has a moderate, positive, and important influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H2-1 is accepted.

H2-2 Commitment has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.571 between commitment and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05) and lies between 0.4 and 0.69. This implies that trust has a moderate, positive, and considerable influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H2-2 is accepted.

H2-3 Satisfaction has a significant favourable influence on alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.442 lies between 0.4 and 0.69 and is significant (p-value < 0.05). This implies that satisfaction has a moderate, positive, and significant influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H2-3 is accepted.

H3 There is a positive correlation between community engagement and alumni loyalty.

The correlation coefficient of 0.489 between community engagement and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value,0.05) and lies between 0.4 and 0.69. This implies that community engagement has a moderate, positive, and considerable influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H3 is accepted.

H4 There is a positive correlation between relationship marketing and community engagement.

H4-1 There is a positive correlation between trust and community engagement.

The correlation coefficient of 0.367 between trust and community engagement is significant (p-value < 0.05) and lies between 0.1 and 0.39. This implies that trust has a weak, positive, and considerable influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H4-1 is accepted.

H4-2 There is a positive correlation between commitment and community engagement.

The correlation coefficient of 0.485 between commitment and community engagement is significant (p-value < 0.05) and lies between 0.4 and 0.69. This implies that commitment has a moderate positive and substantial influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H4-2 is accepted.

H4-3 There is a positive correlation between satisfaction and community engagement.

The correlation coefficient of 0.418 between satisfaction and community engagement is significant (p-value < 0.05) and lies between 0.4 and 0.69. This implies that satisfaction has a moderate positive and meaningful influence on alumni loyalty. Therefore, H4-3 is accepted.

The relationships between variables will subsequently be deliberated.

5.3.8 Relationships between demographic variables and the constructs under study

Spearman's rho coefficient was used to ascertain the relationship between ordinal demographic pairs of variables and the constructs under study (Temizhan *et al*., 2022:265). In contrast, the chi-square test was used to test whether the demographic variable was nominal. All correlations with p-values less than 0.05 indicate a significant correlation between variables. The results are presented in Table 5:10.

Table 5.10: Relationships between demographic variables and constructs

		Age group	**Study level**
Student experience	Correlation coefficient	.047	.117*
	p-value	.303	.010
College identity	Correlation coefficient	.031	-.039
	p-value	.495	.392
Culture and values	Correlation coefficient	-.023	.040
	p-value	.619	.381
Financial support	Correlation coefficient	.006	-.131**
	p-value	.889	.004
Community engagement	Correlation coefficient	-.032	.055
	p-value	.475	.227
Trust	Correlation coefficient	-.005	.078
	p-value	.913	.088
Commitment	Correlation coefficient	-.070	.016
	p-value	.125	.720
Satisfaction	Correlation coefficient	-.041	.014
	p-value	.371	.761
Loyal alumni	Correlation coefficient	-.118**	.011
	p-value	.010	.806

The table above shows that age group is only statistically significantly correlated with alumni loyalty as the p-value < 0.05 and this is unlikely to have occurred by chance. However, this

correlation is negative, implying that the higher the age, the lower the alumni loyalty. Furthermore, the absolute value of the correlation coefficient (0.118) lies between 0.10 and 0.39, which implies that the correlation between age group and alumni loyalty is weak. This could hint at several aspects, such as loyal alumni's affection being less connected to the academic institution, having more competing priorities, or changes in the institution over time, affecting their loyalty. This outcome is exceptionally unconventional since, as consumers age, they often find themselves in a better financial position to contribute to their alma mater. This finding corresponds with researchers Singer and Hughey's (2002:51) study, which states: *"They are often older, more robust, greyer, and sometimes balder, but they are also generally wiser and financially better off than they were undergraduates."*

Despite the negative correlation, this meaningful relationship can inspire HEIs to investigate the underlying reasons for the factors influencing alumni loyalty across different age groups. The outcomes in the preceding table also indicate that the study level significantly correlates with student experience. The correlation is positive, implying that the higher the study level, the more positive the perception of student experience gets. However, the correlation coefficient (0.117) lies between 0.10 and 0.39, implying that the correlation is weak. However, scholars Koenig-Lewis *et al*. (2015:5) proposed that the *passage of time* influences graduates' appreciation of their academic institution. Furthermore, the results also signify that study level significantly correlates with financial support. However, the correlation is negative, implying that the higher the study level, the lower the financial support (Temizhan *et al*., 2022:265). The absolute value lies between 0.10 and 0.39, indicating a weak correlation. As for the negative correlation, students at higher study levels (e.g. graduates) tend to receive less financial support, while students at lower study levels (as in this case, certificates) tend to receive more financial support. This could be because higher-level students are more likely to accept other funding or scholarships, and lower-level students are more likely to receive government-funded financial support, such as NSFAS bursaries. HEIs may consider revising the relevant policies regarding post-graduate students' studies and research, as many different dynamics may follow, such as developing a highly skilled workforce, driving innovation and economic growth, addressing critical societal challenges, fostering entrepreneurship, job creation, and maintaining competitiveness globally. These students need financial support to eliminate their financial debt.

The chi-square test was employed, as the demographic variable, *gender*, was nominal and the results are presented in Table 5.11. The chi-square test is the simultaneous analysis of two variables as they explore the association between (Rebekic *et al*., 2015:47) two categorical variables.

Table 5.11: An association between gender and the constructs under study

Variable	Chi-square statistic	df	p-value
Gender and student experience	10.694	6	.098
Gender and college identity	13.140	8	.107
Gender and culture and values	15.824	6	.015
Gender and financial support	14.741	8	.064
Gender and community engagement	16.744	8	.033
Gender and trust	5.254	8	.730
Gender and commitment	8.873	8	.353
Gender and satisfaction	7.198	8	.515
Gender and alumni loyalty	6.527	8	.588

The table above shows that gender is only significantly associated with the following constructs, i.e. (1) culture and values and (2) community engagement, where the p-values are less than 0.05. *Firstly*, gender is often constructed and defined differently across cultures, leading to varying values and expectations. Furthermore, gender is frequently linked to power and status, with cultural values perpetuating inequalities. These findings align with the preceding results related to the construct of culture and values, where 40% of participants agreed with the sentiments described in culture and values, followed by those (30%) who strongly agreed. *Secondly,* gendered socialisation influences community engagement, with men and women often socialised to engage differently. Through community engagement, individuals can be inspired, and gender plays a significant role in determining the extent and character of the empowerment. By considering the interplay between gender, culture, values, and norms, it points to a more comprehensive picture of the elements that shape community engagement and how to promote more inclusive and equitable engagement practices. Subsequently, cross-tabulations will be deliberated.

5.3.9 Cross-tabulations

Cross-tabulations are among the most useful analytical tools in research. They are two or more dimensional tables that record the frequency of participants with a specific characteristic described in the table's cells, as indicated in Table 5.12. Cross-tabulations are portrayed only if variables are significantly associated with each other. Otherwise, there is no need to do so since the association between the variables would be statistically unimportant to interpret.

Table 5.12 shows that gender is only significantly associated with the constructs (1) culture and values and (2) community engagement, and these are presented subsequently.

Table 5.12: Cross-tabulation: Gender versus culture and values

Culture and values					
		Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**
Gender	Male	8.6%	68.2%	21.9%	1.3%
	Female	20.7%	59.1%	19.2%	0.9%
	Non-binary		100.0%		
Total		16.8%	62.3%	19.9%	1.0%

Both males and females recognise the importance of culture and values in alumni relationships, but males do so slightly more. Therefore, the gender difference suggests potential nuances in how males and females perceive the role of culture and values.

Table 5.13: Cross-tabulation: Gender versus community engagement

Community engagement							
		Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**	**Total**
Gender	Male	7.9%	54.3%	30.5%	4.0%	3.3%	100
	Female	11.2%	53.5%	30.5%	4.8%	Nil	100
	Non-binary	Nil	25.0%	75.0%	Nil	Nil	100
Total		19.1%	53.5%	30.9%	4.5%	1%	100

Table 5.13 above clearly depicts that males and females show similar levels of agreement in community engagement, which, as a construct, can most probably be added to the equation to enhance alumni loyalty. They might be interested in community engagement for various reasons, such as personal growth, community improvement, a sense of belonging, unique motivation, and more. These positive results suggest that educating TVET college students and exposing them to community engagement activities can benefit stakeholders. Table 5.14 depicts the cross-tabulation between gender and preferred forms of communication.

Table 5.14: Cross-tabulation: Gender versus preferred form of communication

Preferred forms of communication							
		Email	**Newsletter**	**SMS/ WhatsApp**	**Internet**	**Social media**	**Total**
Gender	Male	25.2%	2%	38.4%	21.2%	4%	100
	Female	18.7%	0.6%	51.7%	13.9%	1.2%	100
% within gender		20.7%	1%	47.5%	16.2%	2.1%	100

Table 5.14 presents data that combines SMS and WhatsApp as a single category. The combined category (47.5%) is the most popular form of communication among respondents, surpassing other methods in terms of popularity. Even though Figure 5.8 indicates the count for SMS and WhatsApp separately, Table 5.14 shows they are joined as they are interconnected.

The cross-tabulation analysis highlights a considerable association between gender and community engagement. The findings suggest that a significant proportion (almost 60%) of students are inclined toward community engagement, underscoring the viability of incorporating community engagement as a key component within the study's conceptual model. To enhance the rigour and validity of the findings, this study utilised methodological triangulation, which is presented forthwith.

5.4 Triangulation

Triangulation was employed to minimise bias and enhance the generalisability of the results, which entails utilising multiple sources of information. In this case, this refers to the information acquired from the literature review and data obtained through the qualitative and quantitative components of the study. Information from different angles was used to corroborate, elaborate, or eliminate the research problem, as explained in Chapter 1, paragraph 1.3. The management and marketing departments and alumni were involved in the qualitative data acquisition through in-depth interviews (the qualitative component), and current students were the participants in the quantitative data survey research (the quantitative component) to gain insight into their perspectives of alumni loyalty. During the analysis stage, participant feedback was compared to determine areas of agreement and contradiction, and the results are deliberated on in the subsequent section. The layout of this section is presented in Figure 5.20.

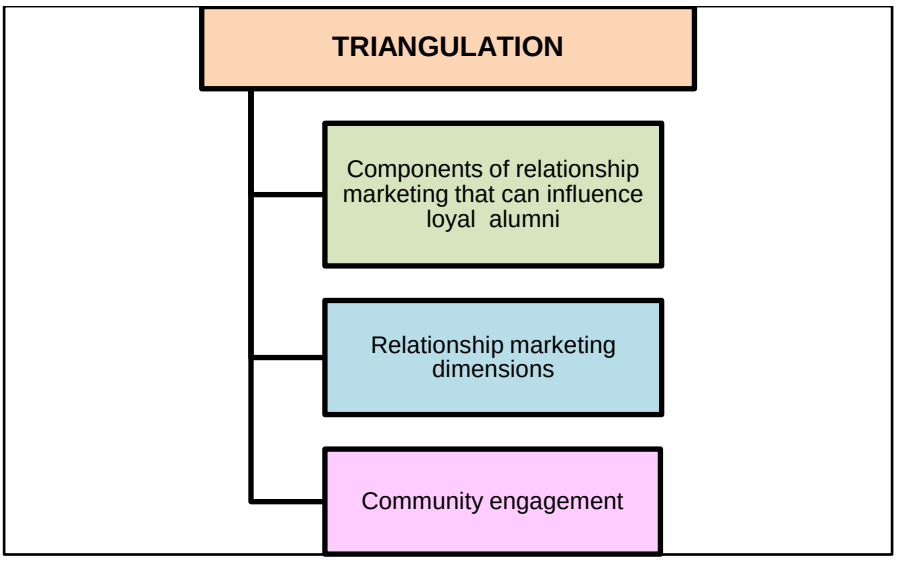


Figure 5.19: Triangulation

During the analysis stage, participant feedback was compared to determine areas of concurrence and contradiction, which are delineated below.

5.4.1 Different components influencing the composition of a long-term relationship

This study identified four components, i.e. student experience, college identity, culture and values, and financial support to establish their influence on establishing, building, and maintaining a long-term relationship between stakeholders.

5.4.1.1 Student experience

The findings from the qualitative dataset paint a picture of a campus lacking 'vigour', with students feeling disconnected and unenthusiastic about their college experience. Key contributing factors are unsuccessful student engagement initiatives, inadequate communication, and the neglect of college facilities. Notwithstanding challenges, a notable strength of Northlink College lies in lecturers' expertise and dedication, ensuring high-quality education, as discussed in paragraph 5.2.2.1. The conclusions from the quantitative dataset deviated from the qualitative dataset. The quantitative dataset outlined that most participants mentioned that they experience a content campus environment and are interested in engaging in long-term relationships to become loyal alumni.

5.4.1.2 Brand and identity

The results of the qualitative findings were overwhelming – Northlink College is a well-known brand, as explained in paragraph 5.2.2.2. Furthermore, the perceived quality of education is so

prominent it greatly impacts students' choices to enrol at Northlink College. Students like to enrol and belong to a reputable brand, aiming to become life-long friends. Sadly, the college does not try to engage with students to encourage the brand in the market and the community. The quantitative results confirmed that students agree that the brand is well-known.

5.4.1.3 Culture and values

The qualitative data analysis indicated that Northlink does not inform students about culture and values. Most participants opined that they are not exposed to the values, culture, work ethics, responsibility, or integrity of Northlink College, as explained in paragraph 5.2.2.3. The academic year commenced with an orientation session, where students were briefly introduced to core principles, including academic integrity, values, and responsibility. In contrast, the results from the quantitative analysis revealed that students agreed that values and culture are discussed with them, and they even expressed the joy of giving to others. However, participants believe that Northlink did not expose them to culture and values, as explained in paragraph 5.2.2.1.

5.4.1.4 Financial support

The financial support component followed a completely different route from the other components. The qualitative analysis denoted that NSFAS bursaries are sufficient and that students are ungrateful. The dataset revealed that students are ungrateful and entitled and act like the government 'owes' them money, as explained in paragraph 5.2.2.4. On the contrary, the quantitative analysis revealed that 61 % of students face financial difficulties and disagreed with the itemised statements related to financial support. Financial support seems to be a huge constraint, although more money does not necessarily imply increased attendance, lower retention rates, and improved academic results.

Forthwith, the findings from the relationship marketing dimensions will be deliberated.

5.4.2 Relationship marketing dimensions

As portrayed in Figure 5.20, this research study categorises relationship marketing dimensions into trust, commitment, and satisfaction. A comparative analysis of qualitative and quantitative findings elucidates the dimension's impact on alumni loyalty, contributing to a deeper understanding of relationship marketing's role in higher education.

5.4.2.1 Trust

The findings from the qualitative dataset revealed that participants trust Northlink College. Northlink College was nominated as the best tertiary institution in 2019 and the interviewed participants affirmed that trust equals quality education. Furthermore, some of Northlink's academic programme managers try to partner with stakeholders to appoint interns but experience difficulty with timeous procedures and a lack of trust. The quantitative results corroborated the qualitative findings, as 64% of participants reported they do trust the college, as indicated in paragraph 5.3.4. However, the quantitative results identified that a proportion (10%) expressed distrust, and the qualitative reasons provided suggest that the college should prioritise student experience, which can directly impact building relationships, trust, and alumni loyalty.

5.4.2.2 Commitment

Some of the participants revealed, during the qualitative interviews, that they are not interested in continuity as they do not see any grounds for relationships. Before considering continuity or commitment, a meaningful relationship between stakeholders must be established (refer to paragraph 5.2.3.2). Currently, that foundation is non-existent, because if there is no relationship then there will be no commitments. Despite the numerous challenges experienced by students, some do form strong emotional bonds with lecturers, but not with the college *per se*, and this then leads to lasting connections and ongoing engagement in some cases even after the completion of their internships. Many students seek individualised care and recognition, feeling valued when provided with dedicated guidance and resources, which ties in with the relationship marketing theory. Therefore, the success of a relationships between alumni and an HEI lies in developing and maintaining relationships, trust, and commitment. Contrary to expectations, quantitative results revealed a strong commitment among students to continue their relationship with Northlink College (70%).

5.4.2.3 Satisfaction

The results of the satisfaction component suggest that participants are not satisfied for reasons stipulated in paragraph 5.2.3.3. From the qualitative data analysis, it became clear that students do not have any expectations besides Northlink College giving them a job. Students primarily need employment, and the scarcity or absence of positions leads to widespread dissatisfaction. The quantitative results deviated from the qualitative findings as a satisfaction rate of 78% with overall experiences was reported. The stark contrasts between negative management and alumni feedback and positive current students' responses raise concerns about potential biases or unfolded perspectives.

The conceptual model, Figure 1.3, depicts the main antecedents of the drivers of alumni loyalty, alumni and relationship marketing. *Firstly*, four dimensions were identified for researching alumni for the study, i.e. students' experiences, college identity, culture and values, and financial support to foster alumni loyalty. *Secondly*, this research study integrated relationship marketing as a mediating variable, highlighting trust, commitment, and satisfaction as pivotal dimensions influencing alumni loyalty. The research study posits alumni loyalty as the dependent variable, examining its relationship with preceding independent variables. The ensuing discussion critically analyses the empirical findings on alumni loyalty.

5.5 Alumni loyalty

The qualitative dataset disclosed that alumni loyalty was conspicuously absent from the interview discussions, as discussed in paragraph 5.2.3.4. This suggests a lack of meaningful relationships and a negligible loyalty factor. Unfortunately, the absence of a vibrant alumni association at Northlink College is a cause of great concern. Traditionally, alumni have been valued for their financial contributions, but the question remains: Are TVET colleges' alumni willing and financially capable of giving back? Good news! Alumni can contribute beyond financial support, sharing their expertise and passion through various roles: acting as guest speakers, mentors, ambassadors, and industry partners. This is precisely where community engagement becomes a significant force to be incorporated by HEIs in the future.

The quantitative results concur with the qualitative findings, as the survey revealed that 68% of the participants agreed with the principles of loyalty and scored 74% on the statement: '*As a student, I value the support services (IT/academic/advising/learning) rendered to me by the college'* – even though many students are unsure where to find the office of support services, hindering their access to essential resources. Students complain daily in front of the Open Learning Centre (OLC) – there are not enough computers to practise on, and certain accounting programmes are not even loaded. A discrepancy exists between students' actions and this study's findings, indicating that students provide answers that they think are socially expected or lack self-awareness.

This study employed triangulation, combining qualitative and quantitative datasets to enhance validity. Comparing the datasets revealed convergence and corroboration. The analysis of components influencing long-term relationships identified one significant component out of four. Northlink College emerged as a well-established and recognised brand in the TVET sector in the Western Cape. Furthermore, the findings suggest that trust emerged as the sole significant factor in the relationship marketing dimensions. This trust is primarily attributed to Northlink College's distinguished educational reputation, characterised by outstanding academic standards.

In conclusion, Northlink College can effectively enhance, foster, and maintain alumni loyalty by sustainably focusing on and prioritising the identified independent variables. By doing so, the college will be well-positioned to cultivate a strong and enduring relationship with its alumni.

Community engagement has emerged as a ubiquitous term in contemporary discourse, prompting debate regarding its integration into alumni relationship models. This study incorporates community engagement into the conceptual framework to augment existing models presented in academic literature. The subsequent discourse will critically examine community engagement, facilitating an in-depth understanding of its implications.

5.6 Community engagement

HEIs have the potential to adopt a more expansive vision, integrate societal needs into their core objectives, and foster a more inclusive, responsive approach.

5.6.1 Stakeholders' interests in community engagement

The qualitative data analysis revealed a critical information gap: participants lacked awareness of community engagement, which can be ascribed to inadequate communication. Northlink College does not partake in or encourage activities involving students in community engagement. However, the marketing team affirmed that, as a department, they get involved in community projects, but no students are involved due to significant challenges. During in-depth interviews, participants highlighted the disparity between the substantial role of corporate social responsibility in business and the lack of corresponding education emphasis. Participants argued that Northlink College should integrate community engagement into its curricula to ensure students graduate with a comprehensive understanding of social responsibility principles. As an academic institution, Northlink College is compelled to put such principles into practice. The quantitative dataset indicated that 43% of the participants expressed a desire to give back to their communities, and 56% agreed to contribute some time. Close to half of the participants expressed willingness to engage in their communities as per paragraph 5.2.4.1. Still, it should be kept in mind that the concept is unfamiliar to the participants, and this requires further contemplation and cultivation to inspire altruistic actions, and requires further explanation and cultivation to inspire altruistic actions.

