

Exploring the impact of student developed marketing communication tools and resources on SMEs performance and satisfaction

Explorando el impacto de las herramientas y recursos de comunicación de marketing desarrollados por estudiantes en el rendimiento y satisfacción de las PYMEs

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Abstract

A number of SMEs lack the essential marketing skills, knowledge, tools and resources, and financial access to ensure the survival of their businesses. Service learning could be used as an effective pedagogy for assisting SMEs with vital marketing communication (MC) strategies via the development of tools and resources that may increase business growth and sustainability. The primary research objective was to evaluate SMEs' satisfaction regarding performance factors, and student developed MC tools and resources that were implemented via a MC service learning programme (in the form of student-run agencies). The inquiry utilized the triad service learning model and quality assurance cycle to apply an evaluation research design that was substantiated by the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm. A survey was conducted among 107 SME owners and managers via a structured questionnaire. The student developed MC tools and resources and their perceived usefulness resulted in a positive influence on a number of performance factors among SMEs. MC tools and resources such as a customer database, email address, and Facebook page had the largest influence on performance factors. Performance factors such as an increase in sales, new customers, brand awareness, competitive advantage, business efficiency, and motivation of employees were found to have a positive influence SME satisfaction. Further inquiry could replicate the study via various marketing-related service learning programmes in different countries that have divergent cultures, economics and contexts.

Keywords: SMEs; student developed marketing communication tools and resources; MC; service learning programme; student-run agencies; satisfaction; expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm; South Africa

JEL Classification: A22; M30; M37; O33

Resumen

Muchas PYMEs carecen de las habilidades, los conocimientos, las herramientas y los recursos de marketing esenciales, así como del acceso financiero para garantizar la supervivencia de sus negocios. Los servicios de aprendizaje podrían ayudar a las PYMEs con sus estrategias de comunicación de marketing (MC) mediante el desarrollo de herramientas y recursos que puedan aumentar el crecimiento y la sostenibilidad de las empresas. El objetivo principal de esta investigación es evaluar la satisfacción de las PYMEs con los factores de rendimiento, y las herramientas y recursos de MC desarrollados por los estudiantes que se implementaron a través de un programa de aprendizaje de MC (en forma de agencias gestionadas por estudiantes). La investigación utilizó la relación modelo de aprendizaje-servicio y ciclo de garantía de calidad para aplicar un diseño de investigación de evaluación que se sustentó en el paradigma de expectativas-confirmación. Se realizó una encuesta a 107 propietarios y gestores de PYMEs mediante un cuestionario estructurado. La investigación reveló una influencia positiva de las herramientas y recursos de MC desarrollados por los estudiantes y la utilidad percibida por parte de los empresarios en una serie de factores de rendimiento de las PYMEs. Las herramientas y recursos de MC, como la base de datos de clientes, la dirección de correo electrónico y la página de Facebook, fueron los que más influyeron en los factores de rendimiento. Los factores de rendimiento, como el aumento de las ventas, los nuevos clientes, el conocimiento de la marca, la ventaja competitiva, la eficiencia empresarial y la motivación de los empleados, influyeron positivamente en la satisfacción de las PYMEs. Una investigación más profunda podría replicar el estudio a través de varios programas de aprendizaje de servicios relacionados con el marketing en diferentes países que tienen culturas, economías y contextos divergentes.

Palabras clave: PYMEs; herramientas recursos de comunicación desarrollado por estudiantes; MC; programa de aprendizaje; agencias gestionadas por estudiantes; satisfacción; paradigma de expectativas-confirmación; Sudáfrica

Clasificación JEL: A22; M30; M37; O33

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1. Introduction

SMEs substantially influence the economic wellbeing of rural communities that are generally unable to garner employment from larger corporate businesses. SMEs play a vital role all over the world, which are a key vehicle of job creation (Grater et al., 2017). The contributions made by SMEs are even more important in developing countries than in developed countries (Grater et al., 2017). South Africa has long recognized the critical importance of a vibrant small business community for economic growth, job creation, poverty reduction and equality, especially since an overwhelming majority of businesses (95%) are categorized as SMEs in this emerging nation (Ritz et al., 2019). In South Africa, SMEs account for an estimated 20%-30% of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) (Moola, 2020, IFC, 2021). This is far less than the contribution of SMEs in developed countries, which on average makes up 60% of their GDPs (SBI, 2018). However, SMEs employ approximately half of the workforce in South Africa, and with the official unemployment rate reaching 34.4% (and 44.4% if those who are discouraged from looking for work are included) in the second quarter of 2021, SMEs have become very important in rebuilding the economy post-Covid-19 pandemic (Moola, 2020, IFC, 2021). Unfortunately, 72% of new SMEs in South Africa fail within their first year of existence (Mokwena, 2021). Research has discovered that SMEs are able to continue operations for a sustained period of time if they utilize certain management principles, for example marketing, which has also been found to expedite business growth (Higuchi et al., 2019).

Though, many SMEs do not have the necessary finance and marketing knowledge, tools, resources and skills to sustain and grow their businesses (Rambe, 2017; Madichie et al., 2019; Salam et al., 2021). Van Scheers (2018) also suggests that a deficiency marketing knowledge, tools, resources and skills could result in the failure of SMEs. A number of other recent studies indicate that marketing and/or MC (especially online media and digital tools and resources) are important to improve SMEs' financial performance/efficiency, sales, awareness, customer relationships and loyalty, and competitiveness (Dos Santos & Duffett, 2021; Gabbianelli & Pencarelli, 2021; Salam et al., 2021). Therefore, it has been proposed that programmes, which include university service learning (SL), should be developed to assist SMEs with marketing, as well as improve current programmes via evaluative research (Rambe, 2017; Higuchi et al., 2019; Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020; Salam et al., 2021).

