

Analysis of Marketing Strategies in Newbridge College During Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Studies have been conducted on analysis of marketing strategies in Newbridge College Malacca during Covid-19 pandemics. In the beginning of the year 2020, this Coronavirus (Covid-19) started to be transmitted all over the world which infected virus by breathing. Due to this virus, all the institutions to be closed and conducted all the education activities via online. This study examines about the framework that covers the Newbridge College upon selection process for students through marketing and promotional materials during the Covid-19 pandemic. Other than that, twenty academic staff of Newbridge College randomly selected to answer the questions on such variables as students' needs in the institution by identify the communication channel, the education promotions, and the quality of education assessment. The research also analysis the strategy performances of marketing team on promoting the courses and scholarship offered during this pandemic via selected channels.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has created significant disruption in higher education globally, with institutions forced to rethink how they deliver teaching, learning, and student engagement. In Malaysia, the education sector is not only central to national development but also a driver of innovation aligned with the imperatives of Industry 4.0. Ensuring high-quality standards and integrating digital technologies have therefore become critical for sustaining competitiveness in the global education market. For private institutions in particular, the pandemic intensified pressures to maintain enrolments, financial stability, and institutional reputation in the face of campus closures and restricted mobility.

Newbridge College (NBC), a private institution in Malacca, illustrates the challenges and adaptations experienced by higher education providers during this period. Prior to 2020, NBC's recruitment strategy relied heavily on traditional marketing tools such as school visits, education fairs, brochures, and other direct promotional activities. The imposition of Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO) and the global shift to online learning disrupted these practices, creating uncertainty in attracting prospective students and retaining existing ones. These developments mirror wider international trends: UNESCO reported that nearly 90% of students worldwide were affected by institutional closures, while the International Association of Universities (2020) survey revealed that 80% of institutions anticipated declines in new enrolments. Such disruptions were especially critical for private colleges, which are more vulnerable to fluctuations in student intake.

Although higher education institutions in Malaysia have increasingly adopted digital platforms for teaching, less is known about how marketing strategies were adapted to sustain enrolment during the pandemic. Existing studies largely address the pedagogical implications of online learning but provide limited insight into the marketing resilience of private institutions. This creates a gap in understanding how branding, communication, and student perceptions intersect to influence recruitment during a global crisis.

This study addresses that gap by examining the marketing strategies of NBC during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it investigates three dimensions: (i) branding strategies employed to enhance the institution's appeal, (ii) students' perceptions of online learning as a determinant of enrolment decisions, and (iii) the potential role of re-engaging dropout students as a recruitment pathway. By situating NBC's experience within the broader

challenges faced by Malaysian private higher education, the study provides insights into how institutions can reconfigure marketing practices in response to crises.

The contribution of this paper lies in highlighting adaptive marketing strategies in higher education during unprecedented disruption. By analysing the interplay between institutional branding, digital communication, and student expectations, the study advances understanding of how private colleges can remain competitive in volatile contexts. It also extends the discourse on higher education marketing beyond traditional practices, emphasizing the role of crisis-driven innovation in sustaining institutional resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review establishes the theoretical and empirical foundations for understanding marketing strategies in higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores five interconnected themes: marketing strategies in education, public relations and social marketing, the impact of Covid-19 on business and marketing, transformations in higher education, and the role of communication technologies in shaping student experiences. Together, these strands highlight the dynamics of institutional resilience and adaptation in times of crisis.

Marketing Strategies in Higher Education

Marketing is increasingly recognized as an essential component of higher education competitiveness. Institutions use branding, service quality, and student engagement strategies to differentiate themselves in an increasingly saturated education market (Kumar, 2017). Research emphasizes that effective strategies are those that align institutional goals with shifting expectations of students, parents, and employers. The importance of marketing lies not only in recruitment but also in building long-term institutional reputation and student loyalty.

At the same time, marketing education itself faces challenges. Scholars highlight how neoliberal pressures, performance benchmarking, and journal quality rankings constrain innovation in marketing pedagogy and practice (Olssen, 2016; Snuggs & Jevons, 2017). This suggests that while marketing has become central to higher education, the field is also shaped by external pressures that limit responsiveness and creativity. These tensions are particularly visible in private colleges, where sustainability depends heavily on effective branding and market positioning.

Public Relations and Social Marketing

The review emphasizes a growing shift from transactional to relational marketing approaches. Social marketing and public relations are increasingly seen as tools to build trust, authenticity, and long-term engagement with stakeholders (French, 2017). Unlike traditional campaigns focused on advertising and promotion, relationship-driven strategies prioritize dialogue, transparency, and co-creation of value.

