

Reference groups as external influence in choosing a private higher education institution

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Abstract

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) play a crucial role in South Africa as there is a growing need for higher education. However, these institutions face numerous challenges in the current tough economic climate. This qualitative research aimed to investigate the influence of reference groups on consumer's decision-making process when choosing a PHEI. The literature review revealed very little research has been conducted on how reference groups influence consumer's decision-making when choosing a PHEI. This addresses a significant gap that the research aimed to analyse. This study used a qualitative research design in the form of 23 semi-structured interviews. The target population of this study included students enrolled in three PHEIs and a non-probability snowball sampling technique was used to draw the sample or until data saturation had been reached per institution. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify broad themes and patterns, after which categories and codes were created. ATLAS.ti 22 supported the qualitative data analysis process. The findings indicated that reference groups, especially family members, played crucial decision-making roles. The findings can inform and lead to more effective marketing strategies and policies.

Keywords: *consumer behaviour, decision-making, PHEI, reference groups*

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1. Introduction

Private higher education providers are pivotal in South Africa as there is a growing need for higher education. The number of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI) in South Africa is relatively high; 93, according to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2022). In 2022, a total of 752 003 full-time learners enrolled to write the final National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination, and 580 555 full-time learners attained the NSC qualification. A total of 278 814 candidates achieved admission to Bachelor studies, 193 357 to diploma studies and 108 159 achieved access to higher certificate studies (DBE, 2023). For the year 2023, a total of 715 719 full Time candidates enrolled to write the NSC examination, whereof 572 983 full time candidates attained an NSC. A total of 282 894 learners achieved admission to Bachelor studies, which is a 40.9% increase from 38.4% from the year 2022. Also, a total of 470 770 candidates (68.1%), who achieved admission to Bachelor and Diploma studies, are eligible to register for studies at higher education institutions (DBE, 2024). It is evident from these numbers that there is a demand for private higher education and that the demand is only increasing as the numbers are increasing every year. The state-owned institutions cannot accommodate these numbers.

The global rise of PHEI has garnered praise from many, being viewed as an opportunity to enhance competition in the sector and thereby elevate the quality of offered programs (Teixeira et al., 2017). However, these PHEIs face numerous challenges in a tough economic climate. For instance, the challenge of a prevailing perception that they primarily function for profit (CHE, 2022), while it is widely acknowledged or apparent simply by examining the term "private higher education institutions," that these establishments do not receive any financial support from the government, unlike public universities in South Africa. Another challenge is the fact that the public's understanding is occasionally shaped by unverified perceptions rooted in anecdotal information and a longstanding tradition that upholds the perceived value of public universities (CHE, 2022). PHEIs thus face significant challenges in securing a modest market share, given that public perception is deeply entrenched in historical traditions.

This study investigates reference groups as an important influence on consumer behaviour when choosing a PHEI in South Africa. After an extensive review of the literature, it is revealed that there is a prevalent gap in the literature. Little research has been done on how

reference groups influence a consumer's decision-making when choosing a PHEI. In previous literature, studies have focused on PHEI in South Africa but not specifically on what influences a consumer's behaviour in their decision-making process (Borghini et al., 2016; Mabizela, 2002; Stander & Herman, 2017). This addresses a prevalent gap that this study analysed. As stated by Kotler et al. (2022, p. 170), "*marketing information has no value until managers use it to make better decisions. The information gathered through research must thus reach the appropriate marketing managers at the right time*". Therefore, it is very important to understand that formal studies of specific marketing situations and decisions are necessary for managers to receive the correct information on time. This study can thus inform the management and stakeholders of PHEIs in South Africa.