Hence, the Marketing Department (Cape Peninsula University of Technology - CPUT) developed a MC service learning programme to service the needs of SMEs in South Africa. The marketing students established MC agencies (known as "student-run agencies") and canvassed local SMEs to be their clients (community partners), so that they could develop MC strategies with the aim of increasing sales, customer loyalty, awareness, customers, competitive advantage and business efficiency, as well as motivating employees. It was important that the MC strategies were implemented via the corresponding tools and resources which included logos, email, business cards, advertising posters, pamphlets, loyalty cards, customer databases, Facebook page, Twitter profile, websites and blogs, press releases and others (e.g. banner, Gumtree advertisements, suggestion boxes, newspaper advertisements, LinkedIn profiles, branded items, Whatsapp groups, etc.). The MC service learning programme has been running for over a decade and has serviced over 700 SMEs since its inception.

However, most inquiries only consider the benefits of service learning from the student stance perspective, so there is a gap in research that investigates the community partner/client benefits (Naik et al., 2020; Cromhout et al., 2021; Jordaan & Mennega, 2021). Additionally, a number of American investigations examine the student benefits of student-run agencies (Haygood et al., 2019; Ranta et al., 2020; Borgognoni & LeBlanc Wicks, 2021), but none consider benefits from the client perspective, which is another gap in research. Maben (2010) also proposes additional student-run agency research in other nations. Furthermore, a number of international service learning programmes (Niehm et al., 2015; Vasbinder & Koehler, 2015; Miller et al., 2017; Mitchell, 2018) and a South African service learning programme (Mokoena & Spencer, 2017) used SMEs as their community partners, which revealed another gap in research since few consider the influence of MC tools and resources, SME performance factors and SME satisfaction. Several SME and/or service learning-related studies have investigated one or several of the MC tools and resources (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Furlow, 2010; Wiese & Sherman, 2011; Goertzen et al., 2016; Rosenberg et al., 2016; Hardin-Ramanan et al., 2018) and SME performance factors (Hopkins, 2012; Rajhans, 2009; Hove & Masocha, 2014; Rosenberg et al., 2016; Rambe, 2017; Oji et al., 2017), but none have investigated the broad range that was included in this study, nor in terms of community partner/SME client satisfaction, so this an additional gap in research from both a local and international perspective.

Hence, this investigation aims to address the abovementioned gaps in research and to make an original contribution to knowledge by investigating a South African student-run agency service learning programme from a community partner/SME client viewpoint. The study also considers SME client benefits in terms of SME satisfaction, as well as a wide range of student developed MC tools and resources and performance factors (as mentioned above). Hence, this study is important from a local and an international perspective, since it aims to show how SMEs can benefit from service learning programmes (in the form of student-run agencies), which not only provide SMEs with valuable MC tools and resources, but can have a significant impact on SMEs

performance factors that are important for economic growth and survival during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study used the triad service learning model and quality assurance cycle, which was corroborated by the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, as the basis for the conceptual framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1. SME Marketing

SME marketing is largely underdeveloped as most scholars rely on the application of general marketing strategies used for large organizations from developed countries (van Scheers, 2018). The basic assumption is that the fundamental principles of marketing are universally applicable to both large and businesses (Gabrielli & Balboni, 2010). However, SMEs are constrained in terms of financial, physical, and human resources in comparison to larger firms, and as such they engage in marketing differently (Odoom & Mensah, 2019). The marketing orientation of SMEs is greatly dependent on the marketing knowledge of the owner (van Scheers, 2018; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021; Salam et al., 2021). Lekhanya (2015) and Oji et al. (2017) observe that in addition to limited access to finance, SMEs also suffer from poor marketing skills and management. Interestingly, the literature reveals that SMEs do recognize the importance of marketing (Franco et al., 2014), but just do not have the skills, tools and resources to implement it effectively (Gellynck et al., 2012; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021; Salam et al., 2021). Today, SMEs need to survive in a marketplace that has become "increasingly more competitive, more specialized, more globalized and more technologically-driven" (Iwu, 2009). Despite these challenges and limitations, marketing strategy and practice is by no means the privilege of large firms alone, and this study focuses on exploring student developed MC tools and resources, performance factors and SME satisfaction in the context of service learning.

Many researchers consider problems that relate to the general marketing of SMEs, such as the effect of incorrect marketing actions on business failure (van Scheers, 2018); the lack of marketing skills negatively affecting growth (Lekhanya, 2015; Oji et al., 2017); the marketing and branding challenges faced by SMEs (Makhitha, 2019); and the impact of competition on SME retailers (Chiliya et al., 2009). Researchers also look at specific marketing-related problems, like the lack of knowledge about which MC tools are used by SMEs (Kallier, 2017); the struggle for rural SMEs to link to mainstream markets (Rambe, 2017); the lack of marketing-related infrastructure in rural areas like the Internet (Oji, Iwu, & Tengeh, 2017); the lack of understanding of the marketing benefits of technological advancements for SMEs (Hove & Masocha, 2014); and the use of mobile marketing (Ngubelanga & Duffett, 2021). Considering all the unique aspects of SMEs in South Africa from a marketing perspective, the service learning programme sought to make a real difference as far as the understanding and implementation of MC strategies are concerned, especially for the purposes of increasing the chances of business survival. Although it did not offer SMEs any funding in this regard, it did seek provide to provide SMEs with a wide variety of traditional and digital student developed MC tools and resources, which could be used for branding and communication activities. The MC tools and resources included: logos, email, business cards, advertising posters, pamphlets, loyalty cards, customer databases, Facebook page, Twitter profile, websites and blogs, press releases and others (e.g. banner, Gumtree advertisements, suggestion boxes, newspaper advertisements, LinkedIn profiles, branded items, Whatsapp groups, etc.), where were designed to improve SME positioning, performance and efficiency sales, loyalty, awareness, and promotion. Accordingly, this study evaluates whether the service learning programme in terms of student developed MC tools and resources, performance factors and SME satisfaction.

