

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL BRANDING AND SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN SHAPING STUDENT RECRUITMENT DECISIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr. Aqila Rafique^{*1}, Misbah Khalid²

^{*1}Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan

²MPhil ELM Scholar, Department of Education, University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan

¹aqila.rafiq@umt.edu.pk, ²misbakhalid12@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Aqila Rafique

Abstract

Social media has become a central space where universities communicate their identity, engage prospective students, and shape perceptions of institutional credibility. This study explores how digital branding and social media engagement are perceived to shape student recruitment-related decision-making in higher education. Using a qualitative approach, data were generated through 30 semi-structured interviews with prospective students and four focus group discussions with current university students, alongside a thematic review of official university social media posts across platforms. The analysis identifies key branding strategies, including storytelling and testimonial content, visually driven messaging, interactive communication, and student ambassador representations that signal campus culture and academic value. Participants described authentic, interactive, and visually engaging posts as more persuasive than traditional marketing. They also highlighted the importance of responsiveness and community interaction in shaping trust. Participants interpreted visible peer validation (comments and shares) as reinforcing brand credibility by providing social proof and reducing uncertainty. The findings suggest that social media operates as a reputational and relational space where prospective students interpret cues about quality, fit, and belonging. The study contributes qualitative insight into digital recruitment communication and offers practical implications for universities seeking ethically responsible and student-centred social media strategies.

Introduction

In the digital era, universities worldwide are increasingly leveraging digital branding and social media engagement as essential tools for student recruitment. As traditional marketing strategies lose effectiveness among tech-savvy students, institutions are adopting innovative approaches to connect with potential applicants through platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and TikTok

(Sadtyadi, 2025). These platforms allow universities to create dynamic content, foster engagement, and build a strong institutional brand, thereby influencing prospective students' perceptions and enrolment decisions. The importance of social media in higher education marketing has grown significantly, particularly in response to globalization and increased competition among universities (Garcés & Bastías, 2025). Research indicates

that institutions that actively manage their online presence and engagement tend to attract a more diverse and global student body (Heymann et al., 2025; Rafiq, 2026). Research in higher education marketing suggests that prospective students use social media to evaluate institutional credibility, student experience, and ‘fit’, making peer content and visible engagement important cues in decision-making (Rutter et al., 2016; Shields & Peruta, 2019; Perera et al., 2023). Moreover, interactive elements such as student-generated content, live Q&A sessions, virtual campus tours, and influencer collaborations have been shown to enhance brand perception and are associated with stronger interest and intention to apply (Webb, 2025).

A growing body of literature highlights that data-driven marketing strategies, including

social media analytics, AI-driven personalized campaigns, and digital storytelling, significantly improve recruitment efficiency (Athukorala & Jayasundara, 2025). Additionally, studies have found that students increasingly rely on peer reviews, social media testimonials, and influencer endorsements when choosing a university (Blessing, 2024). This study aims to explore the evolving role of digital branding and social media engagement in university recruitment, evaluating the effectiveness of different platforms and strategies in influencing student choices. By analyzing multi-platform marketing trends and engagement metrics, this research will offer valuable insights into best practices for universities looking to enhance their online presence and attract top-tier students.

Table 1. Research Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives	Relationship	Research Questions
To explore how universities use digital branding strategies to attract prospective students.	Branding impact	How do universities design and implement digital branding strategies for student recruitment?
To examine the role of social media engagement in influencing prospective students' decisions.	Engagement tactics	What types of social media engagement strategies are perceived by students as most persuasive in shaping university choice?
To analyze students' perceptions of universities based on their digital presence and marketing efforts.	Student perceptions	How do students perceive universities based on their digital marketing and branding efforts?

Literature Review

Digital branding and social media engagement have transformed university student recruitment. With students relying on online resources to explore institutions, universities must establish a strong digital presence to attract prospective applicants. This literature review explores the latest research on digital branding, social media engagement, and digital marketing strategies in student recruitment.

The Role of Digital Branding in Higher Education

Digital branding involves creating a unique online identity for a university, enhancing its reputation, and influencing student decision-

making. Recent studies underscore the critical role digital branding plays in enhancing a university's appeal and influencing prospective students' choices. Garcés and Bastías (2025) conducted a comprehensive bibliometric analysis that found a direct correlation between strong digital branding efforts and increased levels of student engagement and application rates. Their findings suggest that universities investing in cohesive and recognizable online identities are better positioned to attract student interest in an increasingly competitive landscape. These results highlight the significance of not only having a digital presence but also curating it thoughtfully to

align with institutional values and student expectations.