This study not only aimed to examine the current marketing literature but also to provide PHEIs in South Africa with a deeper understanding of their market, which can lead to more effective and fitting marketing strategies and policies that will enable PHEIs to target a larger market. The theoretical construct for this study is consumer behaviour, with reference groups as the main external influence on consumer behaviour. Specifically, the main research question is, "*what is the role of reference groups as an external influence on consumer behaviour that should be considered by PHEIs in South Africa when targeting the available market?*" The secondary research question is, "*what other influences on consumer behaviour must be considered in combination with reference groups by PHEIs in South Africa when targeting the available market?*"

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of consumer behaviour is a constantly evolving field that undergoes changes over time (Babin & Harris, 2018:20), therefore numerous definitions of consumer behaviour are available throughout the literature. According to Mothersbaugh et al. (2020, p. 6), consumer behaviour is "*the study of individuals, groups, or organizations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society.*" Several consumer behaviour models over the years highlight reference groups specifically as an important influence on consumer behaviour (Babin et al., 2017; Fahy & Jobber, 2015; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Kerin & Hartley, 2017; Mothersbaugh et al., 2020; Schiffman & Wisenblit,

2019). According to Solomon et al. (2022, p. 215), reference groups are “*actual or imaginary individual or group that has a significant effect on an individual’s evaluations, aspirations, or behaviour.*” According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019, p. 243), they “*serve as sources of influence, norms and comparison for individuals’ opinions, values and behaviour*”. As group can be two or more individuals who share a set of norms, values, or beliefs and have certain implicitly or explicitly defined relationships to one another such that their behaviours are interdependent, a reference group, however, can be a group whose presumed perspectives or values are being used by an individual as the basis for his or her current behaviour. Reference groups are therefore used by consumers in terms of perspectives and values, as a reference for their behaviour (Mothersbaugh et al., 2020). As there are various definitions of a reference group throughout the literature, only a few definitions were examined as reflected in table 1.

Table 1

Definitions of reference groups over the years

Definition	Author(s)
Formal and informal groups influence the buying behaviour of an individual.	Lamb et al. (2015, p. 111)
An actual or imaginary institution consisting of an individual or groups of individuals whose presumed values and perspectives exert significant relevance on the behaviour of consumers.	Babin and Harris (2018, p. 158-159)
Groups that serve as sources of comparison, influence and norms for an individual’s opinions, values and behaviours.	Schiffman and Wisenblit, (2019, p. 243)
A group whose presumed perspectives or values are used by an individual as the basis for his or her current behaviour.	Mothersbaugh et al. (2020, p. 220)
Two or more individuals who share a common purpose, identity or ethos, are usually used by its members as a point of reference to evaluate the correctness of actions, beliefs and attitudes.	Smith (2020, p. 158)
A group of individuals that consumers compare themselves to or with for information regarding behaviour, attitudes or values.	Hoyer et al. (2021, p. 247)
Direct (face-to-face interactions) or indirect points of comparison or reference in forming a person’s attitudes or behaviour. All the groups that have a direct or indirect effect on a person’s beliefs, decisions, and behaviour.	Kotler et al. (2022, p. 184)

Mothersbaugh et al. (2020) state that most individuals usually belong to several groups and would like to belong to various other groups as well. When an individual is actively involved with a particular group, it functions as his or her reference group. When the situation changes, the individual can base their decision on how to behave, in an entirely different group, which will then become his or her reference group instead. Therefore, individuals belong to several groups simultaneously, but usually use only one group as their primary point of reference in any given situation. According to Smith (2020), real or just imagined group pressure, especially due to cohesion and the perceived expertise or source credibility of a group, can result in a change in behaviour or beliefs or the reinforcement and sustenance of behaviour or beliefs within an individual.

When the intended audience is well respected and highly thought of by an individual, the message they portray would be more likely to be believed (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Kotler et al. (2022) also highlight that reference group influences are the strongest when it is from an individual whom the consumer respects. Therefore, Lamb et al. (2015) opine that reference groups possess the “social power”, which is the power to influence an individual’s actions. The activities, values and goals of certain reference groups can directly influence an individual’s behaviour. Therefore, marketers focus on the three most important implications of reference groups, which are: (1) the reference groups serve as an information source and can influence perceptions; (2) it can affect the individual’s aspiration levels; and (3) the reference group’s norms will either strain or stimulate consumer behaviour (Lamb et al., 2015). The importance of reference groups is also highlighted through its various functions, such as exposing consumers to new behaviours and lifestyles, influencing the attitudes and self-concept of consumers and creating pressures to conform to what will ultimately affect the consumers’ product and brand choices (Kotler et al., 2022).