5.6.2 Stakeholders perceptions of community engagement

Stakeholders perceive that the executive team lacks a proactive approach to driving community engagement initiatives and implementing effective community outreach strategies. Management and the marketing teams concur that the college aspires to elevate its brand profile, cultivating a

positive and enduring impression among stakeholders and the wider public. Northlink College's willingness to engage in community activities is contingent upon government funding, indicating a lack of institutional inclination to prioritise such initiatives, as delineated in paragraph 5.3.5.2.

In a recent study by Saidi and Boti (2023:72), *Revisiting community engagement in higher education in South Africa from a vantage point of the notion of third mission*, they contend that HEIs should expand their scope beyond the dual function of knowledge generation and transmission, embracing a *third mission* that encompasses social responsibility. However, the notion of a *third mission* has not yet gained much traction in South Africa (Saidi & Boti, 2023:88). This study, conducted within Northlink College's TVET context, revealed a notable interest in community engagement among 56% of participants. However, the results emphasise the importance of targeted education and training to bridge the gap between willingness and effective engagement.

The TVET sector in South Africa is well-positioned to address this challenge with vigour and successfully implement community engagement initiatives into tangible actions that benefit local communities and instil a sense of pride.

5 7 Summary

This chapter presented the qualitative and quantitative data analysis and culminated in triangulation, where an interpretation of the findings from both datasets is presented. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 participants and concentrated mainly on alumni, management, and the marketing teams. Atlas.ti software was used to generate themes for the data obtained for the qualitative component of the study. For the quantitative data analysis, 486 completed questionnaires were included. The focus of the quantitative component was on Northlink College students as participants. SPSS software was used to analyse the quantitative data.

The qualitative analysis findings revealed a disconnect between management's views and students' feedback, possibly rooted in varying institutional knowledge, professional experience, and social perspectives. Overwhelmingly positive student feedback suggests a strong foundation for fostering meaningful relationships and cultivating long-term alumni loyalty.

Data triangulation highlighted areas of concurrence and divergences between the two datasets.

Subsequently, Chapter 6 focuses on this study's findings, recommendations, proposed model, and contribution of this study in the form of recommendations.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as a comprehensive summary of the theoretical and empirical aspects of this study, culminating in a proposed model for higher education institutions (HEIs) to enhance alumni loyalty. The case of Northlink College, a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college in the Western Cape, is used as a reference point. This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the research findings and the literature reviews, summarising the findings of each research objective outlined in Chapter 1.

Additionally, this chapter offers a set of recommendations, aligning it with the secondary objectives and the study's contribution to the fields of relationship marketing, alumni loyalty, and community engagement. It also provides suggestions for future research, paving the way for further exploration in these areas. The structure of this chapter is illustrated in Figure 6.1.

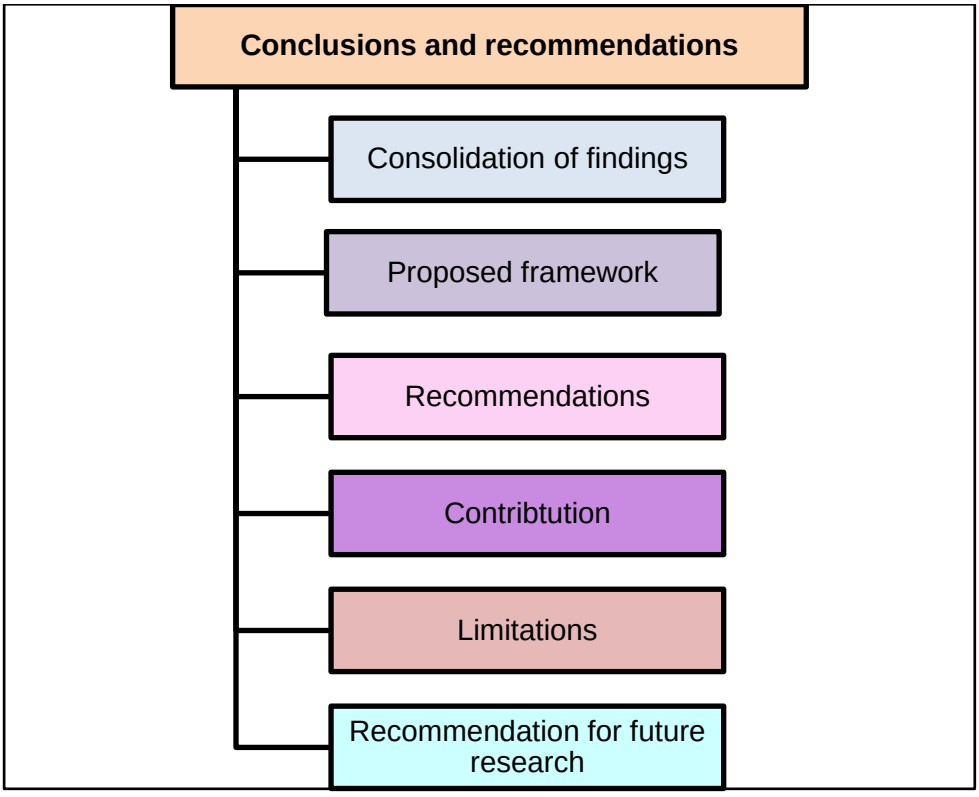


Figure 6.1: Conclusions and recommendations

6.2 Consolidation of findings

Consolidating the findings of a scientific study involves the logical and systematic integration of both the qualitative and quantitative datasets, as in this case, as well as synthesising evidence from multiple literature sources to form comprehensive conclusions. This integrative process relies on sound reasoning, grounded in factual knowledge and premised on established truths, to amalgamate findings and yield meaningful insights. As detailed below, the results of this study yielded several important findings that represent the culmination of this research endeavour.

The empirical findings are delineated below.

Secondary objective 1: To examine the stakeholders' perceptions in enhancing relationships with alumni.

A comprehensive literature review on alumni was undertaken to examine the factors of existing alumni relationship models used by HEIs worldwide and this is presented in Chapter 3. These models indicate that alumni relationships focus on cultivating long-term connections and endeavours to foster a sustainable alumni bond and comprise four distinct components: student experience, college identity, culture and values, and lastly, financial support.

Student experience: The qualitative results of this study revealed that students are not really satisfied with their college experience, although all the participants agreed that Northlink College provides exceptional education to all students. However, this is contrary to the findings in the quantitative dataset, where 60% of the participants indicated that they agree with the sentiments that describe student experience. This is a strong indication that students are interested in long-term relationships to become loyal alumni. Frisby *et al*. (2019:162) also noted that if HEIs' effectively build rapport with students, then the opportunity exists for students to become loyal alumni.

College identity: Northlink College is a well-known brand and the results from both the qualitative and quantitative datasets are in concurrence. The Spearman's rank correlation statistics confirmed a moderate positive relationship between college identity and trust (0.547), commitment (0.528), and alumni loyalty (0.546), suggesting that strengthening these factors most certainly will enhance alumni loyalty.

Branding in education is usually associated with two things: the quality of education and the corporate identity of the academic institution. Northlink College occupies a favourable position as it exhibits both these desirable characteristics. Therefore, Northlink College should seize this opportunity to cultivate long-term relationships with its alumni, fostering loyalty and creating a

lasting connection with alumni. Once successfully created, a brand such as Northlink College cannot easily be duplicated by competitors, as Khann *et al*. (2019:339) recommended HEIs should do.

Culture and values: Participants in the qualitative component of this study clearly indicated that Northlink College does not really reveal its culture and values to students. For example, one comment was, "*students are not informed. Students do not know what the values of the college are*". Added to this are the following comments made by alumni: "*I'm unaware of Northlink's culture or what they stand for*," and "*I'm not interested in values and culture*." In contrast, the quantitative results revealed that students agreed that they are familiar with principles such as work ethics, responsibility, and integrity. Furthermore, the correlation coefficient of 0.466 between culture and values and alumni loyalty is significant (p-value < 0.05).

Drezner (2010:2) opines that decisions to act pro-socially by contributing to one's alma mater are indeed complex. However, the future of philanthropic giving to Northlink College, which also applies to all other HEIs, lies with its current students. If this college's culture and values acknowledge the bulk of the students' heritage, it can promote a sense of loyalty.

Financial support: The qualitative results denoted that NSFAS bursaries are sufficient for students. Management and marketing participants, however, expressed students' ungratefulness, which contrasts with the high-quality education provided by Northlink College and warrants appreciation. A significant proportion of the students (60%) in the quantitative study results indicated that NSFAS does not adequately cover their basic needs, ultimately impacting their overall satisfaction with Northlink College. Financial support emerged as a huge constraint; however, defining sufficient funding remains elusive. Moreover, it raises questions about whether there will ever be a limit to the financial needs of students before satisfaction will be achieved. To reiterate, Spearman's rank correlation confirms a weak but positive link between financial support and the other variables, which significantly influences alumni loyalty.

Secondary objective 2: To explore stakeholders' perceptions of relationship marketing within an alumni context.

A considerable number of literature studies have been published on the focus of relationship marketing, which is attracting and retaining consumers and maintaining desirable exchange relationships with them (Berry, 1995:238; Du Plessis *et al*., 2012:12; Hult *et al*., 2012:14; Kiyak *et al*., 2015:730; Casais *et al*., 2020:52). This section deals with the consolidation of the findings of the three relationship marketing dimensions applicable to this study, namely trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

Trust: The results of the qualitative dataset disclosed that participants trust Northlink College. Students' trust in the college stems from the institution's commitment to delivering high-quality education, with exemplary pass rates, and facilitating internship opportunities with esteemed stakeholders. The quantitative results are in conformance with the qualitative findings in this regard.

The Spearman's correlation statistics revealed that trust is significantly linked to alumni loyalty (0.560); trust correlates with students' sense of belonging and identification (0.547); and trust is tied to overall student satisfaction and experience (0.510). Fostering these strong correlations will significantly boost alumni engagement and their long-term commitment to the success of Northlink College.

Morgan and Hunt (1994:20) some time ago theorised in their commitment-trust theory that commitment and trust are central to developing successful relationships. Scholars, including Abubakar (2015:468) and Singh and Jain (2015:971), profess that their data support Morgan and Hunt's view.

Commitment: The qualitative results demonstrated that participants are not interested in continuity as there are no grounds for relationships. However, a remarkable proportion of students (64%) indicated that they do form strong emotional bonds with lecturers. Interestingly, subjects with more flexible curricula facilitate informal student-instructor interactions, fostering emotional commitment. Conversely, subjects requiring intense mathematical calculations and practical applications often leave insufficient time for casual discussions due to students struggling with complex concepts.

This study's quantitative results provide robust evidence supporting the commitment-trust theory, highlighting the pivotal role of trust in fostering strong relationships between an academic institution and its stakeholders. Contrary to expectations, the quantitative results revealed that student are strongly committed to continuing their relationship with Northlink College (70%).

Satisfaction: Consumer satisfaction is a complex construct with numerous definitions. Several researchers, such as Dimitriades (2006:784), Paswan *et al*. (2008:76), Schlesinger *et al*. (2017:2180), and more recently Susilawati *et al*. (2021:41), concluded that satisfaction is an evaluation of consumers' expectations in relation to actual experiences. HEIs, as service providers, need to identify and investigate students' expectations as a matter of critical importance in their effort to provide high-quality services and education (Zwikael & Globerson, as cited by Tsiligiris *et al*., 2022:53). Tsiligiris *et al*. (2022:53) discovered a strong correlation between cultural diversity and student expectations, emphasising the need to consider individual cultural values in

teaching and learning strategies. From the qualitative data results, it became clear that students do not have any expectations besides Northlink College giving them a job. The primary need of student is employment, and the scarcity or absence of positions certainly is a cause of widespread dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that NSFAS funding falls short of meeting the financial needs of students, leading to considerable dissatisfaction. Linked to these findings, Spearman's correlation statistics endorsed a weak correlation (0.265) between satisfaction and financial support.

The results of the quantitative datasets revealed a satisfaction rate of 78% with students' overall experience. The stark contrasts between the negative management and alumni feedback and the positive responses from current students raise concerns about potential biases or unfolded perspectives.

Secondary objective 3: To explore the stakeholders' interest in community engagement within an alumni context.

Participants in the qualitative analyses commented that disseminating community engagement principles and its applications to students is inadequate, leaving students uninformed and unprepared to engage. Northlink College, as an academic institution, is compelled to put such principles into practice as per the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013). The marketing team affirmed that they get involved in community projects, but students do not participate due to significant challenges.

A staggering 82% of the students who participated expressed an overwhelmingly positive response, indicating a willingness to exhibit kindness and helpfulness toward others. Conversely, the findings revealed that a significant proportion of students (69%) indicated that they would not participate in volunteer work without monetary incentives, underscoring the importance of extrinsic motivation. HEIs can capitalise on students' inclinations towards kindness, fostering an environment that promotes community engagement and altruistic actions.

Spearman's rank correlation statistics signified a few moderate, positive correlations between:

- Community engagement and alumni loyalty (0.489)
- Community engagement and commitment (0.485)
- Community engagement and satisfaction (0.418)

These results suggest that alumni who engage in community service tend to exhibit stronger loyalty, commitment, and satisfaction. The strategic focus of Northlink College should be on establishing a strong engagement foundation with students, leveraging every interaction to build lasting relationships. This investment will reap rewards when students become alumni, driving loyalty, commitment, and philanthropic contributions for the college and the community.

Secondary objective 4: To examine the stakeholders' perceptions towards community engagement as a dimension of alumni loyalty.

The qualitative results denoted that the community engagement profile of Northlink College is characterised by a paucity of intentional outreach and partnership-building efforts, suggesting a missed opportunity for the institution to contribute to its adjacent communities' social, economic, and cultural well-being. The Council on Higher Education (2020:3) advocates for community engagement as a critical component of the social responsibility of academic institutions. Therefore, enabling HEIs to replenish and reinforce their community roots fosters collaborative relationships, and cultivates a sustainable future. Hooks (2003) and the Council on Higher Education (2020:9) underline the limitation of the prevailing paradigm in higher education, wherein community engagement is compartmentalised and disconnected from teaching and learning. This artificial dichotomy effectively alienates academics and students from the fundamental ethical imperatives of education, predicting a disconnection from the broader social context. Ultimately, this fragmentation erodes the sense of community and social responsibility, leading to a lamentable loss of empathy and connectedness with the world beyond the academic enclave.

The quantitative results of this study revealed statistically significant evidence suggesting that students' intentions to attend reunions and social clubs are motivated by a desire to interact with diverse stakeholders. A recent study conducted by Harb *et al*. (2021:16), "*Cultural exploration as an antecedent of students' intention to attend university events: an extension of the theory of reasoned action"*, indicated that students' attitudes, subjective norms and cultural exploration play a crucial role in forming their intentions to participate in college events. Furthermore, Harb *et al*. (2021:15) posit that academic institutions can leverage cultural components to enhance events, fostering an inclusive environment that attracts and engages students from diverse backgrounds. By incorporating cultural elements, events can become platforms for attendees to acquire knowledge about various cultures and actively interact with peers and stakeholders.

Building upon the empirical insights from the preceding chapters, the subsequent/ensuing section delineates the proposed model that encapsulates the core contributions of this study. The proposed model provides a systematic and cohesive structure for understanding relationship

marketing as a foundation to foster alumni loyalty within a TVET college context in the Western Cape.

6.3 Proposed model

The primary objective of this study was to develop a framework that can be used by the management of not only a TVET college but also by HEIs to foster a loyal alumni bond with alumni who will invest in their community to the benefit of all stakeholders involved. It is evident from the findings of both the qualitative and quantitative data components and the previous chapters that Northlink College lacks a fundamental foundation to establish and enhance alumni loyalty, which is critical for nurturing long-term relationships. The proposed model presented in this study offers a comprehensive and integrated approach to understanding the inter-relationships between alumni (student experience, brand and identity, culture and values, and financial support), relationship marketing (trust, commitment, and satisfaction), community engagement and alumni loyalty. Furthermore, the proposed model is based on the strength of the study's qualitative and quantitative findings and outcomes.

The proposed model's application was validated through SEM analysis, demonstrating a strong correspondence between the model's theoretical framework and the empirical data. The conceptual model relevant to this study was constructed and presented in Figure 1.2, Chapter 1, providing a systematic representation of the relationships between key variables. The following table (Table 6.1) summarises the path coefficients and significance levels for all variable relationships examined in this study, highlighting substantial and non-substantial correlations.

Table 6.1: Proposed model

Path			Estimate	Standard error	t-value	p-value
Alumni	===>	Student experience	0.69508	0.04121	16.8670	<.0001
Alumni	===>	College identity	1.04213	0.04041	25.7911	<.0001
Alumni	===>	Culture and values	0.78045	0.04001	19.5051	<.0001
Alumni	===>	Financial support	0.64040	0.05716	11.2042	<.0001
Relationship marketing	===>	Satisfaction	0.72401	0.04416	16.3962	<.0001
Relationship marketing	===>	Trust	1.00208	0.04086	24.5253	<.0001
Relationship marketing	===>	Commitment	1.00512	0.04119	24.3997	<.0001
Relationship marketing	===>	Alumni loyalty	1.18002	0.03974	29.6960	<.0001
Community engagement	<===>	Relationship marketing	0.05418	0.01543	3.5119	0.0004
Alumni	===>	Relationship marketing	0.87818	0.02643	33.2300	<.0001
Alumni	===>	Community engagement	0.70144	0.05477	12.8071	<.0001
Community engagement	<===>	Alumni loyalty	0.00811	0.01880	0.4313	0.6663

The parameter estimates for the derived model in the table above show that all paths (relationships between variables) are significant (p-values<0.05) except for the paths from community engagement to alumni loyalty and from alumni loyalty to community engagement (0.6663), though non-significance does not imply a zero effect. The path diagram clearly reveals an insignificant relationship between community engagement and alumni loyalty, with a path coefficient of 0.01 indicating no substantial influence in either direction. This null finding presents an intriguing paradox, warranting further investigation into underlying factors that may contribute to this lack of association. Possible reasons may include an insufficient understanding of alumni loyalty and community engagement constructs, institutional characteristics, alumni demographics, and external factors. The data supports a substantial connection between early student life, community engagement, and alumni loyalty. For example, students' initial participation in Nelson Mandela Day undertakings does not necessarily convert to long-term loyalty, which addresses the dependent variable, *alumni loyalty*. The derived model is depicted in the path diagram below.