2.2. Service Learning Marketing and SMEs

Klink and Athaide (2004) posit that marketing courses are unique in their receptiveness to service learning, given that marketing as a discipline is interested in social causes and behavioral change. They go on to say that marketing support from undergraduate students can be very helpful for many non-profit organizations and SMEs, given their prevailing need for basic marketing services. They suggest that the application and implementation of basic marketing models and processes can make a noticeable impact on non-profit organizations and SMEs. Some studies have considered marketing-related service learning in the US (Gonzalez-Padron & Ferguson, 2015; Bonaparte, 2019). As a result, these universities have been able to generate empirical data about marketing-related for improving service learning. Unfortunately, such insights and materials are lacking for marketing-related service learning in South Africa, especially from a SME perspective.

The business-related service needs of SMEs (from a service learning viewpoint) usually include the development of a marketing or business plan, doing market research, designing web pages, and pursuing other organizational enhancement projects (Mitchell, 2018). Such assistance is valuable to SMEs in that it helps them to serve their customers more effectively. However, the service learning services do come at a price. The staff members of the SMEs need to collaborate with academic staff members, put time aside to work with students, oversee students on site, and assist in solving problems as and when they arise during the service learning service period. There are a number of international studies that make mention service learning run in conjunction with SMEs (Niehm et al., 2015; Vasbinder & Koehler, 2015; Miller et al., 2017;

Mitchell, 2018), but few of them focus on the experiences of SMEs or the value and nature of the outcomes of service learning for SMEs (refer to Table 1). Findings regarding the experiences of SME participants generally form only a small part of studies geared towards evaluating the success of service learning, which accordingly requires further inquiry.

Table 1. Service Learning Research - SMEs Perspective

Author	Service learning objectives and SME findings
Niehm et al. (2015)	Students helped SMEs with management practices and the implementation of experiential marketing and branding strategies. SMEs reported that they benefitted from the fresh perspectives, energy and creativity of the students, and they also found the students' ideas and strategies valuable and implementable.
Vasbinder and Koehler (2015)	Students did a situation analysis through gathering primary and secondary data and provided strategic suggestions for improvement SMEs noted that they had positive experiences, that students were professional, knowledgeable, highly engaged and committed, and that the insights and recommendations were accurate, helpful, and implementable.
Miller et al. (2017)	Students helped them develop business plans, and provided advice, guidance, and encouragement on business-related issues. SMEs appreciated the business guidance and human capital provided by students. Those interviewed were able to start up new businesses through service learning.
Mokoena and Spencer (2017)	Students conducted a situation analysis and then developed business and marketing plans for each SME. Most SMEs found service learning beneficial and noted that students were professional, brought outside perspectives, gained from the business plan and used recommendations. Although, it was found that some SMEs were resistant to change and did not allow the students to advise them in the business. Negative comments included a lack of student: involvement, quality strategic work, and practical knowledge.
Mitchell (2018)	Students developed an online web presence for the small businesses. SMEs found that students were professional, communicated well, were enthusiastic, and they appreciated having a website built for their businesses. Some SMEs struggled with the timing of the project and were not sure about the maintenance of the websites.

Source: Own elaboration

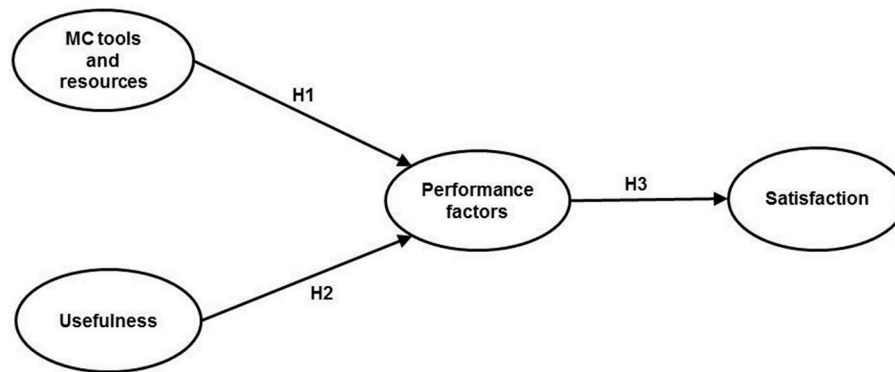
2.3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The South African Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) states that service learning is "...applied learning which is directed at specific community needs and is integrated into an academic programme and curriculum. It could be credit-bearing and assessed, and may or may not take place in a work environment" (HEQC, 2006, p. 24). The triad service learning model (refer to Figure 1) reveals that as a form of community engagement, service learning finds its significance at the intersection of university, service provider and community (HEQC, 2006). The university is a critical element in the three-way partnership and includes both students and academic staff (CPUT marketing department student and staff in this study). Service providers are generally non-profit organizations or other private organizations which already serve the community in question or have a vested interest in engaging with the community. The community (SMEs in this study) is the stakeholder that is the direct beneficiary of the service. In most cases, communities participate in service learning because they recognize potential benefits for themselves. Ultimately, all service learning should focus keenly on the needs of communities and include them in every step of the service learning process as equal partners. Hence, considering the crucial role that communities play, and the challenges they sometimes face in service learning with regard to a lack of power, this study aimed to garner insights in term of the community (SMEs) satisfaction regarding the MC service learning programme that was designed to assist SMEs in South Africa. Additionally, a majority of research only considers service learning from the university student perspective and largely overlooks the community partner viewpoint (Naik et al., 2020; Cromhout et al., 2021; Jordaan & Mennega, 2021).