Consumers can relate to three types of reference groups: (1) aspirational, (2) associative and (3) dissociative. Aspirational reference groups are the groups of individuals that consumers admire and wish to be like but are not currently a member of. Associative reference groups are groups of individuals to which the consumers currently belong and lastly, dissociative reference groups are the reference groups that consumers do not want to emulate or be part of (Babin & Harris, 2018; Hoyer et al., 2021).

In a study by Park and Lessig (1977, p. 102), a reference group was defined as “*an actual or imaginary individual or group conceived of having significant relevance upon an*

individual's evaluations, aspirations, or behaviour". This definition identified three motivational influences of reference groups: informational, value-expressive, and utilitarian. An individual may use an informational reference group in two different ways. The first is when the individual is actively searching for information from a group with the appropriate expertise, and the second is when the individual makes an inference by observing the behaviour of significant others. This reference group influence is similar to Kelman's internalisation process (1961). Information influences entail being accepted (internalised) only when perceived as enhancing their knowledge of an environment and/or the ability to cope with some aspect of the environment (Kelman, 1961). The value expressive reference group influence relates to the motive to enhance or support the self-concept that an individual has. Therefore, an individual would be expected to associate with positive referents and/or dissociate from negative referents. Two different processes characterise the value-expressive reference group influence. First, an individual utilises reference groups to express themselves or uplift their ego; second, a value-expressive reference group influences an individual because of their liking for that group. With this reference group influence, an individual's response to adopt or accept the recommendations from the reference group is irrelevant to the group. The utilitarian reference group influence is like the compliance process. Utilitarian influence is the compliance process in which an individual is willing to satisfy a certain group's expectations to obtain praise or avoid punishment (Kelman, 1961).

According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019), there are only two types of influence from reference groups, namely: (1) normative and (2) comparative. Normative influence is when an individual learns and adopts a certain group's norms, values and behaviours. This includes groups to which an individual naturally belongs such as family, peers and community members. Therefore, normative influence generally occurs among members from the same socioeconomic group as the individual being influenced. On the other hand, comparative influence occurs when an individual compares themselves with someone they respect and admire and, therefore, adopts some of their values and usually imitates their behaviours. Comparative influence generally appears from two individuals from different socioeconomic groups, with both parties aware of the influence (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019), the degree of influence that a reference group can have on an individual's behaviour fully depends on the individual, product and social factors, which include conformity, the group's power, the level of expertise of the individual (being

influenced) and the conspicuousness of the relevant factor. Different reference groups can influence other individuals' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours at certain types or under certain circumstances. Power groups usually bring about behaviours in individuals but do not change attitudes. Therefore, it is added that individuals may conform to the behaviour of powerful individuals or groups but will usually not change their attitudes or internalise their choices (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019).

Product expertise examines an individual's level of expertise and its influence on the likelihood of advice-seeking. Therefore, it is stated that when an individual has little or no experience with a certain product, service or brand, they are more likely to seek advice or an example from others. However, an individual with first-hand experience can easily refer back to the detailed information he or she has and is less likely to be influenced by the advice or example of others (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). According to Bicchieri (2017), different individuals can influence decisions, depending on the specific circumstances. It is further noted that a reference network can be regarded as the range of individuals that an individual cares about when making decisions. This can include an individual's family members, religious authorities, co-workers, bystanders, or any other individual who has the power to influence his or her choice. Mothersbaugh et al. (2020) added that reference group influence can take three forms: informational, normative and identification. Informational influence occurs when an individual uses the behaviours and opinions of reference group members as useful information to make decisions. Normative influence, also called utilitarian influence, occurs when an individual strives to fulfil group expectations to gain a direct reward or avoid a sanction (Fisher & Ackerman, 1998). Identification influence can also be referred to as value-expressive influence. It usually occurs when individuals have internalised the group's values and norms and use these factors to guide their behaviours without any thought or expectation of reference group sanctions or rewards. Therefore, the individual has then accepted the group's values as their own and will behave in a manner that is consistent with the group's values because theirs and the group's values are ultimately the same.