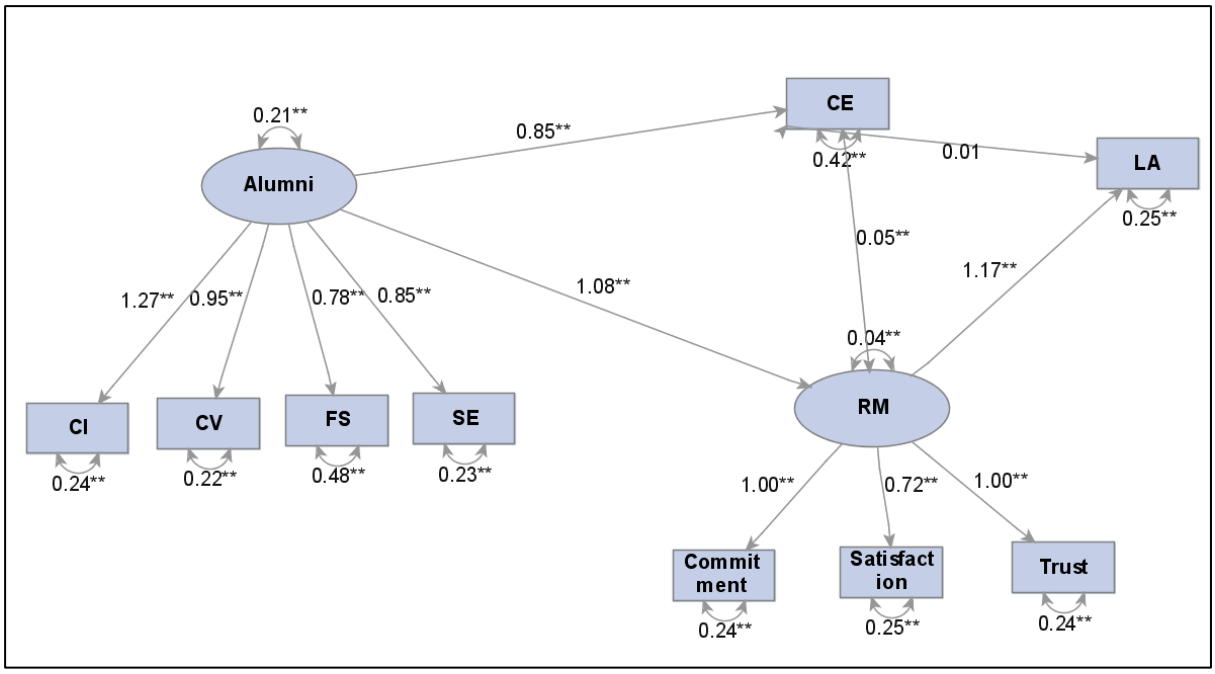


Figure 6.2: Path diagram

Table 6.2 presents the following goodness-of-fit tests to verify whether the model fits the data satisfactorily. In the study: "*Why we need to abandon fixed cutoff for goodness-of-fit indices: An extensive simulation and possible solutions*," Groskurth *et al*. (2023:3892) endorsed that statisticians ensure that their models accurately represent the data by using goodness-of-fit tests leading to more reliable conclusions and informed decisions.

Table 6.2: Goodness-of-fit tests

Fit index	Value for the model under study	Recommended cut-off point
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.972	≥ 0.9 (Zhao *et al*. (2019); Hassim *et al*. (2020)
Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)	0.959	≥ 0.9 (Zhao *et al*. (2019); Hassim *et al*. (2020)
Root mean squared error of estimation (RMSEA)	0.065	≤ 0.08 (Zhao *et al*. (2019); Hassim *et al*. (2020)
Standardised root mean square residual (SRMR)	0.033	≤ 0.08 Hassim *et al*. (2020)

The results in the table above show that the root mean squared error of estimation and standardised root mean square residual are less than the upper limit of 0.08, which indicates a good fit. The comparative fit index and Tucker-Lewis index are above the recommended minimum of 0.9, indicating a good fit. Therefore, the structural equation model was a good fit for the data.

In light of the study's results, deliberations on the implications and recommendations are presented next to contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

6.4 Recommendations

The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of relationship marketing as a foundation to cultivate alumni loyalty for TVET colleges. However, the findings of this study have far-reaching implications beyond the TVET sector. The following recommendations are based on the literature reviews in Chapters 2 and 3 and the results of this study, as depicted in Figure 6.3. These recommendations are divided into the following categories: (1) transitions to young adulthood, (2) orientation programme, (3) mentorship, (4) management support focusing on robust relationships, and (5) brand identity.

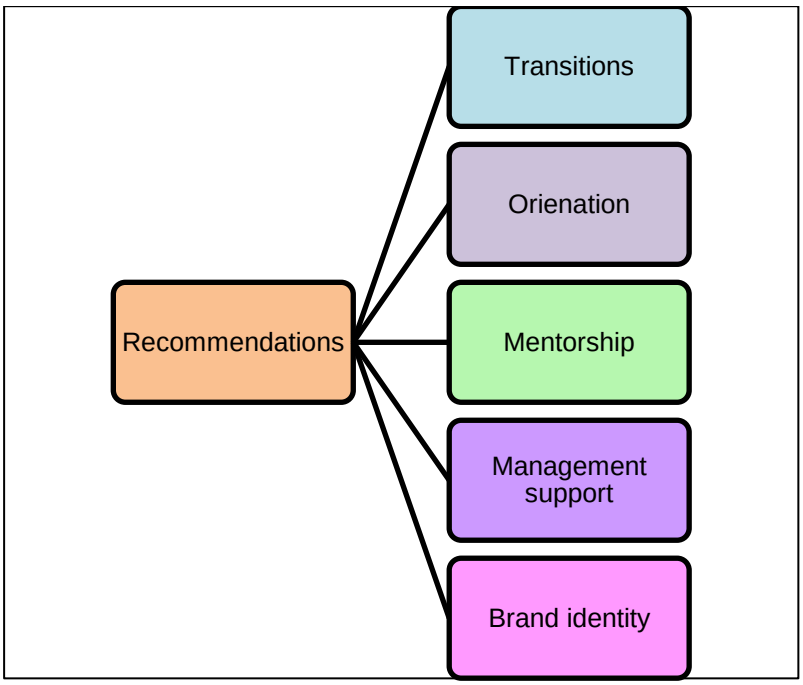


Figure 6.3 Recommendations of the study

The recommendations derived from this study, as illustrated in Figure 6.3, are presented below.

6.4.1 Transitions

Attending college marks a transformative phase in students' lives, significantly shaping their mental outlook, personality, and future prospects. While students' motivations for pursuing higher education vary, the findings of this study accentuate a primary objective – gaining employment is a paramount concern for students.

In a 'fresh' study by Awung *et al.* (2024:1), titled "*Induction-phase challenges faced by South African higher education students: A case study of Sol Plaatje University"*, it is professed that research has underscored the inequalities and socio-cultural and economic disparities between students at academic institutions. In the case of South Africa, this inequality is particularly prevalent in the education system because of the legacy of apartheid. Therefore, academic institutions need to monitor students' transition from high school to college/university and ensure that this transition is underpinned by social justice (Awung *et al*., 2024:1).

Firstly, the transition from school to college.

6.4.1.1 School to college

Transitioning from school to college is one of the most challenging events in a student's life. The results of this study indicate that numerous students experience difficulty transitioning from school to college. High schools should have an obligation to take a proactive approach to prepare scholars for the transition to higher education by providing comprehensive career guidance and individualised career counselling, developing digital literacy skills, and, if the industry is willing, offering job shadowing. Effective career guidance is crucial in aligning students with suitable programmes, mitigating the high dropout rates prevalent in the TVET sector, ranging from 13 to 25% (Garisch, 2024:69). Students who experience language barriers often face significant challenges that impede academic success, social integration, and overall college readiness. The struggles of scholars in accessing online resources, including registering online and completing the NSFAS application, are multifaceted. By acknowledging the intersection of literacy levels, computer skills, and writing, academic institutions can develop targeted interventions to support scholars in overcoming these challenges. Secondly is the transition from college to the working environment.

6.4.1.2 College to working environment

Students must prepare to transition into the working environment as they complete their academic programmes. To successfully navigate this transition, students ought to possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to thrive in the labour market. Academic institutions can provide all-encompassing career readiness programmes, workshops, and employability skills training. Northlink College provides a diverse range of academic programmes, encompassing finance, marketing, sport, tourism, and other disciplines. The tourism department's successful internship programme, facilitated by its robust relationships with industry stakeholders, is a paradigmatic example of the benefit of collaborative partnerships between academia and industry. This symbiotic relationship enables students to access valuable experiential learning opportunities

while providing industries with a pipeline of skilled and work-ready graduates. It can only be hoped that the tourism department will inspire other departments and management to follow suit.

The success of students at HEIs depends on their ability to manage the transitional challenges between the entry- and exit levels of the college. As Awung *et al*. (2024:3) wisely noted that the orientation period marks a critical juncture as students navigate the complexities of transition to an unfamiliar environment. This phase (perplexing time) necessitates unlearning familiar habits and acquiring novel skills, posing significant challenges for some students.

The frantic pace of registration, as of 'having to make the numbers', often overshadows the critical orientation and induction process of incoming students (Garisch, 2024:77). This oversight can leave new students unfamiliar with the rigours of college life and uncertain about the availability of support services. Subsequently, orientation, as the second recommendation indicated in Figure 6.3, is deliberated on.

6.4.2 Orientation

The commencement of an academic year marks a significant milestone for incoming students, who bring diverse thoughts, backgrounds, and levels of preparation to the academic institution. Subsequently, HEIs must implement thoughtfully designed orientation programmes to empower first-year students' confidence, satisfaction, and likelihood of success (Onikoyi & Nnamoko, 2023:1). Induction programmes are comprehensive initiatives designed to warmly welcome new students and systematically prepare them for their academic journey. To facilitate a seamless transition and foster a sense of belonging, institutions offer a diverse range of activities, from campus tours, social events, physical activities with games and sports, mentoring, academic policies, institutional policies, practices, culture and values, IT-related sessions, support services, campus resources, and more, introducing them to campus life and promoting academic success.

Awung *et al*. (2024:1) highlight three pivotal challenges, i.e. environmental, academic, and social, which are widely acknowledged by students. 1) Environmental challenges often occur when first-year students relocate to a new city. Moreover, many South African universities/colleges are situated in urban areas, and many students are from rural areas, which generates anxiety, nervousness, uncertainty, fear, discomfort, and feelings of alienation. Another environmental challenge students face is accommodation, especially for students living off campus. On this issue, one participant said: "*We should have been given accommodation on campus before returning students because we are new to the city while returning students already know the city well*". 2) The reported social challenges were racial stereotyping and marginalisation of some students by others. 3) The main academic challenge faced by most participants was that they had

not been exposed to the use of computers. This challenge would be direr for students with no computer access at home, and a participant indicated: "*I do not have a computer at home*". This suggests that students originate from schools with limited resources, compounded by economic marginalisation within their home communities. Bartley (2021:9) professed that such students do not have equal opportunities for success, which can lead to poor academic performance. Academic institutions should be aware of the possible challenges experienced by many students and HEIs need mitigation plans to address such challenges.

Due to its significance, three key activities will be deliberated in greater depth for the purpose of this study, namely culture and values, student support services, and extracurricular activities.

6.4.2.1 Culture and values

The cultural framework of Northlink College is rooted in its vision, mission and values, as outlined in Chapter 3 (Table 3.1). Instilling students with a set of core values, including 1) excellence, striving for exceptional academic and professional standards; 2) integrity, upholding honesty, ethics, and transparency in all interactions; 3) inclusivity, embracing diversity, equity, and social justice; 4) innovation, encouraging creativity, adaptability, and forward-thinking; 5) collaboration, i.e. fostering open communication, teamwork, and partnerships; 6) accountability, taking responsibility for actions, outcomes, and continuous improvement; and 7) respect, value dignity, and empathy, equip them with a robust foundation to navigate a myriad of challenges, empowering them to make positive impacts in their communities and beyond.

Furthermore, the results of this study highlight the significance of interactive and engaging soft skills training, achieved through structured interactive workshops, immersive role-playing exercises, and engaging activities such as team-building challenges, games, and case studies.

Academic institutions are increasingly recognising and embracing the multicultural fabric of contemporary societies. To foster inclusivity and diversity, cross-cultural activities are essential for creating an environment where all students feel welcome, valued, and respected, regardless of their cultural background.

6.4.2.2 Student support services

Northlink College is compelled to transform its student support services by adopting a comprehensive holistic provision model akin to those employed by universities (Garisch, 2024:70). This paradigm shift repositions student support services as a central, integrative force within the education framework rather than a peripheral adjunct to teaching and learning. Student support services (SSS) play a critical role in addressing the diverse needs of students,

encompassing mental health, social skills, learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and more. To ensure the effective provision, it is imperative that SSS be led by professionally qualified personnel, spanning the entire student lifecycle from pre-entry to exit. Students are unaware of staff's office locations and feel embarrassed to seek help due to possible stigma.

A student representative council (SRC) represents students to college management on their concerns and advocates students' interests and welfare. Despite introducing the SRC during orientation, participants expressed concerns regarding their visibility, poor communication, and insufficient interventions. As indicated by the results of this study, currently, the SRC of Northlink College does not appear to be fulfilling the concerns of the students. Garisch (2024:77) advocates that an SRC should be integrated into SSS and demonstrate a commitment to student-centredness and holistic support.

The availability and accessibility of student support services significantly influence first-time students' integration into higher education environments. The subsequent discussion will elucidate the pivotal role of extracurricular activities.

6.4.2.3 Extracurricular activities

HEI events are institutionally organised activities that occur outside normal classroom times and are not part of the curriculum (Harb *et al*., 2021:1). Several scholarly works (Pascarella & Terenzine, 2005; Al-Ansari *et al*., 2014; Xerri *et al*., 2018), as cited by Harb *et al*. (2021:2), have highlighted how extracurricular activities can play an influential role in students' college life and academic attainment. Research suggests a positive correlation in sporting activities and enhanced social relationships and self-esteem. Engaging in sports has been consistently associated with improved interpersonal connections, social skills, and psychological well-being, including increased self-confidence and self-worth.

The findings of the qualitative dataset revealed a disconnect in student engagement and no college vibe, as one participant confirmed: "*There are sporting facilities, but there is no drive to involve students, and Northlink does nothing to engage students in extracurricular activities*". The survey results revealed that 70% of the participants confirmed the availability of facilities. However, the majority of the respondents showed no interest in utilising it due to the lack of organised activities and preferring to rather go home. Northlink College should prioritise developing targeted programmes and events to stimulate facility usage and unlock numerous benefits, including enhanced student experiences and satisfaction, increased social connections, and community building.

The inaugural entry of newcomers into an academic institution presents a pivotal opportunity to establish meaningful relationships, laying the groundwork for a lifelong connection. This initial encounter serves as the foundation for cultivating loyalty among students, ultimately transforming them into devoted alumni. The student induction programme should promote student bonding, build relationships between them and their lecturers, and foster character development.

Extracurricular activities serve as an integral component of the college orientation process, facilitating socialisation, community building and holistic student development. The third recommendation, as illustrated in Figure 6.3, is mentorship and this will now be dealt with in more depth.

6.4.3 Mentorship

Mentoring has become an increasingly popular mechanism to support first-year students as they progress through education and training (Bolton-King, 2022:3; Lapon & Buddington, 2023:1). Mentorship initiatives aim to construct and sustain interpersonal and interorganisational relationships, to promote reciprocal learning and knowledge sharing among stakeholders, known as peer mentorship (Dixon *et al*., 2023:204).

Mentorship programmes provide a pivotal opportunity to cultivate meaningful relationships that can evolve into a lifelong network of connections, ultimately fostering alumni loyalty and engagement. Consistent with relationship marketing principles, the mentorship relationship exhibits a reciprocal, mutually beneficial dynamic where both parties benefit from the interaction (Bolton-King, 2022:3). Empirical evidence from studies conducted by Bolton-King (2022:3) and Lapon and Buddington (2023:1) demonstrates the significant benefits of mentorship programmes for all participating students.

As first proposed by Bandura (1997:191) in the social learning theory, individuals learn to adapt behaviours by observing and imitating others, particularly more experienced peers. Consequently, peer mentorship programmes capitalise on this concept, pairing first-year students with seasoned peers who model successful behaviours, foster academic resilience, and facilitate social integration (Bolton-King, 2022:3; Lapon & Buddington, 2023:3). The findings from the study, *Peer mentoring: Benefits to first-time college students and their peer mentors,* by Dixon *et al*. (2023:214), unequivocally demonstrate the efficacy of the class leadership programme in fostering student academic success, providing robust evidence of its positive impact on academic outcomes. Peers can act as informal advisors to offer mentees personal and professional guidance and career choice development. Mentees acquire increased study skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking, as well as increased confidence and a sense of

capability. The key to high-quality mentorship is the programme selection process and the training and supervision of mentors.

The orientation experience lays the groundwork for first-year students' sense of belonging – a pivotal predictor of retention and academic success. Mentorship programmes subsequently augment this effort, cultivating a supportive environment that bolsters students' feelings of connection to safeguard students' successful integration into the academic community.

Graham *et al*. (2022:2) advocated that peer mentor programmes consistently supported the success of first-year students, including marginalised populations. On the contrary, an investigation into mentorship, in the study titled *Mentorship for teaching practice in Zimbabwe: Are students teachers getting a raw deal?*" (Maphosa *et al*., 2007:3), uncovered a disturbing power imbalance. This study revealed that mentors often exploit teacher candidates, viewing them as assistants to alleviate their workload rather than as learners requiring guidance. This misguided perception undermines effective mentorship, perpetuating poor outcomes for student teachers. Confronted with a myriad of challenges, including financial constraints, administrators increasingly seek cost-effective solutions that yield substantial benefits. Within this context, mentorship programmes emerge as a highly effective and economical intervention, offering a range of advantages (Dixon *et al*., 2023:215).

Mentorship plays a fundamental role in supporting first-time students' academic, social, and emotional transition to higher education, fostering resilience, retention, and overall success. As depicted in Figure 6.3, the fourth key recommendation emphasises the crucial role of management support.

6.4.4 Management support

Top management support is critical in building and maintaining relationships between relevant stakeholders in academic-industry collaborations. By providing strategic direction, resources, and leadership, top management can facilitate effective collaboration, drive innovation, and foster mutually beneficial outcomes. Fostering trusting and satisfactory relationships with colleagues requires openness, honesty, sharing relevant information, and transferring ownership and responsibility. By incorporating these components into organisational practices, individuals can build strong, collaborative relationships that enhance overall performance and well-being.

The Council of Independent Colleges published a scholarly article by Leih and Teece in 2016, *Campus leadership and the entrepreneurial university: A dynamic capabilities perspective*. The article suggests three core dimensions of the dynamic capabilities framework, i.e. sensing,

seizing, and transforming. In this article, Leih and Teece (2016:183) focus on the role of academic institutions' leadership, which entails making necessary changes to yield an HEI a competitive advantage and enhance its long-term performance. This study's findings suggest that the Northlink College executive team operates contrary to the dynamic capabilities framework, instead of embodying a hierarchical culture. To endorse, a comment from one of the participants reads: "*Northlink runs a hierarchy culture. All decisions and communication are top-down*". The implications of this study highlight the need for the leaders of Northlink College to adopt more inclusive and empowering leadership styles that prioritise transparency, open communication, and employee autonomy. Garisch's (2024:71) findings align with some participants' feedback and identify a critical issue in the management of TVET colleges – a lack of engagement and communication between academics and management. This breakdown fosters mutual suspicion and distrust, disengagement among lecturers, and decreased motivation. Consequently, teaching and learning suffer.

The strategic objectives of Northlink College should include developing and implementing a comprehensive alumni engagement strategy, establishing a robust alumni database and communication systems, and conceiving its role and responsibility in community engagement. The brand identity of Northlink College is characterised by a profound sense of belonging, aligning with its institutional values and culture, and will be reflected on in the ensuing section.

6.4.5 Brand and identity

The key findings of this study revealed an overwhelmingly positive perception of Northlink College, with the institution consistently being regarded as a 'forceful' brand synonymous with excellence in education and training. Despite numerous other TVET colleges across South Africa, Northlink College stands out as a preferred institution, with students primarily drawn to its esteemed brand through positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This phenomenon can be attributed to students' aspirations to associate with excellence as they seek to align themselves with a reputable and high-quality educational provider.

Given the strong positive brand reputation of Northlink College, this study recommends targeted strategies to augment its brand and competitiveness to attract more students, reinforce its market position, continue reinforcing its unique value proposition, and consolidate its status as a distinguished educational leader. To sustain the brand and prominence of Northlink College, the executive team ought to spearhead a targeted marketing strategy driven by the marketing team, to maintain brand visibility.

Regrettably, this study discovered a disconnect between the perceptions of the management and marketing teams concerning the social media presence and student experiences of Northlink College. While management reports an active social media presence, students lack awareness about available channels and share insufficient information. Furthermore, students desire greater involvement in promoting the institution's brand, citing limited opportunities for participation and engagement. By revitalising its website design and social media presence, Northlink College can bridge the communication gap between management and students, fostering a more engaged and informed campus community.

Increasing competitiveness in the educational environment is prompting HEIs to reassess their academic portfolios, leading to a heightened focus on programme diversification and innovation. By tailoring its offering to meet students' diverse needs, Northlink College can distinguish itself from its peers and bolster its target market positioning.