For higher education institutions, this implies moving beyond promotional brochures and events to cultivating meaningful connections with students and communities. During crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the relational dimension becomes especially critical, as institutions must demonstrate empathy, flexibility, and responsiveness to stakeholder needs.

Impact of Covid-19 on Business and Marketing

The pandemic accelerated systemic transformations in business models and marketing practices. Studies show that organizations across sectors adopted cooperative strategies, digital platforms, and corporate social responsibility initiatives to sustain relevance in volatile conditions (Chesbrough, 2020; Ritter & Lund Pedersen, 2020). In many cases, traditional competitors became collaborators, as in the Formula 1 consortium's production of ventilators for public health (de Menzies, 2020).

For higher education, the crisis highlighted vulnerabilities in enrolment and financial sustainability, particularly among private institutions. UNESCO (2020) reported that nearly 90% of global students were affected by closures, while the International Association of Universities survey revealed that around 80% of institutions expected negative impacts on enrolment. Marketing strategies thus had to pivot rapidly to digital channels,

employing telemarketing, social media, and online engagement in place of physical recruitment events. This shift underscored both the challenges and opportunities of crisis-driven innovation in higher education marketing.

Transformations in Higher Education

The literature also identifies deeper structural changes in higher education. A paradigm shift is occurring from traditional teacher-centred instruction to constructivist, student-centred approaches that emphasize active learning, collaboration, and skill acquisition (Romero-López, 2017). Work-based learning (WBL) programs further highlight the importance of aligning curricula with industry needs, though challenges remain in sustaining partnerships and managing expectations between institutions and employers (Mohamad Hisyam, 2015).

The integration of information systems and Industry 4.0 technologies has become essential for institutional resilience. Digital platforms enable more efficient resource management, support flexible learning, and enhance institutional competitiveness (Vicent et al., 2015; Välimaa & Hoffman, 2017). However, these changes also raise questions about equity, access, and the capacity of institutions to adapt effectively.

Communication and Online Learning

Communication plays a critical role in shaping institutional reputation, student satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Research highlights that effective internal and external communication enhances trust, facilitates organizational alignment, and strengthens student engagement (Dévényi, 2016; Sommerfeldt et al., 2019). The pandemic amplified the importance of digital communication channels, with platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and social media becoming central to both academic delivery and recruitment.

Social media, in particular, has been identified as a powerful tool for fostering interaction between students and lecturers. Studies show that platforms like Facebook can enhance collaborative learning, promote engagement, and build social capital (Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016; Al Rahmi & Zeki, 2017). Nonetheless, challenges persist: not all students adapt equally well to online learning, and issues such as digital fatigue, limited interaction, and quality concerns remain significant barriers (Lowenthal, 2020).

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature converges on three key insights. First, adaptive marketing and branding strategies are vital for sustaining competitiveness in higher education, particularly during crises. Second, communication technologies and social media have become indispensable in shaping institutional reputation and student engagement, though their effectiveness depends on quality interaction and strategic use. Third, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated transformations in higher education, compelling institutions to innovate rapidly while balancing sustainability and equity.

Despite these insights, gaps remain in understanding how private institutions, especially smaller colleges, reconfigure their marketing frameworks during crises. Most existing studies focus on teaching and learning adaptations, leaving institutional marketing strategies underexplored. By examining Newbridge College's experience, this study addresses this gap, offering a case-based perspective on how branding, communication, and student perceptions intersect to influence enrolment during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hypotheses Development

H1: There is a positive relationship between **branding strategies** (e.g., dual diplomas, scholarships, affordability) and the effectiveness of marketing strategies at NBC during the Covid-19 pandemic.

H2: There is a positive relationship between **students' perceptions of online learning** and the effectiveness of NBC's marketing strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

H3: There is a positive relationship between the **re-engagement of dropout students** and the effectiveness of NBC's marketing strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the marketing strategies adopted by Newbridge College (NBC), Malacca, during the Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for capturing attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of staff and students, particularly in relation to branding strategies, online learning perceptions, and re-engagement of dropout students. Given the restrictions imposed by Malaysia’s Movement Control Order (MCO), data collection was conducted remotely through Google Forms.