3. Research Methods

According to Burns and Veeck (2020, p. 62), a research design is “a master plan that specifies the methods that will be used to collect and analyse the information needed for a research project.” The choice of research design can be seen as the overall strategy for a

researcher to get the information wanted (Ghauri et al., 2020). This article used a qualitative research design in the form of semi-structured interviews. It also utilised an exploratory research design and followed a social constructivism paradigm. One of the reasons for choosing a qualitative research design was due to the description by Saunders et al. (2019, p. 179) of qualitative research as: “*a study that studies a participants’ meanings to develop a conceptual framework and theoretical contribution*”, as well as a deeper understanding of a construct (Quinlan et al., 2015). Because an exploratory research design is characterized by its flexibility and evolving approach to understand a marketing phenomenon (Malhotra et al., 2020) and a qualitative research approach usually utilises an exploratory research design as it focuses on developing a deeper understanding of a construct (Quinlan et al., 2015), this approach was deemed appropriate for achieving the research objectives of this study.

The target population of this study included students enrolled in three PHEIs in South Africa. For this study, no sampling frame was used since the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 does not permit PHEIs in South Africa to disclose the personal information of their enrolled students. This study utilised a non-probability snowball sampling technique to draw the sample. The number of participants was 23 from three private higher education institutions until data saturation was reached. Data saturation in interviews is recognized when consistent themes emerge, repetition occurs, and no new information or codes are identified. The researcher relied on indicators such as informational redundancy and judgment to determine when data saturation had been reached. The PHEIs were Centurion Academy, Stadio and Akademia. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the primary data, and the interviews were each conducted on a one-on-one basis. The participants were approached via email (a personal invitation letter) or on online platforms. Participants received emails that confirmed the interview time and place of the interview a few days before the interview commenced. The interviews took place between July and October 2022.

The researcher obtained the relevant ethical clearance permission documentation as needed. Interviews were scheduled with willing participants via emails and telephone calls to ensure transparency from the start. The researcher also conducted the interviews in a neutral setting while recording the interview to limit the possibility of the researcher's bias intruding into the data. To eliminate bias in the study, the researcher avoided making assumptions and the researcher showed utmost respect to the views of all the research participants. Thus, opinions from respondents were taken as they were. To further ensure ethical behavior, the

researcher took as many notes as possible to provide a true version of the interview in the transcription and these notes and recordings after interviews were examined by an independent researcher.

Before every interview started, the researcher did the following: read through an informed consent document, which every participant had to sign; outlined the statements that participants are providing consent to conduct the interviews willingly and the participant can stop the interview at any stage if needed; showed the participant the researcher's ethical clearance document received as permission to conduct the interviews and finally asked permission to record the interview for transcription purposes after the interview.

To safeguard participant confidentiality and data privacy, stringent measures such as anonymizing data, using secure storage methods, and obtaining informed consent were implemented throughout the research process. The main objective of the principle of credibility is to demonstrate that the research undertaken was accurately identified and described, which assisted the researcher in providing boundaries for the study. The researcher made thorough notes during each interview in order to assist with the analysis of the data. The researcher tried to listen attentively to what the participants said during the interviews and the participants were always free to express their views and opinions. As transferability is achieved by detailed description and adherence to the procedures and process of data collection and data analysis, the researcher complied with this requirement by detailing the data collection procedures and the method of analysis. Dependability refers to the reliability of the research. Hence, the complete description of the methods employed in the study increased the reliability of the data collection and analysis of the data. Dependability was also achieved by consulting with an independent researcher or consultant to verify the themes and categories as well as the data analysis processes in ATLAS.ti 22. Confirmability means that the study should be free from bias. By making use of an independent researcher or consultant, subjectivity was reduced, and the accuracy of the researcher's data analysis increased.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed using computer programs like Descript and Happyscribe. Afterwards, a thematic analysis was conducted to investigate and identify broad themes and patterns. For each theme, categories and codes were created. The process involved the researcher identifying similar topics and clustering them together. The researcher then distinguished major, unique, and/or previously excluded topics from these

clusters. The clustered topics were converted into categories using descriptive wording, and related topics were grouped together.