To ensure long-term success and brand loyalty, Northlink College should recognise the importance of involving key stakeholders, including community leadership, in its branding efforts.

This study advocates for Northlink College to adopt a holistic relationship-building framework that integrates transition, orientation, mentorship, top management support, and brand identity strategies.

Subsequently, the following sections will explicate the contributions to the extant knowledge base and critically evaluate the implications and significance of these findings for research and practice. The following section outlines the key contributions of this research study.

6.5 Contributions of this study

This study enriched the existing body of knowledge on relationship marketing, alumni, and HEIs, shedding light on the crucial role of fostering loyal alumni bonds. By cultivating such relationships, HEIs can empower alumni to become active change agents, investing in their own communities and ultimately benefiting diverse stakeholders.

From this study's outcomes through the various alumni factors assessed, brand identity exhibits the strongest association with alumni loyalty (0.546), emphasising its centrality in promoting lifelong institutional affinity. The qualitative and quantitative results of this study yielded convergent findings, unequivocally establishing Northlink College as a renowned and reputable brand within the TVET sector in the Western Cape. This study revealed an outstanding endorsement of the perceived quality of education and training of Northlink College, garnering widespread recognition and appreciation. This distinguishing factor presents a unique value

proposition, highlighting academic excellence, research, and community impact. Contrary to the academic distinction of Northlink College, the 2024 report of Garisch on TVET colleges in South Africa raises concerns regarding inadequate professional educator qualifications, negative attitudes toward students, unprofessional conduct, and deficits in subject matter expertise (Garisch, 2024:70). Therefore, Northlink College must strategically leverage its brand and identity to economically strengthen its position by implementing student engagement and building meaningful relationships to foster alumni loyalty.

As shown in Figure 6.3, commitment is the relationship marketing variable exhibiting the most significant correlation with alumni loyalty (0.571). Notably, trust ranks as the second most critical factor contributing to alumni loyalty (0.560). On this subject, Caliskan and Esmer (2019:377) and Mbamgo and Mmatli (2019:1) acknowledged that trust and commitment are to be studied in conjunction. This view is supported by Barroso-Mendez (2020:5), who contends that commitment and trust are the key variables for successful relationships, as these dimensions promote cooperative behaviours between relationship partners and encourage them to maintain long-term relationships. The qualitative and quantitative results of this study revealed a deficiency in commitment, underscoring the imperative for Northlink College to prioritise fostering meaningful relationships with its students. Consequently, the success of a relationship between Northlink College and loyal alumni lies in developing and maintaining relationships, trust, and commitment.

Community engagement in South Africa creates the opportunity to transform teaching and education, ushering in a more democratic and social higher education system that would enable HEIs to refocus higher education towards the public good (Bhagwan, 2017:171). In a recent study, *Revisiting community engagement in higher education in South Africa from a vantage point of the notion of third mission*, Saidi and Boti (2023:72) contend that HEIs should expand their scope beyond the dual function of knowledge generation and transmission, embracing a *third mission* that encompasses social responsibility. Post-1994 higher education policies call upon academic institutions to be responsive to the needs of South Africa and identify community engagement programmes, as necessary. However, the *third mission* notion has not yet gained much traction in South Africa (Saidi & Boti, 2023:88). The findings of this study revealed that approximately half of the students surveyed expressed interest in community engagement. However, the executive team and management are obliged to champion community engagement as a core value, educate students on its principles and practices, expose them to opportunities for experiential learning, and provide the necessary resources and support for community engagement initiatives.

6.6 Limitations

As with any study, this study also had notable limitations. Finding the most recent information from secondary data sources was challenging because of the intersection between relationship marketing, HEIs, and alumni loyalty. Furthermore, secondary data on HEI branding was scant. However, abundant secondary data is available on the subject of relationship marketing.

The timeline of this study posed a significant constraint, limiting the extent to which interviews could be conducted. Although 19 interviews were conducted, time constraints limited the depth and duration of these interactions and potentially impacted the richness and nuance of the data collected. A total sample of 486 responses were gathered for the quantitative data-collection component, the questionnaire, but ideally, a greater number could have been included in this study. Some respondents completed the questionnaire in a hurry and viewed the completion as something tedious and frustrating that had to be done despite the motivation of the fieldworkers.

Conducting the study at a single institution may restrict the external validity and generalisability of the findings to other HEIs, but this study is a case study and specific to Northlink College.

The following recommendations for future studies emerged.

6.7 Recommendations for future studies

This study focused on relationship marketing as a foundation to foster alumni loyalty in a TVET college environment in the Western Cape. To address the limitations of this study, several potential research avenues warrant consideration:

- A value opportunity for replication in other TVET colleges across various provinces in South Africa.
- A study can investigate additional strategies that HEIs can employ to foster and sustain long-term relationships with alumni.
- Future research can explore the application of relationship marketing dimensions in diverse educational settings, such as primary and secondary institutions.
- Examining the role of relationship marketing in promoting student engagement and retention.
- Conduct an exploratory study to elucidate the role of relationship marketing in fostering student engagement, persistence, and retention in HEIs.

- A study to investigate the impact of integrating community engagement into academic curricula on students' civic responsibilities, social awareness, and community involvement.

The results and analysis of this study lead to the following conclusion.

6.8 Conclusion

Using the mixed-method approach, this study investigated relationship marketing as a foundation to foster alumni loyalty at a TVET college in the Western Cape. The participant pool of this study comprised Northlink College, including management and marketing teams who shared their expertise through interviews, and students who contributed their views through a survey instrument.

The findings advocate that Northlink College lacks a robust foundational framework to cultivate and foster alumni loyalty. The results underline the imperative for the institution to establish and nurture long-term relationships with students, laying the groundwork for sustained alumni engagement and loyalty. The findings exhibit inconsistencies and paradoxes, which can be attributed to variations within the research context, suggesting that environmental factors may influence the outcomes. The triangulation of results played a crucial role in the study, ensuring the robustness and reliability of the findings by validating the convergence of data from multiple sources, thereby enhancing the certainty and neutrality of the research outcomes. This study systematically addressed its predetermined research objectives, yielding valuable insights that informed the development of the proposed model. Subsequently, evidence-based recommendations were formulated to guide practice. This investigation's significant contributions were subsequently elucidated, enhancing understanding and advancing the field. Notwithstanding its contributions, this research acknowledges inherent limitations, underscoring the necessity for future investigations to build upon and expand its findings.

This study culminated in an integrative synthesis, merging theory and practice in the final chapter to underscore the pivotal role of relationship marketing dimensions as a foundational framework to cultivate alumni loyalty in academic institutions and related contexts. In conclusion, alumni are key academic stakeholders and fostering loyalty with them ought to be a priority for the management of higher educational institutions (HEIs).

REFERENCES

Aaker, D.A., Kumar, V. & Day, G.S. 2004. *Marketing Research*. 8th ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Abad-Seguro, E., Gonzalez-Zammer, M.D., Infanta-Moro, J.C. & Garcia, G.R. 2020. Sustainable management of digital transformation in higher education: Global trends. *Sustainability*, 12: 1-24.

Abdullah, F. & Kanyan, A. 2013. Managing the Dimensions of Relationship Marketing in the Food Service Industry. *Journal Pengurusan*, 37:91-103.

Abubakar, M.M. & Mokhtar, S.S. 2015. Relationship Marketing, long term orientation and customer loyalty in higher education. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(4):466-474.

Ackerman, R. & Schubriwsky, J. 2007. A business marketing strategy applied to student retention: a higher education initiative*. Journal of College Student Retention*, 9(3):307-336.

Acun, I. 2020. The relationship among university students' trust, self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and social media use. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(1):35-52.

Akaranga, S. I. & Makau, B. K. 2016. Ethical Considerations and their Applications to Research: A Case of the University of Nairobi. *Journal of Educational Policy and Entrepreneurial Research,* 3(12): 1-9.

Akareem, H. S. & Hossain, S. S. 2016. Determinants of education quality: what makes students' perception different? *Open Review of Educational Research*, 3(1): 52–67. doi: 10.1080/23265507.2016.1155167

Al-Alak, B.A.M. 2006. The impact of marketing actions on relationship quality in the higher education sector in Jordon. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 16(2):1-23.

Alkhodary, D. 2023. Exploring the Relationship between Organizational Culture and Well-Being of Educational Institutions in Jordan. *Administrative Sciences*, 13(3):1-21. doi: 10.3390/admsci13030092

Alturki, R. 2021.Research Onion for Smart IoT-Enabled Mobile Applications. *Scientific Programming*, 1-9.

Alves, H. & Raposo, M. 2010. The Influence of University Image on Student Behaviour. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 73-83.

Amani, D. 2022. Internal branding and students' behavioral intention to become active member of university alumni associations: the role of students' sense of belonging in Tanzania. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1):2-20. doi: 10.1080/23311886.2021.1997171

Amine, M.E.A., Chakor, A. & Alaoui, A.M. 2012. Ethics, Relationship Marketing and Corporate Performance: theoretical analysis through the mediating variables. *International Business Research,* 5(8):68-84.

Amoako, G.K., Neequaye, E.K., Kutu-Adu, S.G., Caesar, L.D. & Ofori, K.S. 2019. Relationship marketing and customer satisfaction in the Ghanaian hospitality industry. An empirical examination of trust and commitment. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 2(4):326-340.

Andaleeb, S.S. 1992. The trust concept: research issues for channel distribution. *Research in Marketing,* 11, 1-34.

Ang, D.B.H. 2021. Customer care and customer relationship maintenance at Hung Thinh Property Group in Vietnam. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation,* 2(3):541-549.

Ang, S.H. 2014. *Research Design for Business and Management*. London: Sage Publications.

Angeli, C. & Valanides, N. 2009. Epistemological and methodological issues for the conceptualization, development, and assessment of ICT–TPCK: advances in technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK). *Computers & Education*, 52(1):154-168. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2008.07.006.

Antwi, S.K. & Hamza, K. 2015. Qualitative and Quantitative Research Paradigms in Business Research*. European Journal of Business and Management*, 7(3):217-224.

Arifin, Z. & Setiawan, B. 2022. Utilising gamification for online evaluation through Quizizz: Teachers' perspectives and experiences. *World Journal on Educational Technology: Current Issues,* 14(3): 781-796. https://doi.org/10.18844/wjet.v14i3.7278

Arnett, J.J. 2007. Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child Development Perspective,* 1(2):68-73.

Ashforth, B.E. & Mail, F. 1989. Social identity theory and the organisation. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1):20-39.

Awung, F., Felix, A., Botes, W., Fru, R., Wepener, T. & Moloele, R. 2024. Induction-Phase Challenges Faced by South African higher educational students: A case study of Sol Plaatjie University. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary studies*, 6 (1): 1-12. https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v6il.1275

Aydin, O.T. 2014. Current developments and trends in higher education. *Journal of Business Economics and Finance,* 3(4):471-490.

Azila-Gbettor, E.M., Atatsi, E.A., Mensah, C. & Abiemo, M.K. 2020. Self-esteem, organizational citizenship behavior and commitment among university students. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 12(5): 975-991. https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-04-2019-0095

Baade, R.A. & Sundberg, J.O. 1996. What determines alumni generosity? *Economics of Education Review*, 15:75-81.

Bagheri, A. & Beheshti, M. 2010. *Exploitation of customer relationship management (CRM) for strategic marketing in higher education*. Jönköping: Jönköping University. (Thesis – Masters).

Balázs, L., Rajscányi-Malnár, M., András, I. & Sitku, K. Social responsibility and community engagement at a Hungarian Regional Univerity. *Journal of Higher education Theory and Practice,* 21(1):53-60.

Ball, A.D., Coelho, P.S. & Vilares, M.J. 2006. Service personalization and loyalty. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 20(6):391-403.

Ballamingie, P. & Johnson, S. 2011. The vulnerable researcher: some unanticipated challenges of doctoral fieldwork. *Qualitative Report*, 16(3):711-729.

Ballantyne, D. 1996. Getting your way in business. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 4(1):3-6.

Balmer, J.M.T. 2001. Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing. Seeing through the fog. *European Journal of Marketing*, 35(3/4):248-291.

Bamberger, A., Bronshtein, Y & Yemini, M. 2020. Marketing universities and targeting international students: a comparative analysis of social media data trails. *Teaching in Higher Education,* 25(4):476-492.

Bandura, A. 1977. Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioural change. *Psychological Review,* 84 (2): 191-215. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.84.2.191

Baran, R.J., Galka, R.J. & Strunk, D.P. 2008. *Principles of customer relationship management.* Australia: Thomson.

Barnard, Z. & Rensleigh, C. 2007. Investigating online community portals for enhanced alumni networking. *Emerald Insight*, 26(4):433-445.

Barroso-Méndez, M.J., Galera-Casquet, C., Valero-Amaro, V. & Nevado-Gil, M.T. 2020. Antecedents of Relationship learning in Business-Non-Profit Organization Collaboration Agreements*. Sustainability*, 12(1):1-19.

Bartley, G. 2021. *Students experience of literacy and justice in a predominantly white English Class*. Madison: University of Wisconsin. (Thesis – PhD).

Basera, C.H. 2019. *Effect of international marketing on employees' organisational commitment on retail SMEs: Implications for competitiveness*. Mafikeng: North-West University. (Thesis - PhD).

Bateson, J.E.G. & Hoffman, K.D. 2011. *Services marketing*. 4th ed. Canada: Cengage Learning.

Bay, D. & Daniel, H. 2001. The student is not the customer. An alternative perspective. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 11(1):1-19.

Becker, J.U., Greve, G. & Albers, S. 2009. The impact of technological and organizational implementation of CRM of customer acquisition, maintenance and retention. *International Journal of Research in Marketing,* 26:207-215.

Bekkers, R. & Wiepking, P. 2011. Who gives? A literature review of predictors of charitable giving part one: Religion, education, age and socialisation. *Voluntary Sector View*, 2(3):337-365.

Belanger, C., Mount, J. & Wilson, M. 2002. Institutional image and retention. *Tertiary Education and Management,* 8(3):217-230.

Bell, E., Bryman, A. & Harley, B. 2022. *Business Research Methods*. 6th ed. London: Oxford.

Bell, M. & Lewis, N. 2023. Universities claims to value community engagement scholarship: so why do they discourage it? *Public Understanding of Science,* 32(3):1-18.

Berndt, A. & Tait, M. 2012. *Relationship Marketing and Customer Relationship Management*. 2nd ed. Claremont: Juta & Company Ltd.

Berry, L.L. 1995. Relationship marketing of services growing interest, emerging perspectives. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23(4):236-245.

Beukes, J. 2015. *Customer service expectations from South African alcoholic beverage suppliers in urban and rural areas*. Mafikeng: North-West University. (Thesis – PhD).

Bhagwan, R. 2017. Towards a conceptual understanding of CE in HE in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 35(1):171-185.

Bhagwan, R. 2020. Towards the institutionalisation of CE in HE in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education,* 38(2):38-55.

Bhattacherjee, A. 2012. *Social Science Research: Principles, methods and practices.* Florida, USA.

Biederman, K.B. 2022. *Regenerative Education Development and Design: Exploring a Regenerative Socio-ecological Systems Model*. Prescott: Prescott College. (Thesis – PhD)

Biggermann, S. & Buttle, F. 2012. Intrinsic value of business-to-business relationships: An empirical taxonomy. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(8):1132-1138.

Blumberg, B., Cooper, D.R. & Schindler, P.S. 2011. *Business research methods*. 3rd ed. Michigan: McGraw-Hill.

Boateng, S.L. 2019. Online relationship marketing and customer loyalty; a signalling theory perspective*. International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 37(1):226-24.

Bobalca, C., Gatej, C. & Ciobanu, O. 2012. Developing a scale to measure customer loyalty. *SciVerse ScienceDirect*, 3:623-628.

Bolton-King, R.S. 2022. Student mentoring to enhance graduates' employability potential. *Science & Justice,* 62 (6): 785-794. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scijus.2022.04.010

Bong, S. A. 2002. Debunking Myths in Qualitative Data Analysis. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2): 1-15. doi: 10.17169/fqs-3.2.849.

Bormann, I. and Thies, B. 2019. 'Trust and trusting practices during transition to higher education: Introducing a model of habitual trust. *Educational Research*, 61(2): 161–180. doi: 10.1080/00131881.2019.1596036

Boshoff, C. & De Meyer-Hendenrych, C. 2017. *Principles of Marketing*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Bouchrika, I. 2020. 11 top trends in higher education: 2020/2021 data, insights & predictions. *Guide2Research*. https://www.guide2research.com/research/online-education-trends Date of access: 5 Sep. 2021.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77–101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Brown, J.C., Graves, E., Bradbury, K., Burke, M.A. & Triest, R.K. 2017. Involvement, engagement, community: dimensions and correlates of parental participation in a majority-minority urban school district. *Community Development Discussion Paper*. Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. Date of access: 14 June 2023.

Brunsdon, A. 2024. Theology alumni get together. *NWU&U*. Available from: https://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/i-media/nwu&uENG022024/0013.html

Brunton, G., Thomas, J., O'Mara-Eves, A., Jamal, F., Oliver, S. & Kavanagh, J. 2017. Narratives of community engagement: a systematic review-derived conceptual model for public health intervention. *BMC Public Health*, 17:1-15.

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. 2014. *Research Methodology*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Bryman, A. 1984. The debate about Quantitative and Qualitative research: A question of methods or epistemology. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35(1):75-92.

Brynard, D., Hanekom, S. & Brynard, P. 2014. *Introduction to research 3*. Cape Town: Van Schaik Publishers. https://www.perlego.com/book/2420813/introduction-to-research-3-pdf

Bui, M., Krishen, A.S., Anlamlier, E. & Berezan, O. 2021. Fear of missing out in the digital age: the role of social media satisfaction and advertising engagement. *Psychology and Marketing*, 39(4):683-693.

Buttle, F., ed. 2004. *Relationship Marketing: theory and practice*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.

Byrne, D. 2020. A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual Quan,* 56: 1391–1412. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y

Caliskan, A. & Esmer, S. 2019. Does it really worth investing Relationship Marketing for a port business? *Case studies on Transport Policy*, 7(2): 375-383.

Cambridge Dictionary. https://dictonary.cambridge.org>dictionary>reference

Campbell, A.C. & Baxter, A.R. 2019. Exploring attributes and practices of alumni associations through advance social change*. International Journal of Educational Development*, 164-172.

Campbell, A.C. & Lavallee, C.A. 2020. A community of practise for social justice: Examining the case of an international scholarship alumni association in Ghana. *Journal of Studies in International Education,* 24(4):409-423.

Campbell, A.C., Kelly-Webster, E. & Lavallee, C. 2021. University teaching and citizenship education as sustainable development in Ghana and Nigeria: insight from international scholarship program alumni. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 81(1):129-144.

Cancel, D. & Gerhard, D. 2019. *Conversational marketing: how the world's fastest growing companies use chatbots to generate leads 24/7/365 (and how you can too).* https://books.google.co.za/books?id=QsB9DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false. Date of access: 14 Sep. 2020.

Carales, V.D. & Nora, A. 2020. Finding place: Cognitive and psychosocial factors impacting Latina/o students' sense of belonging. *Journal of Student Affairs and Research and Practice,* 1-17.

Casais, B., Fernandes, J. & Sarmento, M. 2020. Tourism innovation through relationship marketing and value co-creation: a study on peer-to-peer online platforms for sharing accommodation. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 42:51-57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.11.010.

Casais, B., Fernandes, J. & Sarmento, M. 2020. Tourism innovation through relationship marketing and value creation: A study on peer-to-peer online platform for sharing accommodation*. Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 42:51-57.

Cash, P, Isaksson, O, Maier, A & Summers, J. 2022. Sampling in design research: eight key considerations. *Design Studies,* 78, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2021.101077

Chae, N., Backer, A., Mullen, P.R. & Cakmak, Z. 2022. School Counselors as Critical Consumers of Research: Guidelines for Evaluating Quantitative Research by Recognizing Quality Indicators. *Professional School Counselling*, 26:1-15.

Chapleo, C. 2010. What defines 'successful' university brands? *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 5(1):7-23.