The quality assurance cycle is an ongoing process designed to improve service learning. The lessons learnt through reviewing and evaluating the outputs and outcomes of service learning are used to make improvements before the next programme is planned and implemented with the iteration of the cycle. The monitoring process is on-going and ensures that each phase of service learning and quality assurance cycle is effectively managed (HEQC, 2006). Therefore, this study specifically focused on the evaluation phase in a bid to improve the MC service learning programme, and thereby increase the SMEs satisfaction. Oliver (1977) developed the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm and is one of the most popular models used to examine consumer satisfaction, which was applied to assess satisfaction of the SMEs in this study. The paradigm posits that consumers acquire services and products with a specific performance expectation, which is used to assess the services and products performance after their use. The consumers are generally satisfied if the performance exceeds the expectation (positive disconfirmation) and dissatisfied when the performance is lower than the expectation (negative disconfirmation) (Oliver, 1980). Therefore, this study assesses whether SMEs perceive the MC services (i.e. student developed MC tools and resources, SME performance factors, and usefulness) provided by the MC service learning programme (via the student-run agencies) exceed their expectations, and therefore result in satisfaction (positive disconfirmation). The expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm was used in a number of marketing-related studies (Elkhani & Bakri, 2016), but few used the model to assess SMEs' satisfaction in terms of MC tools and resources that were developed via a student-run agency. Accordingly, this study aims to make an original theoretical contribution to the expectancy-disconfirmation

paradigm and SME marketing communication-related inquiry. Refer to Figure 1 for an overview of the MC service learning programme satisfaction conceptual framework.

Figure 1. MC Service Learning Programme Satisfaction Conceptual Framework



Source: Own elaboration

Schachter and Schwartz (2009); Furlow (2010); Wiese and Sherman (2011); Goertzen et al. (2016); Rosenberg et al. (2016); and Hardin-Ramanan et al. (2018) examined individual or a couple of the MC tools and resources in their service learning-related and SME inquiries, but did not consider the influence of such tools and resource on performance factors. Hence, this study endeavors to bridge this research gap via the following hypothesis:

H1. *MC tools and resources positively influence performance factors of SMEs.*

Niehm et al. (2015); Vasbinder and Koehler (2015); Miller et al. (2017); Mokoena and Spencer (2017); and Mitchell (2018) asserted that the SME community partners found the student developed tools and resources to be useful/beneficial. However, these investigations did not evaluate the usefulness/benefits in relation to their influence on performance factors among SMEs. Accordingly, this student endeavors address the gap in knowledge as follows:

H2. *The usefulness of MC tools and resources positively influences performance factors.*

Hopkins (2012); Rajhans (2009); Hove and Masocha (2014); Rosenberg et al. (2016); Rambe (2017); and Oji et al. (2017) assessed individual or several performance factors in their service learning-related and SME inquiries, but did not consider the wide assortment that was confirmed by this inquiry. These investigations also did not examine the performance factors in relations to the SME community partners' satisfaction, so this gap will also be addressed via the following hypothesis:

H3. *Performance factors positively influences SMEs' satisfaction.*

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

Cooper and Schindler (2006) describe the research design as "the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data." It is the plan that allows the researcher to structure the investigation in a way that can serve to secure empirical evidence for the purpose of answering the research questions. The MC service learning programme was designed to contribute to the socio-economic development agenda of the local and national government. In one sense it can be considered what Singh (2007) calls a "socio-economic development intervention project," because it is an intervention designed to help develop society in some way or form. Singh (2007) suggests that it is useful to monitor and evaluate a programme by tracking the impact of the intervention. Therefore, this study made use of an evaluation research design, which evaluates a programme's performance after it has been implemented. This research evaluated SMEs' satisfaction due to MC tools and resources developed by student-run agencies.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

The research population consisted of 331 SMEs that participated in the MC service learning programme over a period of five years. However, only those SMEs that had provided written feedback after participating in the MC service learning programme were eligible to be included in the research, which consisted of 294 SMEs. Hence, considering the small number of SMEs in the sample frame, it was decided that a complete

enumeration of the sample frame should be surveyed in order to generate more accurate data. There were 14 SMEs that did not have contact details listed, and so these were excluded from the list. The final sample frame thus consisted of 280 SMEs. The SMEs were first screened via the telephone to establish that they were willing to participate in the research and that there was a person available who had worked with the marketing students during the MC service learning programme. The SME owners and managers of 107 SMEs gave consent to participate in the study and subsequently completed the structured questionnaires on a face-to-face basis.