After the coding and frequency identification, the researcher visualised the data using ATLAS.ti 22, which leads to developing interpretations. As ATLAS.ti 22 is computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), it supports the qualitative data analysis process. ATLAS.ti 22 is a powerful software to help a researcher with the data analysis of unstructured and non-numerical data. In ATLAS.ti 22 there are also some integrated tools that allow the researcher to quantify the qualitative analysis. This can help a researcher to clarify the steps that led to the interpretation of the data. It is necessary to help with the transparency and coherency of the qualitative analysis of the data.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 2 shows the different themes, categories and codes that were identified during the research. The categories revolved around the influence of reference groups or personal preference, the type of reference groups, and whether the participants' reference groups had previously completed studies at a PHEI. These categories were created to understand whether participants were influenced by reference groups or if it was their own personal preferences. The second category aimed to identify the most important reference groups in the participants' lives and the third category was to determine if any of the reference groups had already attended a PHEI. This was done to measure the level of influence that the researcher was investigating.

Table 2

Reference groups theme, categories and codes

Theme	Category	Code
Reference Groups	Reference group influence or only personal preference	Reference group influence
		Personal preference (influence)
	Type of reference group	Family
		Friends
		Other
Reference group previous studies at PHEI	Yes	
	No	

The following tables and figures examine the frequencies from the categories and codes of the theme reference groups. This theme entailed two questions from the interview guide. The study used the first question first to determine if the participant had experienced any influence from any reference group when choosing to study at a PHEI in South Africa and then to determine which reference group influenced the participant. The second question was to determine if any participant from the reference groups had previously studied at a PHEI in South Africa.

Q1: Did anyone in your reference groups (including family, friends, peers, etc.) influence you to study at a PHEI? If yes, please specify.

Table 3

Reference group frequencies

Theme 2: Reference groups and personal influence		
Category	Code	Frequencies
Reference group influence or only	Reference group influence	F= 19
personal preference	Personal preference (influence)	F= 4
Only one code is mentioned per participant		N= 23

The first category was established to categorise the participants into two groups: if any reference group influenced them to study at a PHEI, and if not, was it their personal preference? Most participants mentioned that at least one or more reference groups influenced their decision to study at a PHEI, which led to 83% of the participants (19 out of 23) indicating this. Only 17% (4 out of 23) were not influenced by any reference group and said it was their preference. The following statements confirm this view:

“My parents preferred it, and that was just that. I did not know anything about private institutions until they came to me and told me about them; I only thought there were Tuks and UJ and a few other places out there. But when I heard of it, I was like yes, we want that option.” (Participant 9)

“Yes, my dad had influenced my choice to study here; he motivated me to study here because then I can study in my language and in a community that has more or less the same values, traditions and opinions as me.” (Participant 22)

“No. No one influenced me to study here. It was my choice.” (Participant 21)

The second category showed that if the participants mentioned that a reference group did influence their decision to study at a PHEI, which reference groups it entailed.

Table 4

Type of reference group influence frequencies

Theme 2: Reference groups and personal influence		
Category	Code	Frequencies
Type of reference group	Family	F= 17
	Friends	F= 2
	Other	F= 3
More than one code was mentioned per participant; 4 had no influence		N= 22

For this question, participants mentioned more than one reference group, which changed the number of times codes were identified from the usual 23 to only 22, as four respondents from the previous category mentioned that they experienced no influence from any reference groups. Thus, they were excluded from this category automatically. Most participants (17 out of 22) indicated that the type of reference group that influenced them to study at a PHEI was their family members, which led to a 77% for the code family. 14% (3 out of 22) mentioned that other individuals from various other reference groups influenced them. Lastly, only 9% (2 out of 22) of the participants experienced the influence of their friends to study at a PHEI. The following statements from participants confirmed this:

“My parents told me I should study here because it is the closest to our house and if you study further away from home, there will then be more costs involved to pay for accommodation and so forth.” (Participant 4)

“Yes, my brother did influence me a lot. He told me that it was better at a private institution. He could compare it with his previous studies because he studied for half a year at a public institution, but he was overflowed with work, and he did not get the necessary attention and help. At the private, there is individual attention and support. Also, last year, when I was matric, I asked the previous year's matric students with whom I still had contact if it was easier for them to go to a private institution. For example, some went to Sol-tech compared to the other students who went to Tuks and UCT, and they said yes, it is easier for them because the classes are smaller and there is much support.” (Participant 2)

The last category for theme 2 entails question 2 on whether the participants' reference groups have studied at a PHEI. The results are shown in table 5.

Q2: Has anyone in your reference groups (including family, friends, peers, etc.) studied at a PHEI? If yes, please specify.

Table 5

Reference group previous studies at PHEI frequencies

Theme 2: Reference groups and personal influence		
Category	Code	Frequencies
Reference group previous studies at PHEI	Yes	F= 15
	No	F= 8
Only one code is mentioned per participant		N= 23

15 out of the 23 participants (65%) had an individual or more than one from their reference groups that had studied at PHEIs in the past, and only 35% (8 out of 23) of them had no one in any reference group that has ever studied at a PHEI before. Statements from the participants confirming these data:

“Yes. My cousin studied there. He is now a lecturer there. Yes, and my father also studied at a private university.” (Participant 1)

“No there has not been anyone that studied at a private institution in my family.” (Participant 22)

“No, no one has studied at a PHEI before. I was the first one.” (Participant 4)

“Yes, friends of mine studied at Sol-Tech, and then another friend studied at Akademia, and another friend of mine also studied here. But uhm, no, not family at all, although my cousin is studying at a private culinary college somewhere.” (Participant 9)

It can be seen from the following table that for the theme reference groups, the abbreviation RG was used. Therefore, the categories and codes all included the abbreviation RG as well. This was how the codes were used in the program ATLAS.ti 22.

Table 6

Reference groups codes for ATLAS.ti 22

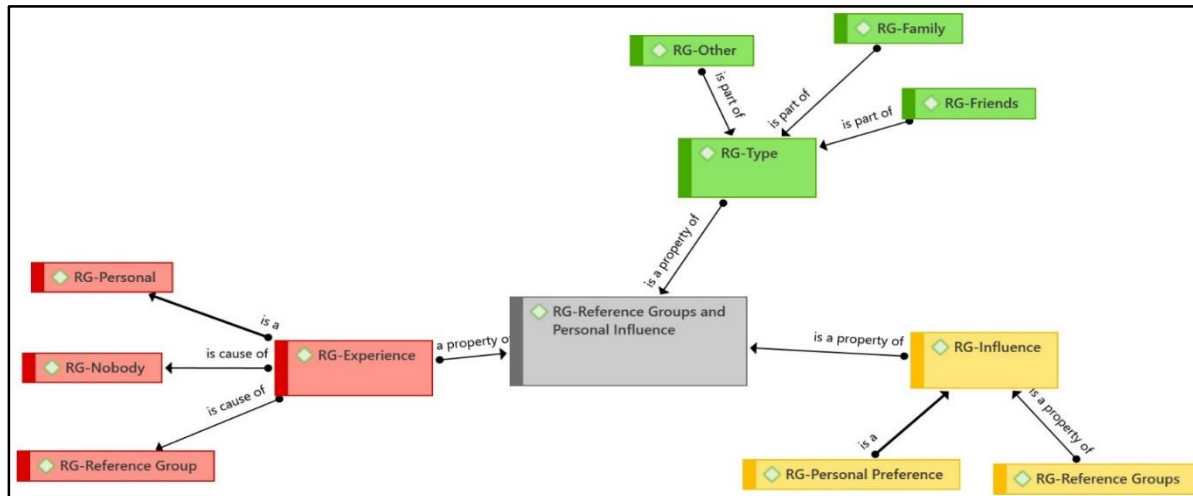
Theme	Category	Code
Reference Groups and Personal Influence RG		RG-Reference group
	RG-Influence	RG-Personal preference
		RG-Family
	RG-Type	RG-Friends
		RG-Other
		RG-Nobody
	RG-Experience	RG-Personal RG-Reference groups