Similarly, Sadtyadi (2025) emphasizes the value of consistency in digital branding across various platforms. Through qualitative interviews with students, the research reveals that a harmonized brand message conveyed through university websites, social media, and digital campaigns builds trust and familiarity among prospects. Supporting this, Isaiah and Adams-Osigbemhe (2024) conducted a quantitative survey of student applicants to demonstrate that institutions with visually appealing and strategically branded websites and social content experienced measurable increases in enrolment figures. Together, these studies collectively advocate for higher education institutions to prioritize digital branding as a strategic tool for visibility, engagement, and conversion in the student recruitment process.

Social Media Engagement in Student Recruitment

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn play a vital role in university marketing, fostering student engagement and influencing decision-making. Social media has become an indispensable tool in the recruitment strategies of modern universities, offering dynamic ways to connect with prospective students. Webb (2025), through a case study focused on Instagram and LinkedIn communities, illustrates how universities that nurture active social media communities witness significantly higher levels of student engagement and an uptick in applications. These digital spaces not only humanize the institution but also serve as platforms where students can observe campus culture, values, and peer experiences in real time, factors that heavily influence their decision-making.

Further enriching this discourse, Blessing (2024) employs a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and interviews to assess the effectiveness of interactive social media content. The study finds that initiatives like live Q&A sessions, virtual campus tours, and student takeovers lead to more informed and emotionally connected applicants. Similarly, Sadtyadi (2025) utilizes social media analytics

to demonstrate the impact of frequency and quality in content posting, concluding that consistent, engaging, and visually appealing posts significantly boost student interaction metrics. Together, these studies affirm that strategic social media engagement not only builds visibility but also deepens the relational connection between universities and potential students, driving higher conversion rates in student recruitment. Prior research on higher education marketing consistently shows that prospective students rely on digital platforms to assess institutional credibility, fit, and student experience, making social media a key site for reputation signalling and choice formation (Perera et al., 2023).

Digital Marketing Strategies for Effective Recruitment

Universities employ various digital strategies to maximize engagement and support recruitment-related outcomes, including audience segmentation, personalization, and student ambassador or influencer partnerships. In the competitive landscape of higher education, universities are increasingly leveraging targeted digital marketing strategies to drive engagement and improve recruitment outcomes. Du and Li (2020), through a case study of top-ranking institutions, highlight how data-driven marketing approaches, such as audience segmentation, analytics-informed ad placements, and behavioral tracking, lead to improved student engagement and recruitment success. These strategies allow universities to tailor messages to specific demographics, ensuring that the right content reaches the right audience at the most impactful time.

Adding to this, Labausa et al. (2023) explore the importance of personalization in digital outreach. Their survey-based research finds that personalized emails, landing pages, and chatbot conversations create more meaningful interactions with prospective students, ultimately aiding in decision-making. Raaper et al. (2024) further emphasizes the power of authenticity and relatability by examining influencer partnerships. Their experimental study demonstrates that universities incorporating student influencers into their campaigns see a measurable increase in

enrolment rates, particularly among Gen Z applicants who place high value on peer recommendations and real-life testimonials. These findings underscore the need for strategic, personalized, and socially attuned marketing tactics in higher education recruitment.

Challenges and Future Directions

While digital branding is effective, challenges exist, including privacy concerns, content authenticity, and algorithm changes on social media platforms. Future research should explore AI-driven recruitment, virtual reality (VR) in branding, and measuring long-term engagement. While digital branding and social media engagement offer clear benefits for university recruitment, several challenges hinder their full potential. Shields and Peruta (2019) note that privacy concerns among students remain a key obstacle. As students become more aware of data usage and digital surveillance, institutions must work to establish trust through transparent data policies and enhanced cybersecurity measures. Additionally, Gyamfi et al. (2022) find that overly curated or polished content can negatively affect perceptions of authenticity, making students skeptical of a university's brand. Their study advocates for the inclusion of student-generated content and more informal storytelling formats that resonate better with prospective students.

Cingillioglu et al. (2024) add to the conversation by identifying the instability caused by frequent algorithm changes on social media platforms. These shifts can drastically reduce organic content reach, undermining even the most well-planned campaigns. Their research suggests that universities diversify their content strategies across multiple platforms to mitigate algorithmic risk and maintain visibility. Looking forward, researchers are increasingly pointing to emerging technologies as new frontiers for recruitment. The potential use of AI in personalized outreach, virtual reality (VR) for immersive campus experiences, and analytics tools to track long-term engagement presents

promising areas for future exploration. As the digital landscape evolves, so too must the strategies institutions employ to connect with a new generation of tech-savvy students.