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of NBC’s academic staff, non-academic staff, and senior students, reflecting both internal and external perspectives on the institution’s marketing practices. NBC has a total population of 78 individuals (33 staff and 45 students). From this, a purposive sample of 20 respondents was selected, comprising lecturers, administrators, marketing officers, librarians, and senior students. The sampling strategy was non-probability and voluntary, consistent with the exploratory nature of the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured Google Form comprising two sections. Section A captured demographic information such as age, gender, occupation, and race. Section B included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed reflections on NBC’s branding strategies, communication channels, perceptions of online learning, and approaches to re-engaging dropout students. The online format ensured accessibility and compliance with pandemic-related safety measures.

Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed thematically. An initial round of coding was conducted to identify recurring concepts and patterns, followed by thematic categorization aligned with the three research objectives: (i) branding strategies, (ii) perceptions of online learning, and (iii) re-engagement of dropout students. Both exploratory and confirmatory analyses were used to validate findings against the study’s conceptual framework and hypotheses.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study’s objectives prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Respondent Demographics

A total of 20 respondents participated in the study, comprising both staff and students of Newbridge College (NBC).

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	9	45
	Female	11	55
Occupation	Academic staff	6	30
	Non-academic staff	5	25
	Students (senior)	9	45

Age group	Below 25	8	40
	26–35	5	25
	36–45	4	20
	Above 45	3	15
Ethnicity	Malay	10	50
	Chinese	6	30
	Indian	3	15
	Others	1	5

Branding Strategies

Branding remained a decisive factor in NBC’s competitiveness. The majority of respondents emphasized tuition affordability (70%) and scholarships or discounts (60%) as critical in influencing enrolment decisions during a time of financial uncertainty. In addition, dual diploma programs with Pearson BTEC (55%) were perceived as a valuable differentiator that gave students added qualification benefits. Half of the respondents also highlighted small class sizes and close lecturer–student engagement (50%) as strengthening the institution’s image. However, the suspension of school visits and education fairs meant that these branding advantages were difficult to communicate effectively, underscoring the need for strong digital marketing to replace traditional face-to-face promotion.

Students’ Perceptions of Online Learning

Findings on online learning were ambivalent. On the positive side, students valued convenience (65%), safety and continuity (55%), and adequate lecturer support (45%). These benefits reflect NBC’s successful transition to online delivery. Yet, significant drawbacks were also reported: reduced interaction and engagement (70%), internet connectivity issues (60%), and difficulties with motivation and focus (50%). These results suggest that while online learning allowed educational continuity, its effectiveness relied heavily on lecturer effort, quality of communication, and stable digital infrastructure.

Re-Engagement of Dropout Students.

Re-engaging dropout students was considered a promising but challenging strategy. More than half of respondents (55%) believed that flexible financial support, such as instalment payment plans and scholarships, could encourage dropouts to return. Another 40 percent highlighted the role of academic mentoring and counselling in ensuring their retention. Nonetheless, challenges were clear: psychological barriers (35%), such as low confidence, and the risk of repeated disengagement (25%) were identified as significant obstacles. This suggests that financial incentives alone are insufficient; effective re-engagement requires a holistic approach integrating academic, financial, and psychosocial support.

Communication Channels.

Digital communication tools became the backbone of NBC’s marketing adaptation. Social media platforms (80%), particularly Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, were identified as the most effective means of reaching prospective students. WhatsApp and email (65%) were considered valuable for personalized follow-up, while telemarketing (50%) remained useful but less impactful compared to social media. Respondents noted that although digital platforms expanded NBC’s reach, they also introduced risks of miscommunication and reduced personal engagement compared to traditional face-to-face methods.

Key Insights

Taken together, these results highlight several critical lessons. First, NBC’s branding strategies—affordability,

scholarships, dual diplomas, and small class sizes—were effective but only if communicated through robust digital channels. Second, while online learning provided continuity, its success was hindered by interaction challenges and infrastructure issues. Third, dropout re-engagement emerged as a viable growth avenue but required comprehensive support beyond financial aid. Finally, digital communication proved essential to marketing adaptation, though it could not fully replicate the relational depth of in-person interactions.

These findings illustrate how NBC, as a small private institution, navigated the pandemic by strategically combining affordability, digital adaptation, and student-centred support. However, they also reveal the limitations of rapid digital transitions and the complexity of sustaining enrolments under crisis conditions.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide valuable insights into how Newbridge College (NBC) adapted its marketing strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden shift in the higher education landscape, characterized by nationwide lockdowns and the closure of physical campuses, demanded swift institutional responses. NBC's approach illustrates how branding, online learning adaptation, and re-engagement of dropout students can collectively support institutional resilience during crisis conditions.