Figure 1 illustrates the network diagram from ATLAS.ti 22 for the theme reference groups. The study enhanced the analysis by translating the identified themes, categories, and codes from table 6 into a visual representation within ATLAS.ti 22 networks. This step involved a dynamic and interactive visualization of the relationships and connections among the different elements. By leveraging the capabilities of ATLAS.ti 22, the study could gain a

deeper understanding of the findings. This visual approach not only facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the data but also provided a more insightful and holistic perspective on the complex relationships identified during the analysis.

Figure 1

Reference groups and personal influence ATLAS.ti 22 networks



Most participants (more than 80%) mentioned that at least one or more reference group influenced their decision to study at a PHEI. This shows the direct influence that reference groups have on potential consumers/students. This also indicates that if PHEIs want to successfully target a larger share of the available market (primary research question of the study), they need to focus on reference groups. This confirms the importance of reference groups highlighted by Kotler and Armstrong (2018) that reference groups could have several functions, such as exposing consumers to new behaviours and lifestyles, influencing the attitudes and self-concept of consumers and creating pressures to conform what will ultimately affect the consumers' product and brand choices. The majority of participants said that the reference group that influenced them the most was family members. Therefore, PHEIs must also focus on family members, like parents, siblings, and alumni, to influence their children and family members. This also confirms the theory from Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019, p. 243) that family can be seen as *"the most vital reference group which entails two or more persons that are either related by blood, marriage, adoption or only residing together"* and the theory from Mothersbaugh et al. (2020) that the family household is described as the primary

mechanism that passes on the behavioural patterns, especially the cultural and subcultural values, to the next generation. These conclusive findings affirmatively address the main research question posed. The data unequivocally demonstrates that reference groups, particularly family members, play a decisive role in influencing the decisions of potential students.

According to Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019, p. 144), “*personal experiences, family and friends, media, and social media strongly affect attitudes.*” This highlights the importance of the family element as it strongly impacts individuals’ initial buying-related attitudes, which also confirms the theory. Most participants also said that an individual or more than one from their reference groups had studied at PHEIs in the past. This indicates that because their reference groups had someone who had previously studied at PHEIs, positive word-of-mouth spread to the potential new students. They were convinced to follow the same path as their family members. This indicates that PHEIs must focus on their alumni (people who have studied at PHEIs before) and the feedback and positive word-of-mouth they can provide to their reference groups to target a larger share of the available market. This confirms the theory of Schiffman and Wisenblit (2019) that in addition to personal experience, the family element also strongly impacts individuals’ initial buying-related attitudes.

The comprehensive analysis reveals that, alongside reference groups, personal experiences, family and friends, media, and social media also exert substantial influences on individuals' attitudes. The acknowledgment of the importance of these additional influences underscores the intricate web of factors that PHEIs in South Africa must consider in tandem with reference groups when formulating targeted strategies for the available market. The study's findings provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of consumer behavior in the higher education context, guiding institutions to adopt a holistic approach in their marketing endeavors.

5. Conclusion

The importance of understanding reference group influence has been highlighted throughout this study. Many students were influenced by their reference groups when choosing to study at a PHEI. Therefore, it can be recommended that marketers of PHEIs focus not only on the individual who wants to enrol for higher education but also on their reference groups, especially family members. Ongoing communication with alumni is of utmost importance, and

involving parents, siblings and other family members in the marketing campaign seems to be the best way forward.

In light of the conclusions drawn, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the study, including challenges related to sampling, geographical representation, and the impact of the global pandemic, which affected the research process and participant engagement. Hence, future research studies could include a wider geographical area of study by considering all the densely populated provinces in South Africa, a larger sample size to gain a more accurate representation of the target population, similar studies by using repurchase intention as a construct and studies focusing on PHEI alumni and their influences on consumer behaviour.

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