Chapleo, C. 2015. Brand 'infrastructure' in nonprofit organizations: Challenges to successful brand building? *Journal of Marketing Communications, 21*(3), 199–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2012.741609

Chatterjee, S. & Kar, A.K. 2020. Why do small and medium enterprises use social media marketing and what if the impact: Empirical insight from India. *International Journal of Information Management,* 53:1-11.

Chattu, V.K. & Yaya, S. 2020. Emerging infections disease and outbreaks: implications for women's reproductive health and rights in resource-poor settings. *Reproduction Health*, 17(1):1-5.

Chen, C.M. & Lin, Y.C. 2012. Does better service induce higher profitability? Evidence from Taiwanese Hospitality Industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 31(4):1330-1332.

Chen, M.-M. & Murphy, H.C. 2018. Hotel school alumni's intentions to use communication channels – a cross-generational comparison study. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 18(3): 202–216. doi: 10.1080/15313220.2018.1431590

Cherry, K. 2018. The basics of prosocial behaviours. *Verywell Mind*. https://www.verywellmind.com. Date of access: 13 Mar. 2020.

Chetioui, Y., Satt, H., Lebdaoui, H. & Baijou, M. 2020. Antecedents of giving charitable donation (Sadaqah) during COVID-19 pandemic: does Islamic religion matter? *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 1-19.

Chi, H., Jones, E.L. & Grandham, L.P. 2012. Enhancing mentoring between alumni and students via smart alumni system. *Procedia Computer Science,* 1390-1399.

Chilisa, B. & Kawulich, B. 2012. Selecting a research approach: Paradigm, methodology and methods. *Doing Social research: A global context,* 5(1):51-61.

Chisholm-Burns, M.A., & Spivey, C. A. 2015. Factors Associated with Student Pharmacist Philanthropy to the College Before and After Graduation. *American Journal of Pharmaccutical Education,* 79(7):1-6. doi: 10.5688/ajpe797102

Christopher, M., Payne, A. & Ballantyne, D. 2013. *Relationship Marketing. Creating stakeholder value.* Oxford: Butterworth.

Clark, G., Marsden, R., Whyatt, J. D., Thompson, L., & Walker, M. 2015. It's everything else you do: Alumni views on extracurricular activities and employability. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 16(2), 133-147. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787415574050

Clary, E.G. & Snyders, M. 1999. The motivations to volunteer: theoretical and practical considerations. *Department of Psychology Minnesota*, 8(5):156-159.

Clément, L., Fernet, C. & Morin, A.J.S. 2020. In whom college teachers trust? On the role of specific trust referents and basic psychological needs in optimal functioning at work. *High Education,* 80: 511–530. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00496-z

Cooper, D.R. & Schhindler, P.S. 2014. *Business research methods.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Council on Higher Education, 2020. *Community engagement as one of the core function of universities: Revisiting the idea of a university*, 1-13.

Cowan, K., Paswan, A.K. & Van Steenburg, E. 2015. When inter-firm relationship benefits mitigate power asymmetry*. Industrial Marketing Management*, 48:140-148.

Cownie, F. & Gallo, M. 2020. Alumni gratitude and academics: implication for engagement. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 1-16.

Crane, R.S., Hecht, F.M. 2018. Intervention Integrity in Mindfulness-Based Research. *Mindfulness,* 9, 1370–1380. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-018-0886-3

Creswell, J.W. 2014. *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*. London: SAGE.

Cropanzano, R. & Mitchell, M.S. 2005. Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. 2005. *Journal of Management*, 31(6):874-900.

Cully, G., Leahy, D., Shiely, F. & Arensman, E. 2022. Patients' experiences of engagement with healthcare services following a high-risk self-harm presentation to a hospital emergency department: A mixed method study. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 26(1):91-111.

Cummins, S., Peltier, J. & Dixon, A. 2016. Omni-channel research model in the context of personal selling and sales management. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 10:2-16. https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-12-2015-0094

Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J. et al. 2020. A wake-up call: equity, inequality and COVID-19 emergency remote teaching and learning. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2:946–967. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00187-4

Da Silva, L.C., Mainardes, E.W., Teixeira, A.M.C. & Junior, L.C. 2020. Brand orientation of nonprofit organizations and its relationship with the attitude toward charity and donation intention. *International Review on Public and Non-profit Marketing,* 17:353-373.

Dance, G.J.X., LaForgia, M. & Confessore, N. 2018. As Facebook raised a privacy wall, it carved an opening for tech giants. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/technology/facebook-privacy.html Date of access: 20 Apr. 2023.

Das, K. 2009. RM Research. An academic literature review and classification. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning,* 27: 326-363.

De Wet, C. & Wolhuter, C. (2009). A transitiological study of some South African educational issues. *South African Journal of Education,* 29: 359-376. 10.15700/saje.v29n3a272

Deacon, E. 2024. Unlocking the power of positive psychology. *NWU&U*. https://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/i-media/nwu&uENG022024/0012.html

Dennis, C., Papagiannidis, S., Alamanos, E. & Bourlakis, M. 2016. The role of brand attachment strength in higher education. *Journal of Business Research*, 69:3049-3057.

Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pdf/PCE_Report_508_FINAL.pdf Date of access: 5 October 2024.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2019. *Post-school education and training monitor report: March 2019*. https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Post-School%20Education%20and%20Training%20Monitor%20Report_March%202019.pdf Date of access: 27 January 2024.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2021.https://www.dhet.gov.za/siteAssets/Post-School Date of access: 15 June 2021.

Dereje, N., Tesfaye, A., Tamene, B., Alemesjet, D., Abe, H., Tesfa, N., Gedion, S., Biruk, T. & Lakew, Y. 2022. COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: a mixed-method study. *BMJ Open*, 1-6.

Devlin, A.S. 2020. *The research experience: planning, conducting, and reporting research.* 2nd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE

Dimitriades, Z.S. 2006. Customer satisfaction, loyalty and commitment in service organisations: some evidence from Greece*. Management Research News*, 29(12):782-800.

Dixon, B.T., Agboola, O., Hauck, A., Argento, M., Miller, M. & Vaughan, A.L. 2023. Peer monitoring: Benefits to First-Time College Students and Their Peer Mentors. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 23(2): 203-215.

Doney, P.M., Barry, J.M. & Abratt, R. 2007. Trust determinants and outcomes in global B2B services. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41(9):1096-1116.

Drezner N.D., Pizmony-Levy, O. & Anderson-Long, M. 2020. In 'alma mater' we trust? Exploring attitudes towards institutions and alumni giving. *The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 122(9):1-44.

Drezner, N.D. & Garvey, J.C. 2016. LGBTQ alumni philanthropy: Exploring conscious motivation for giving related to identity and experiences. *Non-profit and Volunteering Sector Quartery*, 45(IS): 525-715.

Drezner, N.D. & Huehls, F. 2014. *Fundraising and institutional advancement: theory, practice, and new paradigms*. New York: Routledge.

Drezner, N.D. 2008. Cultivating a Culture of Giving: An exploration of Institutional Strategies to enhance African American Young Alumni giving. *Final report for AFP Research Grant*.

Drezner, N.D. 2010. Private black colleges' encouragement of student giving and volunteerism: An examination of prosocial behaviour development. *International Journal of Education Advancement*, 10(3):126-147.

Drezner, N.D. 2010. Why give? Exploring social exchange and organization identification theories in the promotion of philanthropic behaviors of African-American millennials at private-HBCUs. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 9(3): 147-165.

Drezner, N.D. 2018. Alumni engagement in Higher Education: A matter of marketing and leveraging social identities. In: Papadimitriou, A., ed. *Competition in Higher Education Branding and Marketing: National and Global Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Drummond, C., O'Toole, T. & McGrath, H. 2020. Digital engagement strategies and tactics in social media marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(6):1247-1280.

Du Plessis, P.J., Strydom, J.W. & Jooste, J.C. 2012. *Marketing Management*. 6th ed. Cape Town: Juta & Co.

Du Plooy-Cilliers, F., Davis, C. & Bezuidenhout, R-M. 2014. *Research Matters*. Cape Town: Juta & Co.

Dube, B. 2012. *A model for the use of focus groups in marketing research in SA*. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. (Thesis – PhD). https://hdl.handle.net/10210/8362

Dupin, C.M. & Borglin, G. 2020. Usability and application of a data integration techniques (following the thread) for multi- and mixed methods research: A systematic review. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, pp. 1-14.

Dwyer, F.R., Schurr, P.H. & Oh, S. 1987. Developing buyer-seller relationships. *Journal of Marketing,* 51:11-27.

Ebert, K., Axelsson, L. & Harbor, J. 2015. Opportunities and challenges for building alumni networks in Sweden – a case study of Stockholm University. *Journal of Higher Education, Policy and Management*, 37(2):252-262.

Eckel, C.C., Herberich, D.H. & Meer, J. 2017. A field experiment on directed giving at a public university. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics,* 66: 66-71. doi: 10.1016/j.socec.2016.04.007

Edosomwan, S., Prakasan, S.K., Kouame, D., Watson, J. & Seymour, T. 2011. The History of social media and its impact on business. *The Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, 16(3): 1-13.

Edwards, C.J., Bendickson, J.S., Baker, B.L. & Solomin, S.J. 2020. Entrepreneurship within the history of marketing. *Journal of Business Research*, 108:259-267.

Egan, J. 2008. *Relationship marketing: Exploring relational strategies in marketing*. 3rd ed. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Eger, L., Egerova, D., Tomczyk, L., Kryston, M. & Czegledi, C. 2020. Facebook for Public Relations in higher education field: a study from four countries Czehia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary*. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 1-19.

Eiriz, V. & Wilson, D. 2004. Research in relationship marketing: antecedents, traditions and integration. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40(3/4):275-291.

Eisingerich, A.B. & Bell, S.J. 2007. Maintaining customer relationships in high credence services. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 21(4):253-262.

El Essawy, N. 2012. E-customer relationship management readiness in the banking industry: the case of Egypt. *Unpublished thesis*, Middlesex University Research Repository.

El-Ansary, A.I. 2005. Relationship Marketing Management: A school in the history of marketing thought. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 4(1/2):43-58.

Elliot, K.M. & Shin, D. 2002. Student satisfaction: an alternative approach to assessing this important concept. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 24(2):199-209.

Emmanuel, N. 2019. Analysis of Saunders research onion. *Thesismind*. https://thesismind.com/analysis/analysis-of-saunders-research-onion/

Enari, D. 2021. Methodology marriage: Merging Western & Pacific research design. Pacific Dynamics. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 5(1):61-74.

Ennew, C. & Sekhon, H. 2007. Measuring trust in financial services: the trust index. *Consumer Policy Review*, 17(3): 62-68.

Enwereji, P. C. 2019. *A payment culture model for municipal services in the North West Province.* (Thesis – PhD). Potchefstroom: North-West University. https://doi.org/10.5430/rwe.v11n5p56

Eurostat. 2020. https://ire.udel.edu/data-submission/data-dictionary

Fam. K.-M., Waller, D.S. 2008. Agency-client factors across life-cycle stages. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 7(2):217-236.

Feece, D.J., Pisano, G. & Shuen, A. 1997. Dynamic capabilities and strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 18(7):509-533.

Fletcher, K.P. & Peters, L.D. 1997. Trust and Direct Marketing Environments: a Consumer Perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management*, (13):523-539.

Ford, D., Gadde, L-E., Hakansson, H. & Snehota, I. 2003. *Managing Business Relationships*. England: John Wiley & Sons.

Foreman, S.K. & Money, A.H. 1995. Internal Marketing: Concepts, Measurements and Application. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 11:755-769.

Fowler, F.J. 2009. *Survey Research Methods.* 4th ed. Edited by Bickman, L. & Rog, D.J. London: Sage.

Freshwater, D. 2007. Reading mixed methods research: Contexts for criticism. *Journal of mixed methods research*, *1*(2):134-146.

Frisby, B.N., Sidelinger, R.J. & Tatum, N.T. 2019. Alumni recollections of interactions with instructors and current organisational identification, commitment and support of the university. *Communication Reports*, 32(3):161-172.

Gagno, P.L. 2019. Collaborative research on community engagement in TVET, 1-33. https://unevoc,unesco.org.30001-eng

Gaier, S. 2005. Alumni satisfaction with their undergraduate academic experiences and the impact on alumni giving and participation. *International Journal of Educational Advancement,* 5 (4):279-289.

Gallo, M. 2018. How are graduates and alumni featured in university strategic plans? Lessons from Ireland. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 22:1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2017.1397065

Ganti, A. 2023. Social responsibility in business: meaning, types, examples and criticism. *Investopedia*. https://www.investopedia.com. Date of access: 7 July 2023.

Garisch, C. 2024. Why do students drop out of TVET Colleges and what would contribute towards their retention?. *TVET Research Programme,*1-106.

Garvey, J. C. 2016. Conceptualization and Validation of Factors for LGBTQ Alumni Philanthropy. *Journal of College Student Development*. 57:748-754. doi: 10.1353/csd.2016.0073

Garvey, J.C. & Drezner, N.D. 2019. Towards a culturally inclusive understanding of alumni philanthropy: the influence of student involvements and experiences on loyal alumni giving. *Review of Higher Education*, 42:363-392.

Ghosh, A.K., Whipple, T.W. & Bryan, G.A. 2001. Student trust and its antecedents in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 72(3):322-340.

Giambatista, R., McKeage, R. & Brees, J. 2020. Cultures of servant leadership and their impact. *The Journal of Value-Based Leadership*, 13(1):1-17.

Gillan, S.L., Koch, A., Starks, L.T. 2021. Firms and social responsibility: A review of ESG and CSR research in corporate finance. *Journal of Corporate Finance*, 66: 1-51.

Godin, S. 2018. *This is marketing: you can't be seen until you learn to see*. US: Penguin Random House. https://amzn.to/2XxeSMZ

Goffin, K., Lemke, F. & Szwejczewski, M. 2006. An exploratory study of 'close' supplier-manufacturer relationships. *Journal of Operations Management*, 24(2):189-209.

Gomwe, G. 2021. *Innovative business intelligence as a competitive advantage for SMMEs in the North West Province of South Africa*. Potchefstroom: North-West University. (Thesis – PhD).

Gordon, I.H. 2013. *Managing the new customer relationship: strategies to engage the social customer and building lasting value*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons.

Gosier, K.E. 2022. *First Generation alumni giving behaviour and their perception toward their alma mater.* New Jersey: Rowan University. (Master of Arts in Higher Education).

Gottlieb, H. 2006. Introduction to Community Engagement. *Community driven institute, Help4NonProfits,* 1-5.

Government Gazette. 1997. Higher Education Act, 390, 1-24. https// www.gov.za>site>files>gcis-document/201409/a101-97.pdf

Graca, S.S. & Zwick, H.C. 2020. Perceived value of charitable involvement: The millennial donor perspective. *Wiley*, 1-11.

Gravetter, F. J., & Forzano, L. B. 2016. *Research Methods for the Behavioral Sciences.* 5th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Green, J. & Thorogood, N. 2004. *Qualitative methods for health service*. 4th ed. London: SAGE.

Green, J.C., Caracelli, V.J. & Graham, W.F. 1989. Toward a conceptual model for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3):255-274.

Grönroos, C. 1997. Value-Driven Relational Marketing: from products to resources and competencies. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 13(5):407-419.

Groskurth, K., Bluemke, M. & Lechner, C.M. 2023. Why we need to abandon fixed cut offs for goodness-of-fit indices: An extensive simulation and possible solutions. *Behaviour Research Methods,* 56:3891-3914.

Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S. 1994. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In: *Handbook of qualitative research,* 105-117.

Guetterman, T.C., Fetters, M.D. & Creswell, J.W. 2015. Integrating quantitative and qualitative results in health science mixed methods research through joint displays. *Annals of Family Medicine,* 13(6):554-561. https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.1865

Gummeson, E. 2008. *Relationship marketing*. Oxford: Butterworth Heimemann.

Gunbayi, I. 2020. Knowledge-constitutive interests and social paradigms in guiding mixed method research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Studies*, 1(1):37-49.

Gyamera, G.O. 2018. The internationalisation agenda: A critical look at the conceptualisation and rationalisation of internationalisation in public universities in Ghana. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(6):924-942.

Habib, M.N., Khalil, U, Khan, Z & Zahid, M. 2021. Sustainability in higher education: what is happening in Pakistan? *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 22(3):681-706.

Hafsah, J. 2017. Helping attitude of professional and non professional college students. *International Journal of Advance Educational Research*, 2(3):82-87.

Halevy, A., Canton-Ferrer, C., Ma,H, & Ozertem, U. 2022. Preserving integrity in online social networks. *Communications of the ACM,* 65(20):92-98.

Halls, D. 2019. TVET First. *TVET College Times*, 59:1-23.

Hammick, M., Dornan, T. and Steinert, Y. 2010. Conducting a best evidence systematic review. Part 1: From idea to data coding. *Medical Teacher*, 32(1): 3–15. doi: 10.3109/01421590903414245.

Haqka, E.F., Setiadi, R. & Siswantining, T. 2020. Modeling the relationship of factors that shaped student's loyalty. *Journal of Physics.* https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1442/1/012036

Harb, A., Khliefat, A., Alzghoul, Y.A., Fowler, D., Sarhan, N. & Eyoun, K. 2021. Cultural exploration as an antecedent of students intention to attend university events: an extension of the theory of reasoned action. *Journal of Marketing for higher education*, 1-24. DOI: 10.1080/08841241.2021.1958125

Harker, M.J. & Egan, J. 2006. The past, present and future of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management,* 22(1/2):215-242.

Harker, M.J. 1999. Relationship marketing defined? An examination of current relationship marketing definition. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 17(1):13-20.

Harper, M. & Smithers, K. 2024. Fieldwork from A–Z? Exploring shifting identities in doctoral research in Australia and Zimbabwe. *Australian Educational Research,* 51: 1469–1485 https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00649-1

Harrigan, P., Soutar, G., Choudhury, M.M. & Lowe, M. 2015. Modelling CRM in a social media age. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 23:27-37.

Harris, M.A. & Orth, U. 2020. The link between self-esteem and social relationships: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(6):1459-1477.

Harrison, R.L. & Reilly, T.M. 2011. Mixed methods designs in marketing research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 14(1):7-26.

Hartshorn, S. 2010. 5 differences between social media and social networking. *Social Media Today*. http://www.socialmediatoday.com/SMC/194754 Date of access: 20 Apr. 2023.

Hauke, J. & Kossowski, T. 2011. Comparison of values of Pearson's and Spearman's correlation coefficients on the same sets of data. *Quaestiones Geographicae*, 30(2):87-94.

Hawkins, A.G. & Frohoff, K.M. 2010. Promoting the academy the challenges of marketing higher education. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 1-13.

Hazra, A. 2017. Using the confidence interval confidently. *Journal of Thoracic Disease,* 9(10):1-6. 4124-4129. 10.21037/jtd.2017.09.14

Heckman, R. & Guskey, A. 1998. The relationship between alumni and university: toward a theory of discretionary collaborative behaviour. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice,* 6(2):97-112.

Helgesen, O. & Nesset, E. 2007. What account for students' loyalty? Some field study of evidence. *International Journal of Educational management*, 21(2):126-143.

Helgesen, O. Marketing for Higher Education. 2008. *Journal for Higher Education*, 18(1):50-78.

Hemsley-Brown, J., Melewar, T.C., Nguyen, B. & Wilson, E.J. 2016. Exploring brand identity, meaning, image, and reputation (BIMIR) in higher education: A special section. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8):3019-3022. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.016

Hennig-Thurau, T. & Klee, A. 2010. The impact of customer satisfaction and relationship quality on customer retention: A critical reassessment and Model Development*. Psychology and Marketing,* 14(8):737-764.

Hesse-Biber, S. 2015. The problems and prospects in the teaching of mixed methods research. International *Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(5):463-477.

Hesse-Biber, S.N. & Johnson, R.B. ed. 2015. *The Oxford handbook of multimethod and mixed methods research enquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hlefana, M., Roberts-Lombard, M. & Stiehler-Mulder, B.E. 2020. Precursors and outcome of satisfaction in business-to-business relationship building: An information communication technology industry perspective in South Africa*. Independent Research Journal in the Management Sciences*, 1-11.