3.3. Questionnaire and Data Analysis

The main tool for collecting the data from the SMEs was a structured questionnaire, which was principally modified from Schachter and Schwartz's (2009) investigation. As mentioned above, each SME participant (predominantly the owner) was initially asked a screening question prior to the commencement of the survey to confirm that they participated and assisted the marketing students in the MC service learning programme. The next questions collected data on the MC tools and resources, which were developed by the student-run agencies for the SMEs, and performance factors that are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Measurement of Variables

Variables		Measurement	Source
MC tools and resources	Logo	Dichotomous (list) questions	Rosenberg et al. (2016)
	Email		Kallier (2017)
	Business cards		Kallier (2017)
	Advertising poster		Wiese and Sherman (2011)
	Pamphlet		Kallier (2017)
	Loyalty card		Oji et al. (2017)
	Customer database		Fazlzadeh et al. (2011)
	Facebook page		Rosenberg et al. (2016)
	Twitter profile		Kallier (2017)
	Website/blog		Kallier (2017)
	Press release		Goertzen et al. (2016)
	Other		Schachter and Schwartz (2009)
	None		Schachter and Schwartz (2009)
Performance factors	Sales	Dichotomous (list) questions	Furlow (2010)
	New customers		Hopkins (2012)
	Brand awareness		Hopkins (2012)
	Customer loyalty		Oji et al. (2017)
	Business efficiency		Hopkins (2012)
	Competitive advantage		Hove and Masocha (2014)
	Motivation of employees		Rajhans (2009)
Usefulness	Likert scale	Schachter and Schwartz (2009)	
Satisfaction	Likert scale	Schachter and Schwartz (2009)	

Source: Own elaboration

The subsequent questions were composed of two primary structured questions on the MC tools and resources satisfaction and usefulness of the service learning programme. Individual 4-point rating scales were utilized to measure satisfaction and usefulness, which were derived from Schachter and Schwartz's (2009) investigation, which found these measures to be reliability (refer to Table 2). The final questionnaire section collected SME demographic data in terms of age, number of employees, form of legal ownership and annual turnover. The data from the questionnaires was coded and captured via SPSS, which was first used to compute basic descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and frequencies). MC tools and resources and usefulness were analyzed via linear regression in relation to performance factors, which in turn were analyzed in relation to SME satisfaction (refer to Table 3).

4. Results

4.1. SME Demographic Factors

The age of the SMEs that participated in the study was as follows: less than 1.5 years (3.8%), 1.5-2.5 years (6.7%), 2.5-5.5 years (33.3%), 5.5-10.5 years (28.6%), and over 10.5 years (27.6%). The number of employees employed permanently by the SMEs (excluding the owner): 0 (3.0%), 1 (13.9%), 2 (12.9%), 3-4 (32.7%), 5-10 (33.7%), and 11-19 (4.0%). The form of legal ownership of the SMEs included: Pty (Ltd) (22.5%), closed

corporation (26.5%), partnership (6.9%), joint venture (1.0%), and sole proprietor (43.1%). The SMEs annual turnover was as follows: < ZAR0.2 million (52.9%), ZAR0.2-1 million (33.3%), and > ZAR1 million (13.8%).

4.2. SME Satisfaction

More than three-quarters of SMEs (77.7%) indicated a positive level of satisfaction (dependent variable) with the MC tools and resources developed by the student-run agencies, with 45.8% stating that they were satisfied and 31.9% very satisfied. The remaining 22.3% of respondents reported negative satisfaction: 20.2% of SMEs noted that they were dissatisfied and 2.1% were very dissatisfied.

4.3. Independent Variable Overview

A large majority of SMEs (84.9%) had one or more MC tools and resources developed for them by the student-run agencies. The development of a Facebook page (68.9%), the design and/or printing of a pamphlet (29.2%) and poster (27.4%), the design of a logo (16%), the development of a loyalty card (16%) and customer database (16%) were the most prominently featured MC tools and resources. A small percentage of SMEs (15.1%) claimed that no MC tools and resources were developed or shared with them.

The majority of respondents (80%) felt that the MC tools and resources developed by student-run agencies had some form of positive impact on their SME performance factors. Almost half the respondents (48.2%) believed that the MC tools and resources increased new customers and brand awareness. Another 44.7% of SMEs believed that the MC tools and resources helped increase sales, while 34.1% felt that these also assisted in raising customer loyalty. A fifth of respondents (20%) felt that the MC tools and resources had no positive impact on their SMEs.

Just more than half of the SMEs (50.6%) still used the MC tools and resources developed by the student-run agencies, with 29.5% noting that the MC tools and resources continued to be somewhat useful and 21.1% indicating that they were still very useful. A proportion of SMEs (23.2%) stated that the MC tools and resources were previously useful but were no longer useful, while 26.2% claimed that the MC tools and resources were not useful.

Table 3. Linear regression - hypothesis testing

Models	R	R ²	F	p
MC tools & resources → sales	0.521	0.263	2.789	0.003**
MC tools & resources → new customers	0.529	0.279	3.039	0.001*
MC tools & resources → brand awareness	0.500	0.250	2.607	0.005**
MC tools & resources → customer loyalty	0.534	0.285	3.126	0.001*
MC tools & resources → business efficiency	0.372	0.138	1.257	0.257
MC tools & resources → competitive advantage	0.502	0.252	2.646	0.004**
MC tools & resources → employee motivation	0.482	0.232	2.372	0.010**
Usefulness → sales	0.448	0.201	23.369	0.000*
Usefulness → new customers	0.397	0.158	17.442	0.000*
Usefulness → brand awareness	0.436	0.190	21.863	0.000*
Usefulness → customer loyalty	0.332	0.110	11.512	0.001*
Usefulness → business efficiency	0.161	0.026	2.487	0.118
Usefulness → competitive advantage	0.317	0.100	10.376	0.002**
Usefulness → employee motivation	0.243	0.059	5.847	0.018**
Sales → satisfaction	0.484	0.235	28.211	0.000*
New customers → satisfaction	0.469	0.220	25.944	0.000*
Brand awareness → satisfaction	0.331	0.109	11.292	0.001*
Customer loyalty → satisfaction	0.448	0.200	23.050	0.000*
Business efficiency → satisfaction	0.251	0.063	6.193	0.015**
Competitive advantage → satisfaction	0.280	0.078	7.800	0.006*
Employee motivation → satisfaction	0.183	0.033	3.188	0.077