While existing scholarship has made significant progress in examining authenticity, platform affordances, and peer influence in digital branding contexts, much of this work remains fragmented along either content-level or platform-specific lines. Prior studies tend to treat authenticity as either an aesthetic performance or a relational outcome, with limited attention to how strategic polish and perceived authenticity coexist rather than compete. This study extends existing findings by examining how authenticity and polish operate simultaneously within platform-specific affordances, rather than positioning them as binary opposites. In doing so, it challenges the dominant assumption that increased production quality necessarily undermines perceived authenticity and instead suggests a more conditional, context-dependent relationship shaped by peer cues and platform norms.

Notably, the literature also reveals unresolved tensions regarding peer influence. While some studies emphasize peer endorsement as enhancing credibility and trust, others suggest it may dilute perceived authenticity by signaling commercial intent. These contradictory findings point to a gap in understanding how peer influence is interpreted under varying conditions of brand visibility and platform affordances. By empirically examining these tensions, the present study contributes to resolving inconsistencies in prior research and clarifies when peer influence amplifies versus undermines perceived authenticity and brand value.

The literature shows that recruitment outcomes are shaped not only by visibility but also by credibility cues, peer validation, and interactive engagement. Building on these insights, the present study synthesizes brand equity and social influence as primary analytical lenses, supported by sensitizing concepts from technology acceptance and engagement research (see Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of key literature on digital branding, social media engagement, and digital marketing in higher education recruitment

Theme area	Key study/studies	Main contribution / key finding	Method / evidence type	Relevance to this study
Digital branding in higher education	Garcés & Bastías (2025); Sadtyadi (2025); Isaiah & Adams-Osigbemhe (2024)	Strong, consistent digital brand identity is linked with stronger engagement and perceived credibility; branded websites/social presence can support recruitment outcomes	Bibliometric analysis; qualitative interviews; quantitative survey	Supports brand equity lens (trust, reputation, perceived quality) and justifies examining branding cues in content + participant perceptions
Social media engagement and recruitment	Webb (2025); Blessing (2024); Sadtyadi (2025); Perera et al. (2023)	Social platforms enable community-building, real-time interaction, and reputational signalling; interactive formats (Q&As, tours, takeovers) can strengthen connection with prospects	Case study; mixed methods; analytics; prior HE marketing research	Supports social influence lens and explains why engagement features and peer content matter in student choice formation
Digital marketing strategies	Du & Li (2020); Labausa et al. (2023); Raaper et al. (2024)	Data-driven targeting and personalization can increase relevance; authenticity and influencer/student ambassadors can shape perceptions and intentions	Case study; survey; experimental design	Informs coding of strategies (personalization, influencers) and links recruitment messaging to intention and perceived fit
Challenges and limitations	Shields & Peruta (2019); Gyamfi et al. (2022); Cingillioglu et al. (2024)	Privacy concerns affect trust; overly polished content can reduce authenticity; algorithm changes can reduce reach and require cross-platform diversification	Empirical research / conceptual insights	Frames constraints around trust, authenticity, and platform dependency; informs discussion and implications

Digital branding and social media engagement are essential for university recruitment. Research highlights the importance of consistent branding, strategic social media use, and targeted digital marketing. Future studies should focus on emerging trends like AI-driven recruitment and immersive technologies to enhance student engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on brand equity and social influence as complementary but analytically distinct theoretical lenses. Brand equity is employed to explain how accumulated

perceptions, such as credibility, consistency, and symbolic value, shape long-term brand meaning and consumer attachment. In contrast, social influence accounts for the immediate, relational mechanisms through which peer cues, endorsements, and social validation affect perception and decision-making. While brand equity captures the enduring value embedded in the brand itself, social influence explains situational shifts in perception driven by interpersonal and platform-mediated interactions. Distinguishing between these frameworks enables a more nuanced analysis of how stable brand meanings

interact with dynamic social signals in digital environments. This study is primarily informed by brand equity and social influence as analytical lenses for interpreting how universities use social media for recruitment, as shown in Figure 1. Brand equity is used to examine how trust, perceived quality, institutional reputation, and loyalty cues are constructed through digital branding and platform content. Social influence is used to interpret peer validation, student testimonials, influencer/alumni endorsement, and network effects that shape prospective students' perceptions and intentions. Concepts from technology acceptance and engagement research (perceived usefulness, ease of

interaction, and participation) are used as supporting sensitizing concepts to interpret participant accounts but are not treated as separate explanatory models. These lenses guided the development of the coding framework by mapping interview/FGD and post-level indicators (credibility cues, testimonial narratives, peer endorsement, interactive affordances) to the two primary constructs. In the analysis that follows, brand equity is used to interpret longer-term value construction and brand meaning, while social influence is applied to explain short-term perceptual shifts driven by peer interaction and platform affordances.