Hofstee, E. 2006. *Constructing a good dissertation*. Sandton: Interpak Books.

Holdford, D. & White, S. 1997. Testing commitment-trust theory in relationships between pharmacy schools and students. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 61:249-256.

Houston, F.S. & Gassenheimer, J.B. 1987. Marketing and Exchange. *Journal of Marketing,* 51(4):3-18.

Hsu, S.-H., Wang, Y.-C. & Cheng, C.-J. 2015. Developing a decomposed alumni satisfaction model for higher education institutions. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 27(9/10): 979–996. doi: 10.1080/14783363.2015.1054102

HubStar. 2022. *Why is strategic planning in higher education so important?* [Blog post]. https://www.hubstar.com.blog why-is-strategic-planning-in-higher-education-so-important Date of access: 17 April 2023.

Huehls, F. & Drezner, N.D. 2014. *Fundraising and institutional advancement: Theory, practice, and new paradigms*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.

Hult, G., Tomas, M., Pride, W.M. & Farrell, O.C. 2012. *Marketing*. 16th ed. Australia: South Western Cengage Learning.

Hungsapruek, T. 2022. Conditions for donations to the university by alumni: Faculty of Management Science of a public university in Thailand. *Social Space*, 22(1).

Hunt, S.D. 1994. On rethinking marketing: our discipline, our practice, our methods. *European Journal of Marketing*, 28(3):13-25.

Hunt, S.D., Arnett, D.B. & Madhavaram, S. 2006. The explanatory foundations of RM theory. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 21(2):1-16.

Hussain, R., Nasser, A.A. & Hussain, Y.K. 2015. Service quality and customer satisfaction of UAE-based airline: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 42:167-175.

Iankova, S., Davies, I., Archer-Brown, C., Marder, B. & Yau, A. 2018. A comparison of social media marketing between B2B, B2C and mixed business models. *Industrial Marketing Management,* 18:169-179.

Iglesias, O., Markovic, S., Bagherzaden, M. & Singh, J.J. 2018. Co-creation: A key link between corporate social responsibility, customer trust and customer loyalty. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 163:151-166.

Insidetrack. 2021. 12 higher ed trends to watch in 2021. Available from: https://www.insidetrack.org/resources/12-higher-ed-trends. Date of access: 5 Sep. 2021.

Irshaidat, R. 2019. Interpretivism vs. Positivism in Political Marketing Research'. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 21(2):126–160. doi: 10.1080/15377857.2019.1624286.

Islam, T., Islam, R., Pitafi, H., Xiaobei, P., Rehmani, M., Irfan, M. & Mubarik, M. 2020. The impact of corporate social responsibility on customer loyalty: the mediating role of corporate reputation, customer satisfaction, and trust. *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, 25:1-39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spc.2020.07.019

Ivankova, N.V., Creswell, J.W., & Stick, S.l. 2006. Using mixed methods sequential explanatory design: from theory to practice. *Field Methods*, 18(1):3-20.

Ivens, J. & Shaw, C. 2002. *Building great customer experiences*. New York: Palgrave.

Jacobson, J., Gruzd, A. & Hernandez-Garica, `A. 2020. Social media marketing: Who is watching the watchers? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 53:1-12.

Jaksic, V., Silic, D. & Silic, I. 2021. Critical realism and pragmatism in transport. *Global Journal of Business and Integral Security,* 1:1-15.

Jemaa, A.M.B. & Tournois, N. 2014. Relationship marketing key concepts as relationship value determinant. *Journal of Marketing Research and Case Studies*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.5171/2014.201710

Johnson, B.J. 2020. Community engagement: barriers and drivers in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(6): 87-105. https://doi.org/10.20853/34-6-4116

Johnson, D.S., Clark, B.H. & Barczak, G. 2012. CRM processes: How faithful are B-B firms to customer profitability? *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41:1094-1105.

Johnson, J.W., Thomas, V. & Peck, J. 2010. Do specialized MBA programs cultivate alumni relationships and donations? *Journal of Marketing in Higher Education*, 20(1):119-134.

Johnson, R.B., Onwuegbuzie, A.J. & Turner, L.A. 2017. Toward a definition of mixed methods research. *Journal of mixed method research*, 1(2):112-134.

Josiassen, A., Assaf, A.G. & Cvelbar, L.K. 2014. CRM and the bottom line: Do all CRM dimensions affect firm performance? *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 36:130-136.

Jurkowitsch, S., Vignali, C. & Kaufmann, H. R. 2006. A Student Satisfaction Model for Austrian Higher Education Providers Considering Aspects of Marketing Communications. *Innovative Marketing*, 2(3):9-23.

Juwaheer, J.D. 2000. Implement RM in the services sector. An empirical study of Mauritius. *Social Sciences and Humanities and Law and Management Research Journal*, 3:35-49.

Kanwar, A. & Sanjeeva, M. 2022. Student satisfaction survey: a key factor for quality improvement in the higher education institution. *Journal of Innovation & Entrepreneurship*, 11(27):1-10.

Kaplin, A.M. 2014. European Management and European Business School: Insights from the history of Business Schools. *European Management Journal*, 32:529-537.

Karimjanova, R.M. & Soliyeva, G.A. 2022. The role and importance of marketing research in the modernization of the economy of the Republic. *European Journal of Innovation in Nonformal Education*, 2(1):220-223.

Kasri, R.A. 2013. Giving behaviour in Indonesia: motives and marketing implications for Islam charities. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 4:306-324.

Kativa, E. 2014. *Towards an integrative tourism development model for local communities in Namibia.* Pretoria: University of Pretoria. (Thesis – PhD) http://hdl.handle.net/2263/46191

Kavali, S.G., Tzokas, N.X., & Saren, M.J. 1999. Relationship marketing as an ethical approach: philosophical and managerial considerations. *Management Decision*, 37(7): 573-581.

Kemmer, G. & Keller, S. 2010. Nonlinear least-squares data fitting in Excel spreadsheet. *Nature Protocol*, 5(2):267-282.

Khan, N. 2017. Adaptive or transactional leadership in current higher education: A brief comparison. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(3):1-183. doi: 10.19173/irrodl.v18i3.3294

Khann, M., Jacob, I. & Chopra, A. 2019. Promoting Business School brands through alumni (past customers)- Analyzing factors influencing their brand resonance. *Journal of Promotion Management,* 337-353. doi: 10.1080/10496491.2019.1557812

Khoa, B.T. 2019. The Antecedents of Relationship Marketing and Customer Loyalty: A Case of the Designed Fashion Product. *Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 7(2):195-204.

Kieu, T., Mogaji, E., Mwebesa, C., Sarofin, S., Soetan, T. & Vululleh, S.P. 2020. Marketing higher education in Africa. Moving from research to practice. In Mogaji, E., Maringe, F. & Hinson, R.E, eds. *Strategic marketing of higher education in Africa.* 1st ed. New York: Routledge.

Kimball, B.A. 2015. '"Democratizing" fundraising at elite universities: The discursive legitimation of mass giving at Yale and Harvard, 1890–1920. *History of Education Quarterly*, 55(2): 164–189.

Kiyak, D., Medvedeva, A. & Pranckeviciute, L. 2015. Relationship Marketing dimensions expression in Klaipeda Health Care Institutions. *Regional Formation and Development Studies*, 3(17):73-82.

Kleist, R., Newsom, J., Grasz, J., Conley, A., Brodersen, A. & Turco, S. 2019. *Huskers helping Huskers: a corporate-level analysis of the Nebraska Alumni Association.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska. (Thesis - Honors). https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/honorstheses/153

Koenig-Lewis, N., Asaad, Y., Pamler, A & Petersone, E. 2015. The effects of passage of time on alumni recall of 'Student Experience'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 70(1):1-22.

Kosan, L. 2014. Accounting for Marketing: Marketing Performance Through Financial Results. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, 4(4):276-283.

Kotler, P. & Armstrong, G. 2016. *Principles of Marketing*. 16th ed. London: Pearson.

Kotler, P. & Fox, K.F.A. 1995. *Strategic marketing for Educational Institutions.* 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Kotler, P., Armstrong, G. & Harris, L.C. & He, H. 2019. *Principles of Marketing*. 8th ed. London: Pearson.

Kumar, P. & Nanda, P. 2020. *Handbook of Research on Diverse Teaching Strategies for the Technology Rich Classroom*. Pennsylvania: IGI Global.

Kumar, P. 2020. A review of relationship management fundamentals. *Talent Development and Excellence*, 12(2):3915-3921.

Kumar, R. 2019. *Research Methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners*. 5th ed. London: Sage.

Kumatongo, B. & Muzata, K.K. 2021. Research Paradigms & Designs with their Application in Education. *Journal of Lexicography & Terminology*, 5(1):16-32.

Lamb, C.W., Hair, J.F. & McDaniel, C. 2009. *Essential of Marketing*. 6th ed. USA: South Western.

Lapon, E. & Buddington, L. 2024. The impact of peer mentoring in first-year education students. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education,* 13 (1): 73-87. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-01-2023-0002

Lawrence, J. & Tar, U. 2013. The use of grounded theory technique as a practical tool for qualitative data collection and analysis. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 11(1):29-40. https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejbrm/article/view/1300.

Lebakeng, A.J.N. 2018. *Leadership and community engagement at technical and vocational education and training colleges.* Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. (Thesis – MPhil).

LeBlanc, G. & Nguyen, N. 1999. Listening to the customer's voice: examining perceived service value among business college students. *The International Journal of Educational Management,* 13(4):187-198.

Lee, C.Y. & Chang, J.L. 2020. The effect if service innovation on customer behavioural intention in the Taiwanese insurance sector: the role of word of mouth and corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Asia Business Studies*, 14(3):341-360.

Lee, Y.I. & Trim, P.R.J. 2012. How mutuality reinforces partnership development: Japanese and Korean marketing perspectives. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41(5):770-779.

Leedy, P.D. & Ormrod, J.E. 2013. *Practical Research*. 10th ed. USA: Pearson Education.

Leigh, S. & Teece, D. 2016. Campus leadership and the entrepreneurial university: A dynamic capabilities perspective. *Academy of Management Perspectives,* 30 (2): 182-210. https://doi.org/10.5465/amp.2015.0022

Lekaota, L. 2016. Rural communities' participation in the planning and management of tourism developments: A case study from Lesotho. *African Journal of Hospitality*, *Tourism and Leisure,* 5(4):1-12.

Lewin, J.E. & Johnston, W.J. 1997. Relationship Marketing Theory in Practice. *Journal of Business Research*, 39:23-31.

Liang, C.J. & Wang, W.H. 2006. The behavioural sequence of the financial services industry in Taiwan: service quality, relationship quality and behavioural loyalty. *Services Industries Journal*, 26(2):119-145.

Lin, L-Y & Lu, C-Y. 2020. The influence of corporate image, relationship marketing and trust on purchases intention: the moderating effects of word-of-mouth. *Tourism Review*, 65(30):16-34. doi: 10.1108/16605371011083503

Lincoln, Y.S. & Gube, E.G. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage.

Lindgreen, A., Hingley, M.K., Grant, D.B. & Morgan, R.E. 2012. Value in business and industrial marketing: past, present and future. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41(1):207-214.

Litheko, A.M. 2019. *Strategic management of tourism stakeholder relations: Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela.* Potchefstroom: North-West University. (Thesis – PhD).

Little, E. & Marandi, E. 2003. *Relationship Marketing Management*. Australia: Thomson Learning.

Liu, W., Wang, Z, & Zhao,H. 2020.Comparative study of customer relationship management research from East Asia, North America and Europe: A bibliometric overview. *Electronic Markets*, 30:735-757.

Lor, P.J. 2010. Preparing for research: metatheoretical considerations. https://pjlor.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/chapter-3-draft-2011-04-152.pdf.

Mackay, N. 2012. *The interrelationship between CRM initiatives, customer satisfaction and behavioural intention*. Potchefstroom: NWU. (Thesis – PhD).

MacMillan, K., Money, K., Money, A. & Downing, S. 2005. Relationship marketing in the non-profit sector: an extension and application of the commitment-trust theory. *Journal of Business Research,* 58(6):806-818.

Mael, F. & Ashforth, B.E. 1992. Alumni & their alma mater: A partially test of the reformulated model of organizational identification. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour,* 13:103-123.

Mahajan, R., Lim, W.M., Sareen, M., Kumnar, S. & Panwar, R. 2023. Stakeholder theory. *Journal of Business Research*, 166:1-16.

Makole, K.R., Ntshangase, B.A. & Msosa, S.K.2023. Organizational culture and management practices at technical vocational education and training colleges. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 12(4):2021-2036.

Malhotra, N.K. 2010. *Marketing research: An applied orientation*. 6th ed. London: Pearson Education.

Malhotra, N.K. 2010*. Marketing research: An applied orientation*. 5th ed. Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River: Pearson.

Malik, S.A. 2010. *On the use of customer relationship management (CRM) in the banking industry: A qualitative cross-case analysis between the banks in Pakistan and the UK.* Manchester: University of Manchester. (Thesis – PhD).

Malinao, W.M. 2023. Retention, satisfaction and motivation enables a HEI in the Philippines amidst teacher migration. *Puissant*, 4:716-735.

Manzuma-Ndaaba, N.M., Harada, Y., Nordin, N., Abdullateef, O. & Romle, A.R. 2018. Application of social exchange theory on relationship marketing dynamism from higher education service destination loyalty perspective. *Management Science Letter*, 8:1077-1096.

Maphosa, C., Shumba J. & Shumba A 2007.Mentorship for teaching practice in Zimbabwe: are student teachers getting a raw deal?. *South African Journal of Higher Education,* 21 (2): 1-12.

Marketing 101 for Alumni Relations. 2018. Personalizations and understanding your marketing stack in higher education. https://getwisr.com/college-alumni/marketing for alumni-relations Date of access: 28 Feb.2020.

Marr, K.A., Mullin, C.H. & Siegfried J.J. 2005. Undergraduate financial aid and subsequently alumni giving behaviour. *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finances*, 45:123-143.

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G.B. 2016. *Designing Qualitative Research*. 6th ed. London: SAGE.

Marwale, T. As Universities remodel as businesses, they need to be wary of losing core mandates. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionisat/2021-09-05-as-universities-remodel-as-businesses-they-need-to-be-vary-of-losing-core-mandates/ Date of access: 6 Sep 2021.

Mason, K. & Leek, S. 2012. Communication practices in business relationships: Creating, relating and adapting communicating artefact through time*. Industrial Marketing Management,* 41(2):319-322.

Mbango, P. & Mmatli, W. 2019. Precursors and outcomes of satisfaction in business-to-business relationship marketing. Insight from hawkers/street vendors leafy vegetable market in South Africa. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5:1-19.

McAlexander, J., Koenig, H. & Dufault, B. 2015. Millennials and Boomers: Increasing alumni affinity and intent to give by target market segmentation. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 21. doi: 10.1002/nvsm.1544

McAlexander, J.H. & Koening, H.F. 2001. University experiences, the student-college relationship, and alumni support. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 10(3):21-43.

McCloskey, D.J., McDonald, M.A., Cook, J., Heutin-Roberts, S., Updegrove, S., Sampson, D., Gutter, S. & Eder, M. 2011. Community engagement: Definition and organizing concepts from the literature. *Principles of Community Engagement*. Atlanta: U.S.

McDaniel, C.D. & Gates, R.H. 2010. *Marketing research*. 8th ed. https://books.google.co.za/books/about/Marketing_Research.html?id=3KI7PgAACAAJ&redir_esc=y

McDearman, J.T. & Shirley, K. 2009. Characteristics and institutional factors related to young alumni donors and non-donors. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 9:83-95.

McDougle, L., McDonald, D., Li, H., Miller, W.M. & Xu, C. 2016. Can philanthropy be taught? *Chapman University Digital Commons*, 4-23. http://doi.org/10.1177/0899764016662355

McKenzie, R. 2001. *The Relationship-Based Enterprise: Powering Business Success Through Customer Relationship Management*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.

McMillan, J & Schumacher, S. 2014. *Research in Education. Evidence-Based Inquiry*. England: Pearson.

Melewar, T.C. & Akel, S. 2006. The role of corporate identity in the higher education sector, a case study. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10(1):41-57.

Melnikovas, A. 2018. Towards an Explicit Research Methodology: Adapting research onion model for future studies. *Journal of Future Studies*, 23(2):29-44.

Merritt, C. 2021. *Marketing Using Social Media: An Analysis of Course Enrollment Data following a Social Media Campaign.* North Carolina: Wingate University. (PhD).

Mishra, S.B. & Alok, S. 2017. *Handbook of Research Methodology: A compendium for scholars and researchers.* New Delhi: Educreation.

Moghavvemi, S., Sulaiman, A., Jaafar, N.I. & Kasem, N. 2018. Social media as a complementary learning tool for teaching and learning: The case of YouTube. *International Journal of Management Education*, 16(1):37-42.

Mohajan, H.K. Quantitative Research: A successful investigation in natural and social sciences. *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*, 9(4):52-79.

Molenaar, C. 2015.*Why customers would rather have a smartphone than a car? Relationship retailing as an opportunity*. London: Routledge.

Moller, K. & Halinen. 2000. Relationship Marketing theory: Its roots and direction. *Journal of Marketing Management,* 16:29-54.

Monks, J. 2003. Patterns of giving to one's alma mater among young graduates. *Economics of Education review*, 22(2):121-130.

Moore, D. & Bowden-Everson, J.L. 2012. An Appealing Connection – the role of relationship marketing in the attraction and retention of students in an Australian tertiary context. *Asian Social Science*, 8(14):65-75.

Moorman, C., Deshpande, R. & Zaltman, G. 1993. Factors affecting trust in market research relationships. *Journal of Marketing*, 57:81-101.

Morgan, D.L. 2014. *Intergrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: A pragmatic approach.* USA: Sage.

Morgan, R.M. & Hunt, S.D. 1994.The commitment-trust theory of Relationship Marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3):1-20.

Motabogi, C. 2023. Develop tomorrow's leaders today. *NWU&U*. https.//www.nwu.ac.za/alumni-magazine

Mpinganjir, M. & Roberts-Lombard & Svenssa, G. M. 2017. Validation the relationship between trust and commitment, economic and non-economic satisfaction in South Africa buyer-seller relationship. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 1-20.

Mubango, P. 2015. *Business to business dimensions of Relationship Marketing in the South African cement manufacturing industry*. Kwazulu-Natal: University of Kwazulu-Natal. (Thesis - PhD).

Munusamy, J., Chelliah, S. & Mun, H.W. 2010. Service quality delivery and its impact on customer satisfaction in Banking sector in Malaysia. *International Journal of Innovation management and Technology,* 1(4):398-404.

Muposhi, A. 2018. *Actors influencing pro-environmental behaviour: A focus on the use of non-plastic reusable shopping bags*. Johannesburg: University of Johannesburg. (Thesis - PhD).

Murray, J.L. & Arnett, J.J. eds. 2019. *Emerging Adulthood and Higher Education: A New Student Development Paradigm.* New York: Routledge.

Naidoo, V. & Wu, T. 2014. Innovations in marketing of HE: Foreign market entry mode of not-for-profit universities. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 29(6):548-558.

Ndeudjeu, J.N. 2020. *Influence of the social media promotion mix on the car insurance purchasing of residents in Mahikeng.* Mahikeng: NWU. (MComm).

Newman, M.D. & Petrosko, J.M. 2011. Predictors of Alumni Association Membership. *Research Higher Education*, 52:738-759.

Ngcwangu, S. & Shabalala, L.P.S.2021. Accelerating the implementation of SDG 4: stakeholder perceptions towards initiation of sustainable community engagement projects by higher education institution. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 23-32.

Ngo, V.M. & Vu, H.M. 2021. Can CRM create customer agility and superior firms' performance? *International Journal of Business and Society*, 22(1):175-193.

Nguyen, B., Melewar, T.C., & Hemsley-Brown, J. eds. 2019. *Strategic brand management in higher education.* London: Routledge.

Nha, V.T.T. 2021. Understanding validity and reliability from qualitative and quantitative research traditions. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 37(3):1-9.