* Significant difference at $p < 0.001$

** Significant difference at $p < 0.05$

4.4. Student Developed MC Tools and Resources and Usefulness Analysis

Linear regression was used to investigate the relationship between the student developed MC tools and resources and usefulness in relation to the performance factors. Refer to Table 3 for a summary of the results.

The results showed that the MC tools and resources resulted in a positive influence on all of the performance factors, except for business efficiency (refer to Table 3). The regression analysis showed that: customer database ($\beta=0.196$, $p<0.05$) and Facebook ($\beta=0.196$, $p<0.05$) predicted an increase in sales; Facebook ($\beta=0.196$, $p<0.001$) predicted an increase new customers; email ($\beta=0.209$, $p<0.05$), Facebook ($\beta=0.242$, $p<0.05$) and other MC tools and resources ($\beta=0.196$, $p<0.05$) predicted an increase in brand awareness; email ($\beta=0.235$, $p<0.05$) and loyalty card ($\beta=0.356$, $p<0.001$) predicted an increase in customer loyalty; poster ($\beta=0.257$, $p<0.05$) and Facebook ($\beta=0.198$, $p<0.05$) predicted an increase in competitive advantage; and logo ($\beta=0.203$, $p<0.05$) and customer database ($\beta=0.246$, $p<0.05$) predicted an increase in employee motivation. Therefore, **H1** was supported. Refer to Table 3 for the abovementioned regression models variable coefficients, F and R square values, as well as the global significance.

The results showed that the usefulness of the MC tools and resources resulted in a positive influence on all of the performance factors, except for business efficiency (refer to Table 3). The regression analysis showed that: usefulness predicted an increase in sales ($\beta=0.448$, $p<0.001$); usefulness predicted an increase new customers ($\beta=0.397$, $p<0.001$); usefulness predicted an increase in brand awareness ($\beta=0.436$, $p<0.001$); usefulness predicted an increase in customer loyalty ($\beta=0.332$, $p<0.001$); usefulness predicted an increase in competitive advantage ($\beta=0.317$, $p<0.05$); and usefulness predicted an increase in employee motivation ($\beta=0.243$, $p<0.05$). Accordingly, **H2** was supported. Refer to Table 3 for the abovementioned regression models variable coefficients, F and R square values, and the global significance.

The results showed that all of the performance factors resulted in a positive influence on SME satisfaction, except for employee motivation (refer to Table 3). The regression analysis showed that: an increase sales predicted satisfaction ($\beta=0.484$, $p<0.001$); an increase new customers predicted satisfaction ($\beta=0.469$, $p<0.001$); an increase in brand awareness predicted satisfaction ($\beta=0.331$, $p<0.001$); an increase in customer loyalty predicted satisfaction ($\beta=0.448$, $p<0.001$); an increase in business efficiency predicted satisfaction ($\beta=0.251$, $p<0.05$); and an increase in competitive advantage predicted satisfaction ($\beta=0.280$, $p<0.05$). No significance was revealed for an increase in motivation of employees, so **H3** was partially supported. Refer to Table 3 for each of the abovementioned regression models variable coefficients, F and R square values, and the global significance.

5. Discussion

Student-run agencies assisted SMEs by developing or acquiring MC tools and resources for them. Facebook, email addresses, customer databases, loyalty cards, logos and other MC tools and resources were found to have a positive effect on the various performance factors. Facebook pages have multiple benefits for SMEs, including increased brand exposure, lead generation, decreased marketing expenses, access to existing, new, and foreign target markets, increased brand loyalty, increased mobile engagement, and customer relationship management (Stokes, 2018; Belch & Belch, 2021). Nzeku and Duffett (2021) report that Facebook is a useful marketing channel in South Africa. The wide use of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) in South Africa and its affordability as a marketing tool (Madichie et al., 2019; Duffett, 2020) explains why SMEs surveyed in this study found it to be such a beneficial MC medium. A number of other recent international studies also verified that social media was a beneficial marketing tool for SMEs (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020; Salam et al., 2021; Steel, 2021). Email marketing is considered a cost-effective direct marketing channel (Stokes, 2018; Belch & Belch, 2021). Pinkham (2021) found that SMEs consider email marketing useful to build brand credibility and visibility, increase sales, generate leads, promote services, attract new customers, and save time. Given the benefits of email marketing and its cost effectiveness, it is understandable that SMEs in this study found the development of a professional email address a highly useful tool for marketing, leading to higher levels of satisfaction. Therefore, SMEs should consider email marketing as a means to improve MC performance. Customer databases are important to assist SMEs with an effective customer relationship management system where customers can be monitored and retained, as well as increase sales at a reduced cost (Fazlzadeh et al., 2011). Hence, SMEs should consider the use of customer databases as a cost-effective marketing tool. Loyalty programmes are developed to facilitate trust between the customers and businesses, which often take the form of loyalty cards (traditional or digital) that are used to incentivize customers to make repeat sales (Oji et al., 2017). Accordingly, SMEs should consider the use loyalty cards, which are easy to implement, but can have a major effect on repeat purchases. Generally speaking, SMEs have crude logos that are not very effective branding tools (Antonelli, 2016). Odoom (2016) affirms the importance of an effective logo in the brand building efforts of SMEs, so it is plausible to think that SMEs for which new updated logos were developed experienced high levels of satisfaction. Hence, both South African and international SMEs should not underestimate the value of logos on their branding efforts. Hence, is proposed that South African and global SMEs adopt or expand these use of potential lucrative conduits to improve MC performance.