Branding strategies and institutional positioning

Branding emerged as a decisive factor in sustaining student recruitment. Three main strategies were identified: the dual diploma programme, scholarships, and the affordability of living in Malacca. Among these, the dual diploma was particularly influential, allowing students to graduate with both an NBC Diploma and a BTEC Higher National Diploma from the United Kingdom. This provided clear pathways to further study abroad and enhanced the employability of graduates, positioning NBC as an institution offering internationally recognized credentials at relatively low cost. Scholarships were another significant element of the college's branding. Need-based scholarships supported students from families with limited financial resources, while merit scholarships rewarded high academic performance. These initiatives not only reinforced NBC's social responsibility but also increased its attractiveness to students seeking value-for-money education during a period of financial strain. In addition, Malacca's relatively low cost of living was consistently emphasized as a competitive advantage. Compared with metropolitan centers such as Kuala Lumpur, students could pursue higher education at NBC with reduced financial burden, a factor of heightened importance during economic downturns caused by the pandemic.

Together, these strategies created a multidimensional branding approach that integrated academic quality, financial accessibility, and socio-economic relevance. The findings demonstrate that NBC's marketing effectiveness stemmed from aligning its institutional identity with the needs and constraints of prospective students. This supports the broader argument that higher education branding cannot rely on academic reputation alone but must also incorporate affordability, inclusivity, and relevance to student aspirations.

Students' perceptions of online learning

The second theme concerned perceptions of online learning, which were more complex and less uniformly positive. Respondents acknowledged that online delivery provided continuity of instruction and safeguarded health during lockdowns. Online learning was also valued for its flexibility, allowing students to access materials and participate in classes from diverse locations. However, the majority of respondents expressed concerns regarding its effectiveness compared with traditional classroom teaching. A common issue was the reduction of interaction and engagement. Students often felt less connected to lecturers and peers, limiting opportunities for discussion, collaboration, and immediate feedback. For lecturers, the transition to virtual platforms made it difficult to assess comprehension and sustain motivation, particularly when students were reluctant to participate actively in online sessions.

Technical challenges, including unstable internet connections and limited access to devices, further constrained the effectiveness of virtual learning. Respondents also noted that students were more easily distracted in online settings, which compromised focus and reduced overall learning outcomes. While online platforms functioned

as a necessary emergency solution, they were unable to replicate the pedagogical richness of face-to-face learning.

These findings highlight both the strengths and limitations of NBC's response. On one hand, the rapid transition to digital delivery demonstrated institutional adaptability and a commitment to maintaining educational continuity. On the other hand, the weaknesses identified underscore the need for longer-term investment in digital infrastructure, lecturer training, and the design of interactive and student-centered online pedagogies. Without such improvements, online learning risks being perceived as inferior to classroom teaching, which may negatively affect student satisfaction and institutional reputation in the long run.

Re-engagement of dropout students

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in the exploration of strategies to re-engage dropout students. Respondents identified several approaches with strong potential: tuition fee reductions, modular short courses, and skill-based certification programmes. Tuition discounts were seen as a practical incentive to reduce financial barriers, while modular and short-term offerings provided flexible entry points for students unable to commit to full-time study. Skill-based certifications, such as training in computer literacy or professional competencies, were viewed as particularly attractive to students seeking career advancement.

The findings reveal that dropout students' motivations for re-enrolment extended beyond academic qualifications. Many sought opportunities to enhance employability, acquire new skills, and improve their career trajectories. This suggests that re-engagement strategies must be designed with attention to both economic realities and labour market demands. By offering flexible and affordable programmes that balance academic and vocational outcomes, NBC can expand its market reach, strengthen its inclusivity, and reinforce its role as a provider of lifelong learning opportunities.

Implications of the findings

The analysis underscores that NBC's resilience during the pandemic rested on a multidimensional approach that integrated branding innovation, adaptation to online learning, and targeted re-engagement initiatives. Branding through dual diplomas, scholarships, and affordability served as a foundation for recruitment by presenting a clear value proposition to prospective students. Online learning, despite its limitations, ensured academic continuity and highlighted the institution's willingness to innovate under crisis conditions. Efforts to re-engage dropout students reflected NBC's responsiveness to diverse learner needs and its recognition of higher education's socio-economic role.

From a broader perspective, the study demonstrates that effective marketing in higher education requires more than promotional activities. It involves aligning institutional strategies with student expectations, socio-economic realities, and technological capacities. In this sense, marketing is not an isolated function but an integrated element of educational quality, accessibility, and inclusivity. The evidence also highlights that crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic expose institutional weaknesses but simultaneously create opportunities for innovation. Institutions that can adapt their branding, pedagogy, and outreach strategies are better positioned to sustain enrollment and enhance their long-term competitiveness.