Northlink College. https// www.northlink.co.za

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. 2017. Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1):1-13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

O'Gorman, K. & MacIntosh, R. 2015. *Research Methods for Business Management: A guide to writing your dissertation.* 2nd ed. Oxford: Goodfellow.

Oberlo, 2022. How many people use social media in 2020? https://www.oberlo.com>statistics

Olivier, R. 1981. Measuring and Evaluation of Satisfaction Process in Retail Setting. *Journal of Retailing*, 57(3):25-48.

Oluseye, O.O., Tairat, B.T. & Emmanuel, J.O. 2014. Customer relationship management approach and student satisfaction in higher education marketing. *Journal of Competitiveness*, 6(3):49-62.

Onikoyi, B. & Nnomoko, N. 2023. University Induction and 1st year students' integration into higher education: An exploration of experience*. Department of Computer Science*, Edged Hill University, 2-9. https://ssrn.com/abstract=4724564

Orcutt, M., Patel, P., Burns, R., Hiam, L., Aldridge, R., Devakumar, D., Kumar, B., Spiegel, P. & Abubakar, I. 2020. Global call to action for inclusion of migrants and refugees in the COVID-19 response. *Lancet*, 395:9-15. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30971-5.

Osayawe, B. & Taylor, M. 2009. Managing students' loyalty to school after graduation through relationship marketing. *The TQM Journal*, 21(5):502-516.

Owen, D. & Hill, S. 2011. Embedding public engagement in the curriculum: A model for the assessment of student learning from public engagement*. Paired peer learning through engineering education,* 1-16.

Owens, D.C., Sadler, T.D., Barlow, A.T. & Smith-Walters, C. 2020. Student motivation from and resistance to achieve learning rooted in essential science active learning practices. *Research in Science Education*, 50: 253-277.

Palmatier, R.W. & Steinhoff, L. 2019. *Relationship Marketing in the Digital Age*. New York: Routledge.

Palmer, A. & Koening-Lewis, N. 2008. Experiential bases for relationship development: A study of alumni relationships. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 7(1):65-90.

Palmer, A., Koenig-Lewis, N. & Asaad, Y. 2016. Brand identification in higher education: A conditional process analysis. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(8): 3033-3040. doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.01.018

Paly, C. 2020. What is post-school education and training. *Skills Portal*. https://www.skillsportal.co.za/content/what-post-school-education-and-training Date of access: 13 July 2022.

Paris, C., Lee, W. & Seery, P. 2010. The role of social media in promoting special events: acceptance of Facebook 'Events'. *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism*, 14:531-541. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-211-99407-8_44

Park, C.W., Jaworski, B.J. & Macinnis, D.J. 1986. Strategic brand concept-image management. *Journal of Marketing*, 50(4):135-145.

Park, J., Lee, J., Lee, H & Truex, D. 2012. Exploring the impact of communication effectiveness on service quality, trust and relationship commitment in IT services, Internal *Journal of Information Management*, 32:459-468.

Paswan, A. 2008. Sell the brand first: how to sell your brand and create lasting customer loyalty. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 17(4):287-288.

Pausits, A. 2007. A model for relationship-based higher education management. *Management issues in knowledge-based university*. *Gdansk University of Technology*, 61-69.

Payne, A. & Frow, P. 2013. Relationship Marketing: looking backwards to the future. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 31(1):11-15.

Payne, A. *2006. Handbook of CRM: achieving excellence in customer management*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Payne, A., Ballantyne, D. & Christopher, M. 2006. A stakeholder approach to relationship marketing strategy: the development and use of the 'six markets' model. *European Journal of Marketing,* 29(7/8):855-874.

Payne, E.M., Peltier, J.W. & Borger, V.A. 2017. Omni-channel marketing, integrated marketing communication and consumer engagement. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing,* 11(2):186-197.

Pearson, W.J. 1999. Comprehensive research on alumni relationships: Four years of market research Stanford University. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 26:5-21.

Pedro, I.M., Pereira, L.N. & Carrasqueira, H.B. 2017. Determinants for the commitment relationship maintenance between the alumni and the alma mater. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 28(1):128-152.

Peltier, J.W., Zahay, D. & Lehmann, D.R. 2013. Organizational learning and CRM success: A model for linking organizations, practices, customer data quality and performance. *Journal of Interactive Marketing,* 27:1-13.

Pelton, L.E., Strutton, D. & Llumpkin, J.R. 2002. *Marketing Channels. A relationship management approach*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin.

Perin, M.G., Sampaio, C.H., Simoes, C.& De Polvora, R.P. 2012. Modeling antecedent of student loyalty in higher education. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 22(1):101-116.

Peruta, A. & Helm, C. 2018. Engaging university alumni through social media: strategies for creating community. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 7(1):123-150.

Peter, J.P. & Donnelly, J.H. Jr. 2008. *Marketing management*. https://www.amazon.com/Paul-Peter-James-Donnelly-MANAGEMENT/dp/B004K39UUE.

Piliavan, J. & Charng, H-W. 1990. Altruism: a review of recent theory and research. *Annual review of sociology*, 16:27-65.

Plummer, R., Witkowski, S., Smits, A. & Dale, G. 2022. Higher education institution–community partnerships: measuring the performance of sustainability science initiatives. *Innovative Higher Education*, 47: 135-153. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09572-8

Pol, H., Galatzha, M. & Pruyn, A. 2020. New Perspectives on Customer Relationships: How relational Models influence customer experience and how they are activated. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, 19(1): 29-51.

Porter, T., Hartman, K., & Johnson, J.S. 2011. Books and balls: antecedents and outcomes of college identification. *Research in Higher Education Journal,* 13:1-14.

Post-School Education and Training Monitor. 2024. https//www. dhet.gov.za

Preedy, M., Glatter, R. & Wise, C. eds. 2003. *Strategic leadership and educational improvement*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674580300200436

Pride, W.M. & Ferrell, O.C. 2012. *Marketing*. 15th ed. Canada: Cengage Learning.

Purcell, J., Pearl, A. & Van Schyndel. 2020. Boundary spanning among community-engaged faculty: an exploratory study of faculty participating in higher education community engagement. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching and learning,* 6(2):1-26).

Quinlan, C. 2011. *Business research methods*. Boston. South Western Cengage Learning.

Rad, D., Balas, E., Ignat, S., Rad, G. & Dixon, D. 2020. A predictive model of youth bystanders' helping attitudes. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12:136-150. https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.1sup2/257

Radcliff, S.K. 2019. Cultivating relationships between the institution and its emerging adult alumni. In: Murray, J.L. & Arnett, J.J., eds. *Emerging adulthood and higher education*. New York: Routledge.

Rafail, P. 2018. Nonprobability Sampling and Twitter: Strategies for Semibounded and Bounded Populations. *Social Science Computer Review*, 36(2):195-211. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439317709431

Raimondo, M.A. 2000. The measurement of trust in marketing studies: a review of models and methodologies. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu>document. Date of access: 15 October 2020.

Rasila, H. 2010. Customer relationship quality in landlord-tenant relationship. *Property Management*, 28:80-92. https://doi.org/10.1108/02637471011037107

Rattanamethawong, N., Sinthupinyo, S. & Chandrachai.A. 2018. An innovation model of alumni relationship management. *Kasetart Journal of Social Sciences*, 39:150-160.

Rauschnabel, P.A., Krey, N., Babin, B.J. & Ivens, B.S. 2015. Brand management in higher education: The University Brand Personality Scale. *Journal of Business Research*, 69:3077-3086.

Rebekic, A. Loncaric, Z. Petrovic, S. & Maric, s. 2015. Pearson's or Spearman's Correlation Coefficient – Which one to use? *Poljoprivreda*, (21):47-54.

Reimann, M., Schilke, O. & Thomas, J.S. 2010. Customer relationships management and firm performance: the mediating role of business strategy. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 38(3):2-24.

Riantiarno, F., Zuhriyah, l. & Windarwate, H.D. 2020. Own Goodness and Service for Others. *International Journal of Science and Society*, 2(1):345-354.

Riantiarno, F., Zuhriyah, L. & Windarwati, H. 2020. Own goodness and service for others: A motivation to serve people with mental disorders: systematic review. *The International Journal of Science and Society*, 2(1):345-355. https://doi.org/10.54783/ijsoc.v2i1.84

Richards, K.A. & Jones, E. 2006. Customer relationship management: Finding value driver. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 37:120-130.

Rigby, D. & Bilodeau, B. 2013. Management Tools and Trends. *Bain & Company*, 1-19.

Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice—A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London: SAGE.

Roberts, J., Merrilees, B., Herington, C. & Miller, D. 2010. Building retail trust: neighbourhood vs regional shopping centres. *International Journal of retail and Distribution Management*, 38(8):597-612.

Rojas, M. & Veenhoven, R. 2013. Contentment and affect in the estimation of Happiness. *Social Indicators Research*, 10:1-24. DOI 10.1007/s11205-011-9952-0

Rojas-Mendez, J.I., Vasquez-Parraga, A.Z., Kara, A. & Cerda-Urrutia, A. 2009. Determinants of student loyalty in higher education: A tested relationship approach in Latin America. *Latin American Business Review,* 10:21-39.

Romero, M.J.M. 2014. RM: It's importance in private label extension. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(5):667-672.

Rooney, T., Krolikowska, E. & Bruce, H.L. 2020. Rethinking relationship marketing as consumer led and technology driven: Proposition for research and Practice. *Journal of Relationship Marketing,* 42-61.

Rose, A. & Malliso, L. 2020. Raising aspirations for non-traditional students outreach activities. A review of literature to the Uni Connect programme. *IMPact*, 3(1):1-20.

Russell, H. 2008. *Community engagement: Some lessons from the New Deal for Communities Programme*. London: Liverpool John Moores University.

Rust, A., 2015. The role of students and alumni in Relationship Marketing: An exploratory study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa. *International Journal Education & Science*, 9(1):37-46.

Rutberg, S. & Bouikidis, C.D. 2018. Focusing on the fundamentals: A simplistic differentiation between qualitative and quantitative research. *Nephrology Nursing Journal*, 45(2): 209-212.

Sagenmüller, I. 2007. *How can relationship marketing improve student retention?* [Blog post]. https://www.u-plannier.com/blog/how-can-relationship-marketing-improve-student-retention Date of access: 25 Mar. 2019.

Sahay, A. 2016. Peeling Saunder's Research Onion. *Research Gate*, 1-5.

Saidi, A. & Boti, Z. 2023. Revisiting community engagement in Higher Education in South Africa from a vantage point of the Notion of Third Mission. *South African Journal of Higher Education,* 37(1):72-91.

Salagrama, R., Prashar, S. & Sai Vijay, T. 2021. Do customers exhibit gratitude after service recovery? Understanding the moderating role of relationship type. *Service Business*, 15:757-779.

Sanchez, A. 2022. Group identity and charitable contributions: Experimental evidence. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 194:542-549.

Sanchez-Fernandez, R., Jimenez-Castillo, D. & Iniesta-Bonilla, A. 2016. Economic value for university services*. International Journal of Marketing Research*, 59(5):671-692.

Santouridis, I. & Tsachtani, E. 2015. Investigating the impact of CRM resources on CRM processes: a customer life-cycle based approach in the case of a Greek Bank*. Procedia Economy and Finance*, 19:304-313.

SAQA. 2016. NQF. http://www.saqa.org.za/list.php?=NQF Date of access: 20 June 2021.

Saraih, U.N., Abdul Rahman, N., Nordin, N., Ramlan, S.N., Ahmad, R. & Sakdan, M. 2018. The influence of students' experience on alumni giving in Malaysian public educational institutions. Paper delivered at MATEC Web of Conferences. doi: 10.1051/matecconf/201815005030

Sargeant, A., Ford, J.B. & West, D.C. 2006. Perceptual determinants of nonprofit giving behaviour. *Journal of Business Research*, 59(2):155-165.

Saunders, M. Lewis, P. & Thornhille, A. 2019. *Research methods for business students*. England: Pearson Education.

Schlesinger, W., Cervera, A & Perez-Cabanero, C. 2017. Sticking with your university: the importance of satisfaction, trust, image and shared values. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42 (12):2178-2194.

Schlesinger, W., Cervera, A. & Iniesta, M. Á. 2015. Key Elements in Building Relationships in the Higher Education Services Context. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 21(4): 475–491. doi: 10.1080/10496491.2015.1051403.

Schlesinger, W., Cervera, A. & Iniesta, M.A. 2015. Key elements in building relationships in the higher education services context. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 2(4):475-491.

Schlesinger, W., Cervera-Taulet, A. & Wymer, W. 2021. The influence of university brand image, satisfaction, and university identification on alumni WOM intentions. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 33(1):1–19. doi: 10.1080/08841241.2021.1874588

Scotland, J. 2012. Exploring the Philosophical underpinnings of Research: relating ontology and epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive and Crititcal Research paradigms. *English language Teaching*, 5(9):1-8.

Sebola, K.C. 2015. *Investigating the best practices for alumni relations in business schools.* Potchefstroom: North-West University. (Thesis – MA.). http://hdl.handle.net/10394/20900

Seiders, K., Voss, G.B., Grewal, D. & Godfrey, A.L. 2005. Do satisfied customers really buy more? Examining moderating influences in a retailing context. *Journal of Marketing*, 69(2):26-43.

Selane, C. & Odeku, K.O. 2024. An Analysis of How TVET is playing a significant role in fostering students' skills and competencies in South Africa*. Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 14(3):293-302.

Setiawan, R., Aprillia, A. & Magdalena, N. 2020. Analysis of antecedent factors in academic achievement and student retention*. Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, 15(1):37–47. doi: 10.1108/AAOUJ-2020-0010

Severo, E.A., De Guimaräes, J.C.F.; Dellarmelin, M.L. 2021. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on environmental awareness, sustainable consumption and social responsibility: Evidence from generations in Brazil and Portugal. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 286:1-14.

Shaker, G.G. & Nathan, S.K. 2017. Understanding higher education fundraisers in the United States. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 22(4):1-28.

Shapiro, J.M., Romano, N.C. and Mittal, B. 2004. Emergent internet technology applications for relationship marketing. *Journal of relationship marketing*, 2 (3/4):85-108.

Sheth, J.N. & Uslay, C. 2007. Implications of the revised definition of Marketing: from exchange to value creation. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 26(2):302-307.

Sheth, J.N.& Parvatiyar, A. 1995. The evolution of relationship marketing. *International Business Review*, 4(4):397-418.

Sheth, J.N., Parvatiyar, A. & Sinha, A. 2012. The conceptual foundations of Relationship Marketing: review and synthesis*. Economic Sociology - The European Electronic newsletter*, 13 (3):4-26.

SHRM, 2021. How do I calculate FTE hours? https://www.shrm.org>resourcesandtools>hr>qa>pages Access 16 August 2021.

Siebritz, G. 2023. How many TVET colleges are there in South Africa? https://www.skillsportal.co.za/content/how-many-tvet-colleges-are-there-in-south-africa Date of access: 26 February 2023.

Simon, A., Frame, C. & Sohal, A. 2009. Store owners' reactions to a corporation's takeover of a shopping centre in Australian city*. International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, 37(7):563-579.

Sin, L.Y.M., Tse, A.C.B., Yau, O.H.M., Lee, J.S.Y. & Chau, R. 2002. The effect of RM orientation on business performance in a service-oriented economy. *Journal of Services Marketing:* 656-676.

Singer, T.S. & Hughey, A. W. 2002. The role of the alumni association in student life*. New Directions for Student Services*, 100:51-66.

Singh, V. & Jain, A. 2015. Consumer trust in retail: development of multiple item scale. *Journal of Economic, Business and Management*, 3(10):971-976.

Skari, L.A. 2014. Community college alumni: predicting who gives. *Community College Review*, 42(1):23-40.

Snijders, I., Wijnia, L., Rikers, R.M.J.P. & Loyens, S.M.M. 2020. Alumni loyalty drivers in higher education. *Social Psychology of Education*, 22:607-627.

Söderlund, M. & Colliander, J. 2015. Loyalty program rewards and their impact on perceived justice, customer satisfaction and repatronize intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services,* 25:47-57.

Sorgdrager, B. 2023. Message from the president of the NWU convocation. *NWU & U*, 1-21. https://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/i-media/nwu&uENG022024/0012.html

Sreejesh, S., Mohapatra, S. and Anusree, M.R. 2014**.** *Business Research Methods: An Applied Orientation*. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-00539-3

Stephenson, A.L. & Yerger, D.B. 2014. Does brand identification transform alumni into university advocates? *International Review on Public and Non-profit markets*, 11:243-262.

Stephenson, A.L. & Yerger, D.B. 2015. The role of satisfaction in alumni perceptions and supportive behaviors. *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 36:299-316.

Stewart, T. & Alrutz, M. Meaningful relationships: cruxes of university-community partnerships for sustainable and happy engagement. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 5(1):1-12.

Stocker, F. & Boaventura, J.M.G. 2020. A stakeholder theory approach to creating value in higher education institutions. *The Bottom Line*, 33(4):297-313.

Streiner, D.L. 2006. Building a Better Model: An Introduction to Structural Equation Modelling. *Research Methods in Psychiatry*, 51(5): 317:323.

Striker, D., Bosworth, G. & Bouter, G. 2020. Research methods in rural studies; Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 78:262-270.

Sung, C.-I. 2014. Investigating philanthropy initiatives in Chinese higher education. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 1-22. doi: 10.1007/s11266-014-9509-3

Sung, M. & Yang, S-U. 2009. Student-University relationships and reputation: A Study of the links between key factors fostering students' supportive behavioural intentions towards their university. *Higher Education*, 57(6):787-811.

Suryatni, M., Hailuddin, H., Nururly, S., Thamrin, S., Sariwulan, T. & Endri, E. 2023. Evaluation of Implementation of Organizational Culture, Leadership, and Employment Managent. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 12(5):294-307.

Susilawati, E., Khaira, I & Pratamce, I. 2021. Antecedents to student loyalty in Indonesian HEIs: the mediating role of technology and innovation. *Educational Sciences Theory and Practice*, 21(3):40-57.

Sutrave, K., Godasu, R. & Noteboom, C. 2020. Strategic use of social media by higher education to influence alumni engagement. *Association of Information Systems*,1-5.

Sutrisna, M. 2009. Research methodology in doctoral research: understand the meaning of conducting qualitative research. *Working paper presented at the ARCOM doctoral workshop*, Liverpool John Moores University, 12 May 2009.

Swani, K., Brown, B.P. & Milne, G.R. 2014. 'Should tweets differ for B2B and B2C? An analysis of fortune 500 companies' Twitter communications? *Industrial Marketing Management,* 43(5):873-881.

Sylvester, P. & Myran, S. 2020. "Minding the gap" career navigators as an illustration for supporting student growth and learning. *Community Journal of Research and Practice*, 44(2):1-16.

Tapia, M.N. 2010. La propuesta dagogical del "aprendizaje-servicio" una perspectiva Latinoamericana, *Tzhoecoen*, 5(23-43).

Temizhan, E., Mirtagioglu, H & Mendes, M. 2022. Which correlation coefficient should be used for investigating relations between Quantitative variables? *Journal for Engineering, Technology and Sciences,* 85(1):265-277.

Temple, P. 2006. Branding higher education: Illusion or reality? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 10(1):15-19.

Thaichon, P. & Ratten, V., ed. 2021. *Transforming Relationship Marketing. Strategies and business models in the digital age.* London: Routledge.

Theron, E. & Terblanché, N.S. 2010. Dimensions of RM in B-to-B financial services. *International Journal of Marketing Research*, 52(3):383-402.

Timm, P.R. 2005. *Customer service: career success through customer satisfaction.* 3rd ed. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Toppi, A., Ulkuniemi, P., Saraniemi, S. & Malaska, M. 2012. Corporate brand communication through social media in industrial markets. *Paper presented at the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group Conference*, Rome, 1-20.

Traino, K.A., Racheal, M.S. & Fisher, S. 2021. Transitions readiness and quality of life in emerging adult college student. *Journal of American College Health,* 71(4):1167-1174.

Truong, D., Liu, R.X. & Yu, J. 2020. Mixed methods research in tourism and hospitality Journals. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(4):1563-1579.