There are numerous other MC tools and resources which were developed for SMEs, including banners, branded items (like t-shirts), online classified ads (like Gumtree), suggestion boxes, promotional videos, a YouTube channel, newspaper ads, community radio, various social media profiles (like Instagram or Pinterest), mobile platforms (like SMS or Whatsapp), and so forth. SMEs often spend a significant amount of time testing

new marketing tools and services in order to discover affordable and effective tools for their businesses (Alford & Page, 2015). Fortunately, the advent of numerous free and affordable digital MC tools and resources have levelled the playing field for SMEs by offering them high return on investment for their small marketing budgets. In addition, many of the MC tools and resources actually increase business efficiency by streamlining certain processes, which is very valuable to SMEs as they do not usually have the resources to employ a team of marketers in-house, nor the budget to outsource the work to external agencies (Brenner, 2021). Considering that student teams developed a range of additional MC tools and resources for SMEs, many of which were value-adding, affordable, and easy to use digital tools, it makes sense that the SMEs experienced high levels of satisfaction as a result. Hence, local and worldwide SMEs should not overlook the use of these MC tools and resources in their MC strategies that could improve business efficiency.

The MC tools and resources were found to be useful or beneficial in relation to most of performance factors. More than half of the SMEs indicated that they still use the MC tools and resources developed by the student run-agencies. A study by Kallier (2017) gives some insight into this finding by recording that South African SMEs often made use of business cards, websites, emails, Facebook, social media, mobile media, and pamphlets. Lekhanya (2015); Makhitha (2016); and Oji et al. (2017) all confirm the wide usage of promotional materials by South African SMEs, adding other media such as magazine advertisements, outdoor signage, brochures, local advertising, Whatsapp, and flyers. Some SMEs did however say that the tools were useful before but not anymore, or were not useful at all, and had never been useful. This could be as a result of Kallier's (2017) finding that some tools such as Twitter, blogs, and posters were very rarely used by South African SMEs. Hence, international SMEs should also consider forming partnerships with universities and MC service programmes such as student-run agencies to take advantage of the associated business efficiency benefits. However, nearly one out of six SMEs reported that no MC tools and resources had been developed or shared with them, which could account for most of some negative feedback received from SMEs that stated the student developed MC tools and resources were not useful. This is somewhat similar to Schachter and Schwartz's (2009) discovery that a small number of students did not develop any tools or resources for their partner organizations during service learning.

A positive relationship was found in terms of satisfaction with regards to student developed MC tools and resources and performance factors. Furlow (2010) also found that organizations experienced high levels of satisfaction with the tools and resources developed for them by students during service learning. One organization surveyed by Schachter and Schwartz (2009) states, "The tools provided will probably be a better measure of our program impact. It has helped us create a rationale and a plan for more formal program evaluation." This is in line with the current study, which reports more than three quarters of SMEs experiencing high levels of satisfaction regarding the MC tools and resources developed for them by students. Interestingly, Wiese and Sherman (2011) observe that although students developed marketing materials for local retail stores, some service learning programmes were not as successful as others due to a lack of interest and effort on the part of the organizations concerned. These sentiments could account for why a number of SMEs did not experience satisfaction owing to student developed MC tools and resources. Those SMEs that made use of the MC tools and resources developed for them by the student-run agencies testified to a number of positive benefits stemming from their use. Almost half of the SMEs mentioned increased sales, new customers, and increased brand awareness stemming from the MC tools and resources, with smaller numbers citing increased customer loyalty and increased competitive advantage. In addition, a positive significant relationship was found between satisfaction and an increase in sales, new customers, brand awareness, customer loyalty, and competitive advantage. These findings echo those of Rambe (2017) who found that SMEs that make use of promotional tools such as Facebook are able to attract new customers. Oji et al. (2017) discovered a link between the use of promotional tools such as social media and customer loyalty, and Hove and Masocha (2014) confirm that marketing technologies increase business performance such as sales, growth, and profitability. Wutzke (2021) highlights brand awareness, customer loyalty, and new customers as benefits of using promotional tools. Rosenberg et al. (2016) specifically mention the benefits of student-developed promotional material, including increased awareness and corporate sponsorship. Additional, less noteworthy positive benefits that flowed from the student developed MC tools and resources include an increase in business efficiency and motivation of employees. Hopkins (2012) argues that promotional tools such as social media can promote effective communication between businesses and their customers, which leads to increased business efficiency. Rajhans (2009) highlights that increased levels of communication leads to employees experiencing greater levels of motivation and performance. Accordingly, South African and international SMEs should consider the use of student-run agency MC services as a cost-effective means to improve a number of business efficiency factors.