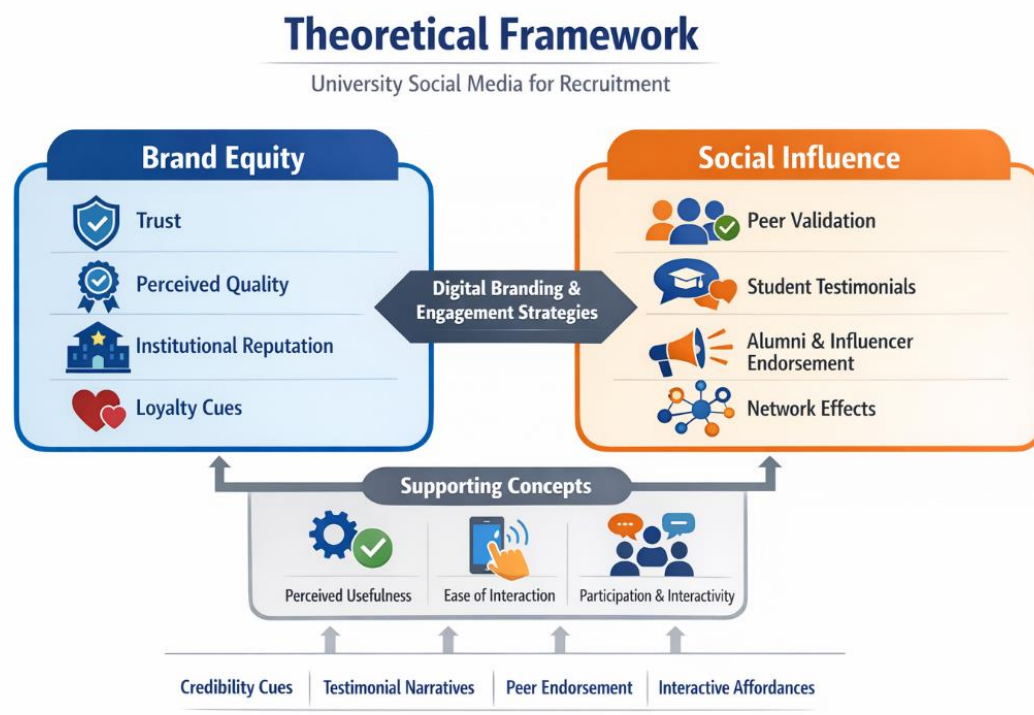


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach to explore the role of digital branding and social media engagement in student recruitment within higher education institutions. The study aimed to understand the perceptions, engagement behaviors, and decision-making processes of prospective students influenced by digital marketing strategies. The research was

exploratory in nature and followed an interpretivist paradigm, allowing for an in-depth examination of students' experiences and perspectives on university branding efforts in digital spaces. To answer research questions, multiple qualitative data collection techniques were employed, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and thematic content analysis of social media

materials. These methods provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of how students interact with university digital branding strategies and how such interactions influence their enrolment decisions.

Research Design & Sampling Strategy

A large sample was selected to ensure a diverse range of insights. Data was generated through 30 semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions (FGDs). The interview

sample comprised 30 prospective students (aged 18–30) who were considering applying to a university. In addition, four FGDs were conducted with current university students (n = 20; 5 participants per group), producing a total of 50 unique participants. No participant took part in both an interview and an FGD. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via university social media pages and student networks to capture varied experiences of social media exposure and decision-making.