While NBC's strategies were effective in many respects, the study also points to areas requiring continued improvement. In particular, online learning must evolve beyond emergency delivery to become a credible and engaging mode of education. This will require investment in interactive platforms, professional development for lecturers, and mechanisms to strengthen student engagement. Similarly, re-engagement initiatives for dropout students must be systematically developed, marketed, and aligned with labor market needs to maximize their impact.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

In summary, the study provides a detailed examination of how a private higher education institution in Malaysia adapted to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. NBC's branding strategies effectively reinforced its market

positioning, its online learning initiatives ensured continuity despite limitations, and its re-engagement approaches highlighted new opportunities for inclusivity and institutional growth. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of higher education marketing during crises and offer practical insights into how institutions can balance academic quality, financial accessibility, and student-centered innovation to remain resilient in uncertain environments.

CONCLUSION

The study provides an in-depth analysis of marketing strategies employed by Newbridge College (NBC) during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting how the institution adapted to unprecedented disruptions in higher education. The findings indicate that NBC's marketing efforts were centred on three key dimensions: strengthening branding strategies, addressing student perceptions of online learning, and targeting re-engagement of dropout students.

A major outcome of the research was the identification of branding strategies that proved effective in sustaining recruitment and institutional visibility throughout the pandemic. Central to this was the introduction of the **Dual Diploma pathway**, which allowed students to graduate with both an NBC Diploma and a Pearson BTEC Higher National Diploma. This unique offering positioned the institution competitively within Malacca, attracting students by ensuring international recognition at a single tuition fee. In addition, **scholarships and merit-based awards** were actively promoted to ease financial burdens during the crisis, while the relatively **low cost of living in Malacca** served as an auxiliary branding advantage. Collectively, these strategies underscored the institution's emphasis on affordability, accessibility, and long-term career value.

The research also examined the effectiveness of these branding approaches. Respondent feedback revealed that the majority viewed such strategies as instrumental in encouraging higher enrollment despite the pandemic restrictions. Most participants emphasized that scholarships and dual qualifications provided not only financial relief but also enhanced educational value, thereby sustaining confidence in the institution. This aligns with broader scholarship on the significance of differentiation in educational marketing during crises.

A second dimension of the study addressed **student perceptions of online learning**, which became the primary mode of instruction following national lockdowns. While online delivery enabled academic continuity, responses highlighted mixed perceptions. A significant portion of students and staff indicated that virtual platforms could not fully replicate the engagement and comprehension levels achieved in face-to-face classrooms. Challenges included limited interaction, distractions during online classes, and reduced lecturer ability to monitor student understanding. Despite these limitations, Microsoft Teams emerged as the preferred platform due to its stability and collaborative features, suggesting that platform choice is integral to sustaining teaching quality in online environments. The findings reinforce existing literature that stresses the importance of interactivity, effective communication channels, and digital readiness in online higher education.

The third major focus was **re-engagement of college dropout students**, a group identified as an untapped yet valuable recruitment pool. The study found broad support among respondents for providing tailored opportunities to this segment, such as reduced tuition fees, short online courses, and skill-based training certifications. These initiatives were not only perceived as beneficial for individuals seeking career progression but also as an effective marketing strategy for expanding NBC's enrollment base during the crisis. By offering flexible learning pathways and professional training, NBC positioned itself as a socially responsive institution that could enhance employability and lifelong learning.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that NBC's pandemic-era marketing strategies combined **financial accessibility, innovative program structures, technological adaptation, and social inclusion**. These approaches reflect a broader trend within Malaysian private higher education institutions to sustain competitiveness and resilience under conditions of uncertainty. Importantly, the results also highlight the reciprocal relationship between student perceptions and institutional marketing performance. Where marketing initiatives directly addressed affordability and employability, students responded positively, thereby reinforcing NBC's brand credibility.

Overall, the study provides valuable insights into how a mid-sized private college navigated the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic through adaptive marketing. The integration of dual qualifications, financial aid, and targeted re-engagement of dropout students illustrates a multi-pronged approach that balanced institutional sustainability with student needs. Moreover, the analysis of online learning perceptions underscores the importance of continued investment in digital pedagogy and communication infrastructure. These findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on educational marketing in times of crisis and suggest that institutions that align their strategies with affordability, inclusivity, and technological adaptability are better positioned to thrive in post-pandemic higher education landscapes.

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