Tsiligiris, V., Kéri, A. & Cheah, J.E.T. 2022. Exploring the relationship between student individual culture dimensions & service quality expectations in higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 30 (1): 51-72. https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-11-2020-0137

Tull, D.S. & Hawkins, D.L. 1993. *Marketing research: measurement & methods*. 6th ed. New Yersey: Prentice-Hall.

Twenge, J.M. 2008. Excellent and accessible view of emerging adulthood. *American Journal of Psychology,* 121:682-687.

Tzafrir, S.S. & Dolan, S.L. 2004. A scale for Measuring Manager-Employee Trust. *Management Research*, 2:115-132.

Ueda, Y., & Nomima, M. 2012. Effect of student attitudes on university loyalty and university cooperation: an empirical study in Japan. *International Journal of Management*, 29(1):133-142.

University of Stuttgart. *What does 'alumni' mean?*' https://www.alumni.uni-stutgart.de>service>definition. Date of access: 2 June 2021.

Valitov, S.M. 2014. University brand as a modern way of winning competitive advantage. *Procidia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 152:295-299.

Valos, M., Polonsky, M.J., Mavondo, F. & Lipscomb, J. 2014. Senior marketers' insights into the challenges of social media implementation in large organisations: assessing generic and electronic orientation models as potential solutions. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(7/8):713-746.

Valtakoski, A. 2015. Initiation of buyer seller relationship. The importance of intangibility, trust and mitigation strategies. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 44:107-118.

Van Der Walt, N. 2024. Alumni Relations Office. *NWU&U*. https://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/i-media/nwu&uENG022024/0012.html

Varey, R.J. 2002. *Relationship Marketing: Dialogue and network in the E-Commerce Era.* New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S. & Young,T. 2018. Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15 year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 18(48):1-18.*

Venturino, M. & Hsu, Y-C. 2022. Using WhatsApp to Enhance Distance Education at the University of South Africa. *Tech Trends*, 66: 401-404.

Verma, V., Sharma, D. & Sheth, J. 2016. Does relationship marketing matter in online retailing? A meta-analytic approach. *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science*, 44(2):206-217.

Vidal, D.D. & Pittz, T.G. 2018. Education beyond the classroom: alumni giving and the value of campus culture. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-15.

Vollan, B., Henning, K. & Staewa, D. 2017. Do campaigns featuring impact evaluations increase donations? Evidence from a survey experiment. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 9(8):1-19. doi: 10.1080/19439342.2017.1377752

Voss, G.B. & Voss, Z.G. 1997. Implementing a RM program: a case study and managerial implications; *Journal of Services Marketing*, 11(4):278-298.

Waeraas. A. & Solbakk, M.N. 2008. Defining the essence of a university: lessons from higher education branding. *Higher Education*, 57:449-462.

Walaba, A.A. 2014. Relevance of alumni organisations to the students and the university: A case study of Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 15(22):1-50.

Wallis, W.W. 2016. *Engaging alumni in private higher education to develop alumni relations*. Potchefstroom: North-West University. (Thesis - Masters).

Walter, E. 1995. Cambridge Dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com>about-us>

Walter, N., Asgari, O., & Cleff, T. 2022. What role does the brand play? Measuring the impact of customer-based brand equity on the selection of MBA programs at Dutch business schools. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2022.2048430

Wang, X.L. 2011. Relationship or revenue: Potential management conflicts between customer relationship management and hotel revenue management. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 31(3):864-874.

Watts, C., Burton, S. & Freeman, B. 2020. 'The last line of marketing': Covert tobacco marketing tactics as revealed by former tobacco industry employees. *An International Journal for Research*, Policy and Practice, 1-12.

Webb Farley, K.E. 2016. Can private donations help public universities build bridges over troubled waters? Practical lessons for administrators and donors. *Public Organization Review,* 18:175-190.

Weerasinghe, I.M.S. & Fernando, R.L.S. 2018. Critical factors affecting students' satisfaction with higher education in Sri Lanka. *Quality Assurance in Education: An International Perspective*, 26(1): 115-130. https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-04-2017-0014

Weerts, D.J. & Ronca, J.M. 2008. Characteristics alumni donors who volunteer at their alma mater. *Research in Higher Education*, 49(3):274-292.

Weerts, D.J. & Sandman, L.R. 2010. Community engagement & boundary spanning roles at research universities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81(6):702-727.

Wiggins Johnson, J., Thomas, V. & Peck, J. 2010. Do specialized MBA programs cultivate alumni relationships and donations? *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 20(1):119-134.

Wiid, J. & Diggines, C. 2015. *Marketing Research*. Cape Town: Juta & Company.

Wilde, S. 2011. *Customer Knowledge Management: Improving customer relationship through knowledge application*. London: Springer.

Wilson, C. & Callister, M. 2018. Everything is not Pleasantville: reframing public relations encroachment as workgroup autonomy in higher education. *The Public Relations Journal*, 11(3):1-22.

Wisconsin Alumni Association. Madison, Wisconsin. https://www. uwalumni.com

Wong, H., Wong, R. & Leung, S. 2018. Relationship Marketing in Tertiary Education: An empirical study of relationship commitment and student loyalty in Hong Kong. *International Business Research*, 11(2):205-221.

Worthington, S. & Horne, S. 1998. A new RM model and its application in the affinity credit card market*. International Journal of Bank Marketing*,16(1):39-44.

Wu, S.H., Huang, S.C.T. & Tsai, C.Y.D. 2022. Lifelong good soldiers of higher education institutions: driving factors and obstructions of alumni loyalty. *Service Business*, 16:331–357. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11628-021-00475-4

Wu, S-I. & Lu, C-L. 2012. The relationship between CRM, RM and business performance: A study of the hotel industry in Taiwan. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 31:276-285.

Yildiz, S.M. & Kara, A. 2017. A unidimensional instrument for measuring internal marketing concept in the higher education sector: IM-11 scale. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 25(3):343-361. https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-02-2016-0009

Yilmaz, K. 2013. Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Traditions: epistemological, theoretical and methodological differences. *European Journal of Education,* 48(2): 311-325.https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12014

Yousaf, A., Mishra, A. and Bashir, M. 2018. Brand trust, institutional commitment, and their impact on student loyalty: evidence for higher education in India. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(4): 878–891. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2018.1558441.

Zboja, J.J., Jackson, R.W. & Grimes-Rose, M. 2020. Attitude towards charitable businesses: an expectancy theory perspective of volunteerism: the roles of powerlessness, attitudes toward charitable organization, and attitude to helping others. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 17:493-507.

Zheng, B., Hall, M.A., Dugan, E., Kidd, K.E. & Levine, D. 2002. Development of a Scale to measure patients' trust in Health Insurers. *Health Services Research*, 37(1):185-200.

Zhou, Y & Wu, M.L. 2022. Reported methodological challenges in Empirical Mixed Methods articles: A review on JMMR and IJMRA. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 2022(16):47-63.

Zikmund, G.W., Babin, B.J., Carr, J.C. & Griffin, M. 2013. *Business Research Methods*. 9th ed. Canada: Cengage Learning.

ANNEXURE A: ETHICS CLEARANCE

NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za

Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)

31 August 2020

Prof M Potgieter
Per e-mail
Dear Prof Potgieter,

EMS-REC FEEDBACK: 28082020
Student: Matthysen, AM (24895989)(NWU-00831-20-A4)
Applicant: Prof M Potgieter – PhD in Marketing Management

Your ethics application on*, Relationship marketing as foundation for fostering loyal alumni: The case of TVET College in the Western Cape,* which served on the EMS-REC meeting of 28 August 2020, refers.

Outcome:

Approved as a minimal risk study. A number **NWU-00831-20-A4** is given for one year of ethics clearance.

Due to the Covid-19 lock down ethics clearance for applications that involve data collection or any form of contact with participants are subject to the restrictions imposed by the South African government.

Kind regards,

Mark Rathbone

Digitally signed by Mark Rathbone
DN: cn=Mark Rathbone, o=North-West University, ou=Business management, email=mark.rathbone@nwu.ac.za, c=ZA
Date: 2020.09.08 13:42:45 +02'00'

Prof Mark Rathbone
Chairperson: Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)

ANNEXURE B: INTERVIEW GUIDE



INTERVIEW GUIDE: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Qualitative strategy

These one-on-one interviews are aimed at gaining insight and knowledge on how to establish, develop and maintain long-term relationships for fostering loyal alumni in the TVET sector, specifically in the Western Cape. The objective of this research is to develop a proposed model which can be used by the management of TVET colleges to develop alumni to the benefit of all stakeholders. The semi-structured interview approach has been adopted and this approach is based on having predetermined discussion themes developed in advance. However, you will be allowed some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to you. The discussion themes will be introduced in a standardised and straightforward manner and the same set of themes will be used for all interviews in the same order or sequence.

Participants: Marketing team, management, current students and graduate students

Role players in the education group have been identified as being significant for this study. Firstly, members of the management team of Northlink College as a Higher Educational Institution is to be interviewed in an attempt to gain understanding on how they perceive the importance of maintaining ongoing relationships with stakeholders, which can result in alumni giving and supporting. Secondly, members of the marketing team is to be interviewed with the objective of attaining a comprehensive understanding of their perception of the value and importance of the brand: 'Northlink College'. Thirdly, graduated alumni is to be interviewed to establish their ideas on fostering alumni loyalty.

By agreeing to the interview, you confirm that you have read the above description of this research study; agrees that this is a low risk study; that you are aware of the purpose of the study; that you voluntarily agree to take part in this study; and by continuing with the interview you consent for the information to be used in aggregate form.

Resources required

A suitable venue would be required for conducting the in-depth interviews. Ideally the venue should be on the Tygerberg Campus of Northlink College. The researcher will be conducting the in-depth interviews with the participants. A note pad and audio recorder will be used during the interview session with prior approval of the participant.

1. Introduction Phase

Good day, my name is Annemie Matthysen, a research student from the North-West University, Mafikeng Campus. This is a one-on-one interview aimed at gaining firsthand information on your perception of the role of RM to foster loyal alumni in the TVET sector. It would be appreciated if you could please avail yourself for an uninterrupted 15 minutes for this interview and the information provided is regarded as strictly confidential and will be used entirely for research purposes.

Please note that this interview is recorded to ensure that your comments and contributions are adequately captured for processing purposes. However, your name will not be attached to any comments, views presented and/or perceptions expressed.
Do you have any questions in this regard before we continue?

2. Interview Phase

[Ensuring that adequate notes are taken and the tape recorder is recording correctly.]

❖ **Demographic data**

1. What is your current position in the College?
2. How long have you been in this position?
3. Could you please tell me about your career/interest in the marketing of this college.

[Explain any previous experience related to your current position?]

We are going to talk about how different components of Relationship Marketing can influence loyal alumni. Please respond to the following questions as per your perception.

❖ **Student experiences: Prompts**

NC's website and social media; students' academic experience; the facilities and activities; language barriers; student transition; staff's orientation of/at this college.

- **College identity: Prompts**

  The traditions and values; brand building; loyal and long-term relationships; integrity and ethical values at/of this college.

- **The culture and values of this college: Prompts**

  Compatibility of the values; community concern; students' values importance; behavioural demonstration of values; student expectations of this college.

- **Financial support: Prompts**

  Financial aid; financial burdens; students and family; students' future support of this college.

- **Community engagement: Prompts**

  Influencing community engagement and volunteering; the commitment; events for stakeholders; your contribution towards this college.

Many of these RM variables as discussed above, need to be maintained for mutually beneficial long-term relationships with stakeholders. With these efforts, the HEI's need to build loyal alumni. The following section is devoted to relationship attributes, including satisfaction, trust, commitment and finally loyalty.

- **Satisfaction: Prompts**

  Shared cultural values; peer-mentoring; improving student satisfaction; long-term relationships

- **Trust: Prompts**

  Stakeholders' interests; sincerity and reliability; trust in information; integrity

- **Commitment: Prompts**

  Lasting relationships; recommending this college; emotional commitment

- **Loyalty: Prompts**

  Sense of loyalty; to earn long-term loyalty; experiences versus expectations; students returning to this college

❖ **Concluding the interview**

Thank you for your valuable time. Is there anything else you would like to add before we conclude this interview? Should you want to contact me at a later stage, my contact number is 0723758156 or email: annemie11m@gmail.com.

Thank you very much for participating in the interview

ANNEXURE C: SURVEY

Dear Participant

My name is Annemie Matthysen and I am conducting research on relationship marketing as the foundation for fostering loyal alumni. Alumni include all students who completed their studies with an institution of higher education and represents a very important group of stakeholders for any such institution. I believe that you will also play as a future stakeholder in the wellbeing of this institution and all its students, as well as the local community. As such, the aim of this study is to develop a proposed model which can be used by the management of TVET colleges to establish and maintain alumni to the benefit for all partners involved. The data you give will be used to achieve this aim hence your contribution is highly valued and appreciated.
Please assist me by completing the following questionnaire. The questionnaire is userfriendly and should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All responses are confidential and no personal questions linking you to this specific questionnaire (e.g. name, address, student number) are included. The results will only be outlined in the form of aggregate statistical data. Your participation is strictly voluntary. The demographic questions will only be used for sample description purposes. Thank you - your assistance and contribution are highly appreciated.

Annemie Matthysen
eMail: amatthysen@northlink.co.za

Cell phone: +27 723758156

Prof M Potgieter
eMail: Potgieter.Marius@nwu.ac.za
annemie11m@gmail
Telephone: 018 389 2615
North-West University
School of Management Sciences

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed that it is a low risk study and I am aware of the purpose of the study. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study and by continuing and completing this questionnaire, I consent for the information being used in aggregate form.

Thank you very much for participating!

QUESTIONNAIRE
Please complete the following by indicating an **X** in the appropriate box.

SECTION A: CANDIDATE PROFILE

The purpose of the demographical descriptors used is to do a comparative analysis in order to establish if there are any concurrences and/or contradictions concerning the constructs of relationship marketing and community engagement and alumni loyalty and the demographic descriptors included in this study. The demographic descriptors are also used for further statistical analysis purposes and will not be used for profiling purposes.

A1	**Gender**	Male	**1**
		Female	**2**
		Non-binary	**3**
A2	**Age category**	18 – 28	**1**
		29 – 39	**2**
		40 - 50	**3**
		Above 50	**4**
A3	**Which is your preferred form of communication to keep you enlightened about the activities of the college?**	Email from college	**1**
		Newsletter	**2**
		SMS	**3**
		what's up	**4**
		Internet website	**5**
		Social media	**6**
A4	**Study level**	N4	**1**
		N5	**2**
		N6	**3**
A5	**Field of study**	Business Management	**1**
		Human Resources	**2**
		Financial Management	**3**
		Marketing Management	**4**
		Sport	**5**
		Drama	**6**
		Public Management	**7**
		Tourism	**8**
		Catering	**9**

A6	**Enrolment type and funding**	Full-time: NSFAS BURSARY	**1**
		Full-time: SELF-FUNDED	**2**
		Full-time: BURSARY (other)	**3**
		Part-time student: BURSARY (other)	**4**
		Part-time student: SELF-FUNDED	**5**
A7	**What made you choose this TVET college?**	Financial support	**1**
		Job opportunities/internships	**2**
		College facilities	**3**
		Student life	**4**
		Recommended by friends/family	**5**
		Word-of-mouth	**6**
		Accommodation	**7**
		Academic achievements	**8**

SECTION B: RELATIONSHIP MARKETING INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Refer to the following statements and indicate your level of agreement in the appropriate block/box.

KEY: SA=Strongly agree (1); **A**=Agree (2); **N**=Neutral (3); **D**=Disagree (4); **SD**=Strongly disagree (5)

Statement		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
STUDENT EXPERIENCES		**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
SE1	This college provides all students with a positive academic experience.					
SE2	This college develops students' problem solving skills.					
SE3	I received support in the transition from high school to college.					
SE4	The website and social media of this college is user-friendly, appealing and informative.					
SE5	The quality of interactions between the lecturers and students make me excited about learning.					
SE6	I acquired the ability to work in teams.					
SE7	I participated in social events organised by the student organisation.					
SE8	The administrative personnel are service orientated, positive and friendly.					

SE9	College facilities such as accommodation, sport, catering and leisure activities' availability.					
SE10	This college exposes students to job shadowing to learn from doing to gain practical experience.					
SE11	I experience language barriers while engaging in class activities.					
COLLEGE IDENTITY						

CI1	The traditions and values of this college are well communicated to students.					
CI2	This college goes out of its way to build a reputable image/brand so that a student wants to become a 'lifelong friend'.					
CI3	As a student, I am proud to 'belong' to this college to continue with a long-term relationship.					
CI4	This college promotes a culture of integrity, loyalty and ethical values.					
NC CULTURE AND VALUES						
CV1	This college makes an effort to make students aware that education is the most important tool for development, such as self, the community, and South Africa.					
CV2	The values of this college (accountability, transparency and lifelong learning) are similar to those of the students.					
CV3	This college teaches us joy of giving to others and promotes culture and religious.					
CV4	This college enables students to reach their personal goals.					
CV5	Students regard 'service quality' as an important value.					
CV6	Students value the importance of education.					
CV7	This college values people and relationships.					
FINANCIAL SUPPORT						
FS1	I received leadership and mentorship for counselling, admission and financial aid.					
FS2	As a student, I am concerned about my education-related expenses.					

FS3	I support my family with money matters.					
FS4	Total NSFAS bursary was awarded to me.					
FS5	I was/am earning while learning.					
FS6	I will contribute financially towards this college when I start earning an income.					
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT						
CE1	I want to attend events (reunions, social clubs/sport) of this college to meet different stakeholders.					
CE2	Students have the desire to 'give back' to the college.					
CE3	As a member of my community, I am willing be take part in unpaid activities, called volunteering (such as tutoring to children).					
CE4	I want to be involved in my community by being helpful and kind to others.					
CE5	This college ought to present events that contribute positively to the community.					
CE6	I will contribute my time and expertise towards this college and the community after I complete my studies.					

SECTION C: RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Please indicate your level of agreement in the appropriate block/box. For each one of the following statements.

KEY: SA= Strongly agree (1); **A**=Agree (2); **N**=Neutral (3); **D**=Disagree (4); **SD**=Strongly disagree (5).

Statement		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
SATISFACTION		**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
S1	Positive shared cultural and cooperative influence my overall satisfaction with the college.					
S2	As a student, peer-mentoring would improve my satisfaction with this college.					
S3	I am academically active, because I belief in life-long learning.					
S4	As a student, I want to be identified with a successful brand, such as this college.					

TRUST						
T1	This college teaches us how to maintain personal and professional life balance.					
T2	The college react quickly and efficiently to students' needs.					
T3	The college shows friendliness, courtesy and goodwill towards its students.					
T4	Students' perceptions of this college's sincerity lead to greater student trust.					
T5	Students and the college exchange useful and valuable information regularly.					
T6	As a student, I have confidence in the integrity and reliability of this college.					
COMMITMENT						
C1	I want to receive regular information on the activities of this college.					
C2	I feel emotionally committed to this college because of my education and development.					
C3	I do/will recommend this college to friends and relatives.					
C4	I want to enrol and will actively participate in an alumni activities.					
LOYAL ALUMNI						
L1	I believe this college deserves my loyalty.					
L2	I want to be in a 'relationship' with this college after graduation.					
L3	I would gladly return to this college to attend other courses.					
L4	My college experience compare favourably with my expectations.					
L5	As a student, I value the support services (IT/academic advising/learning) rendered to me by this college.					

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE.
YOUR CONTRIBUTION IS HIGHLY APPRECIATED.

ANNEXURE D: ENGLISH EDITING CERTIFICATE

To whom it may concern

Cecile van Zyl
Language editing and translation
Cell: 072 389 3450
Email: Cecile.vanZyl@nwu.ac.za

11 November 2024

Dear Mr / Ms

Re: Language editing of dissertation (Relationship marketing as a foundation to foster loyal alumni: The case of a TVET college in the Western Cape)

I hereby declare that I language edited the above-mentioned dissertation by Ms AM Matthysen (student number: 24895989).

Please feel free to contact me should you have any enquiries.

Kind regards



Cecile van Zyl

Language practitioner

BA (PU for CHE); BA honours (NWU); MA (NWU)
SATI number: 1002391