6. Conclusions, Recommendations and Limitations

It can be concluded that the student developed MC tools and resources ultimately resulted in a positive impact on a number of performance factors and high satisfaction levels among the participating SMEs owing to the MC service learning programme. Hence, from a practical contribution perspective, it is recommended that the MC service learning programme should spend time developing the tools and resources aspect of service learning by testing new tools, training students in their effective use, and creating profiles of SMEs for which

certain tools work the best in South Africa and abroad. It may also be helpful to do further empirical research in this regard. SMEs favor MC tools and resources that can be used either for free or at a very low cost and which they can easily and simply facilitate themselves, such as a Facebook page, a customer database and an email address (Lekhanya, 2015). Considering that SMEs lack funds for marketing, it is recommended that marketing student teams focus their attention on developing MC tools and resources which are either free or very affordable, and then train the SMEs on how to use them to increase their marketing reach and return on marketing investment. The research concludes that when the student developed MC tools and resources are implemented by SMEs, the ensuing benefits include an increase in sales, new customers, brand awareness, competitive advantage, business efficiency, and motivation of employees. These benefits result in SMEs attributing high levels of satisfaction from the MC service learning programme. Accordingly, a practical recommendation is that student-run agencies should focus on implementing MC tools and resources that are most likely to result in performance benefits for SMEs. SMEs do not find tools and resources useful when students do not share these with them, do not effectively train the SMEs in their use, do not effectively hand over the tools created, or simply do not develop any tools and resources for the participating firms (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). On the other hand, SMEs continue to make use of tools which are valuable and which they have been trained to use (Lekhanya, 2015; Makhitha, 2016; Oji et al., 2017). It is clear that students need to be monitored more carefully by course coordinators to ensure that they actually develop the tools and resources mandated by the MC service learning programme. In addition, students need to be taught about which MC tools and resources would be most suitable for different SMEs according to their industry type, phase in the product life cycle, budget, resources, and marketing capacity (Kota, 2018). Finally, course coordinators need to facilitate a hand-over process in terms of which students not only pass along all the MC tools and resources developed by the students, but also specifically train SME staff in their effective and continued use. The aforementioned recommendations should be considered by both South African and global service learning programmes, especially those that use student-run agencies for MC services to improve satisfaction among SMEs and other community partners. This study also makes a noteworthy contribution to the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, since it shows that this model can also be successfully applied to a service learning programme in order to assess SMEs' satisfaction regarding MC tools and resources that were established by student-run agencies.

This study was hindered by some limitations. Although the response rate was favorable, the sample was relatively small. Future studies may want to increase the sample size in order to draw conclusions which can be generalized more broadly, and analyze the SME performance benefits of service learning offered by a broader range of undergraduate business courses. The research sample was drawn from only one service learning programme at one university in South Africa. Future research might replicate the study with multiple marketing-related service learning programmes operating at universities in different countries that vary in terms of culture, context, and economics. The research surveyed SMEs that were for the most part already established. In order to test the capacity of service learning to support the incubation, start-up, and development of SMEs, it would be helpful to study service learning which supports SMEs at each stage of the business growth cycle. The study only considered the benefits and challenges which SME owners or managers perceived service learning had on their businesses. Future studies may want to consider surveying the actual impact of service learning on SMEs by doing randomized control trials and using pre- and post-tests to evaluate the actual impact on performance indicators like sales, new customers, brand awareness, and so forth.

Appendix A

Table 4. Client Survey Questionnaire

Marketing Communication Service Learning Programme - Client Survey Questionnaire
<p>Thank you for voluntarily participating in this study, which deals with the impact of the marketing communication tools and resources developed in the CPUT Marketing Department's service learning programme. Responses are completely confidential and will provide valuable data that will be used for academic purposes.</p> <p>Filter 1: Did you participate in CPUT's marketing communication (MC) service learning programme? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Filter 2: Did you personally assist the marketing students in the MC service learning programme? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
<p>1. What tools and resources did the MC student team develop or acquire for your business? (Check all that apply)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Logo</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Email</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Business Cards</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Advertising Poster</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Pamphlet</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Loyalty Card</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Customer Database (email/SMS)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Facebook Page</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Twitter Profile</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Website / Blog</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) _____</p>
<p>2. What was the impact of the MC tools and resources? (Check all the boxes that apply)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased sales</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased new customers</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased brand awareness</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased customer loyalty</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased business efficiency</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased competitive advantage</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Increased employee motivation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> There was no positive impact</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) _____</p>
<p>3. How useful have the tools and resources been?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not useful at all</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Was useful before but not anymore</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Continues to be somewhat useful</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Continues to be very useful</p>
<p>4. How satisfied are you overall with the MC tools and resources developed or acquired by the students?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Very Dissatisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Dissatisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Satisfied</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Very Satisfied</p>
<p>BUSINESS DEMOGRAPHICS</p>
<p>5. How old is the business? (How long has it been operating?)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Less than 1.5 years</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1.5 - 2.5 years</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2.5 - 5.5 years</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5.5 - 10.5 years</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Older than 10.5 years</p>
<p>6. How many permanent employees does the business have?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 0 - 4</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 - 19</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 20 - 49</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 50 - 199</p> <p><i>*If you answered either option 1 or 2 in Q6 please continue to Q7.</i></p>
<p>7. How many permanent employees does the small business have?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 0</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 2</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3 - 4</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 5 - 10</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 11 - 19</p>
<p>8. What is the business's legal form of ownership?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> PTY (LTD)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Closed Corporation (CC)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Partnership</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Joint Venture</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Sole Proprietor</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Cooperative</p>
<p>9. What is the yearly turnover of the business in Rands?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Less than 200,000</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 200,000 - 1,000,000</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 1,000,000 - 3,000,000</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 3,000,000 - 6,000,000</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 6,000,000 - 16,000,000</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 16,000,000 - 32,000,000</p>
<p>Thank you for your time and participation!</p>

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