Table 3. Participant overview

Data source	Participant group	N	Age range	Group structure	Inclusion criteria/status
Semi-structured interviews	Prospective students	30	18–30	Individual (1:1)	Considering applying to a university; exposed to university social media
Focus group discussions (FGDs)	Current university students	20	18–30	4 groups × 5 participants	Currently enrolled; experience with university social media content

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who actively engage with universities’ digital branding content, ensuring they could provide informed and meaningful insights into how social media strategies shape recruitment perceptions and decisions. To broaden the range of perspectives, snowball sampling was then employed, allowing initial participants to refer peers with similar or contrasting experiences of university branding. Eligibility criteria required participants to be aged 18–30 years, so they were either prospective students making enrolment decisions or currently enrolled students reflecting on recent decision-making. Participants also needed to be active social media users who follow or interact with university pages on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube. Finally, recruitment sought diversity in educational aspirations by including individuals considering different types of institutions, including public, private, local, and international options.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using three complementary methods. First, to gain personalized and in-depth perspectives, 30 one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences with university branding and recruitment content. Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and explored participants’ awareness and perceptions of branding efforts, how digital content shaped trust and credibility, the role of social media engagement in university choice, and preferences for content types such as videos, testimonials, and interactive posts. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically, with participants encouraged to share concrete examples of how specific online content influenced their decision-making. Second, to capture collective meanings and the dynamics of peer influence, four focus group discussions (FGDs) were held (5 participants per group; n = 20). Each session lasted 60–90 minutes and was moderated using a structured discussion guide to prompt interaction and

comparison of views. Discussions focused on participants' responses to real university advertisements and promotional posts, preferred branding elements (testimonials, virtual campus tours, influencer collaborations), and the perceived credibility of user-generated content compared with official institutional branding. FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed to identify shared patterns as well as differences linked to participants' backgrounds and aspirations.

Third, to triangulate participant accounts, the study conducted a thematic content analysis of university social media branding materials, examining 100 public posts, advertisements, and interactive content from official university pages on platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and YouTube. Posts were analysed to identify recurring branding strategies (emotional storytelling, influencer collaborations, interactive features), and comment tone was coded manually as positive, neutral, or negative based on dominant evaluative language. This content analysis helped document patterns in branding practices and engagement signals, strengthening and contextualizing the themes emerging from interviews and focus groups.

Social media data corpus

To triangulate participants' accounts, the study also examined university social media content used for recruitment. Public posts were collected from official university accounts on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn. The sampling window covered July 2024–June 2025. Posts were selected using purposive criteria: (a) posts explicitly promoting admissions, programs, scholarships, campus life, or student testimonials; and (b) posts with high visibility (prominently featured, pinned, or high engagement). In total, 100 posts were included in the analysis. Engagement indicators (likes, shares, comments, views) were treated as descriptive signals of audience interaction, not as causal evidence of impact.

Data saturation was used as the guiding principle for determining sample adequacy. Saturation was considered reached when additional interviews and content units no longer produced substantively new codes or

insights but instead reinforced existing patterns. After the later stages of data collection, recurring themes related to authenticity, polish, peer influence, and platform affordances consistently reappeared, indicating sufficient depth and conceptual coverage for the study's exploratory aims.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. All participants were informed about the study purpose, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To protect privacy, identifying information was removed during transcription, and participants are reported using pseudonyms/codes (R01–R30; FGD1–FGD4). Data (audio files, transcripts, and coding files) were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. The study followed institutional ethical requirements for research involving human participants.

Data Analysis Approach

A six-step thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse all qualitative data. Coding was conducted by the primary researcher, who remained closely engaged with the data throughout all six phases of thematic analysis. Analysis began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview and focus group transcripts to identify recurring narratives and patterns. Next, initial descriptive and interpretive codes were applied to relevant segments of text, capturing branding perceptions, engagement behaviors, and influences on decision-making. These codes were then clustered into broader thematic categories reflecting key dimensions such as trust-building, brand credibility, emotional appeal, and peer influence. Themes were reviewed and refined through iterative comparison across interviews, focus groups, and social media materials to check coherence and consistency, before being clearly defined and named in alignment with the research questions. Finally, the findings were interpreted and synthesized into a conceptual explanation of how digital branding and social media engagement shape students' perceptions

and intentions in university recruitment. To strengthen validity and reliability, triangulation was operationalized by comparing themes across interviews, FGDs, and post-level content patterns. Member checking was also conducted by sharing brief theme summaries with a subset of participants (n = 8) and incorporating clarifications where participants indicated misinterpretation. Interpretive consistency was supported through iterative review of codes and themes

across multiple stages of analysis. Emerging interpretations were regularly revisited in relation to the original data, and analytic decisions were discussed through peer debriefing to challenge assumptions and refine theme boundaries. This reflexive and iterative approach enhanced analytical rigor while remaining consistent with an interpretivist qualitative framework.

Table 4: Thematic Coding Table (Hierarchical Structure)

Coding	Sub-Themes	Themes
Recognition of consistent colors, fonts, logos	Visual Consistency	Awareness & Perception of Digital Branding
Familiarity from repeated content exposure	Brand Familiarity	
Noticing frequent engagement from university pages	Branding Visibility	
Testimonials from alumni	Peer Influence	Trust & Credibility Through Digital Content
Real stories from students	Authenticity	
Video content from faculty and students	Multimedia Credibility	
Content feels “genuine,” not overproduced	Informal Presentation Builds Trust	
Students discovering universities via Instagram	Platform as Discovery Tool	Role of social media in University Selection
Decision influenced by university’s Instagram/Twitter content	Influence on University Choice	
Real-time updates and responses on social platforms	Responsiveness as a Deciding Factor	
Preference for testimonial videos over text	Multimedia Preference	Student Content Preferences
Engagement with polls, Q&A boxes, and interactive stories	Interactivity Matters	
Following influencer or student ambassador content	Influencer-Led Engagement	

Theme 1: Awareness & Perception of Digital Branding

Many participants demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the branding efforts of universities on social media. They described how consistent use of colors, fonts, and visual styles helped them recognize and remember certain institutions. This repetition was not seen as mere marketing but as a sign of professionalism and strategic identity. One prospective student (R03) noted,

“I always recognize their posts because they use the same color palette and style. It feels like they’ve got a solid identity.”

Such comments reflect how visual branding contributes to the perceived legitimacy and coherence of an institution, especially when seen repeatedly across platforms.

This perception of coherence also shaped familiarity. As another student shared, *“Even before I visited their website, I kept seeing their content on Instagram. It made the university stick in my mind.”* (R18).

The frequency of exposure to branded content created a sense of psychological proximity, making students feel acquainted with a university before any formal interaction. This illustrates how branding visibility can act as a primer for more serious consideration during the application phase. The initial attraction may not stem from academic prestige but from simple visual familiarity and sustained exposure.

Theme 2: Trust & Credibility Through Digital Content

Trust emerged as a central component in how participants evaluated the credibility of universities online. Content that featured real students, alumni, and faculty was frequently cited as more believable and impactful than highly polished marketing campaigns. As one participant explained,

"The alumni stories made me believe in their programs. If someone's talking about getting a job after graduation, that's real proof." (R09).

This highlights the power of peer storytelling in establishing institutional trust. Rather than polished, impersonal branding, respondents gravitated toward relatable and outcome-focused narratives.

Moreover, the authenticity of content delivery played a crucial role in this trust-building process. One current student (R14) commented,

"Their posts didn't feel overly scripted. It's like you're hearing from a friend, not a PR team."

This statement underscores how informal presentation styles can enhance perceived sincerity. By avoiding corporate tones and showcasing "real people," institutions are able to lower the psychological barrier of skepticism often associated with digital marketing. Authenticity, in this case, is not only about who is speaking but how they are framed, relatable, unscripted, and emotionally grounded.

Theme 3: Role of Social Media in University Selection

Participants consistently identified social media as a key gateway to discovering and evaluating universities. In many cases, students were introduced to institutions not through

official websites or brochures but through Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter feeds.

"I wasn't considering them at all, but after following their Instagram for a few weeks, I applied,"

shared one prospective student (R05). This quote encapsulates the profound role that social platforms play in shaping student trajectories, they are no longer supplemental but central to university discovery and consideration.

Equally important was how responsive and active a university was on these platforms. Social media served as both an information source and a channel for interaction.

"I got most of my questions answered by watching their Twitter Q&A highlights. That helped a lot," said another participant (R27).

The immediacy and accessibility of information reduced uncertainty and increased confidence in institutional transparency. In a competitive digital landscape, institutions that use their platforms to engage in real-time and provide meaningful insights hold a significant advantage in influencing student decisions.

Theme 4: Student Content Preferences

Students expressed strong preferences for content that felt real, engaging, and visually stimulating. The format mattered just as much as the message, with video testimonials and interactive posts standing out as the most impactful. As one prospective student put it, *"I usually skip reading long posts, but I'll watch a 1-minute student video testimonial every time."* (R11). This reflects a broader shift in content consumption among digital natives who value concise, authentic, and visually engaging formats over dense textual content.

Interactivity further enhanced engagement, creating a sense of participation rather than passive observation.

"They use polls and Q&As in their stories, and I always participate. It makes me feel seen," shared one current student (R15).

When universities create spaces for two-way interaction, students feel more involved and acknowledged, a dynamic that fosters emotional investment. Beyond aesthetic appeal, students' preferences reflect a desire for relational connection and representation in digital spaces, which significantly shapes how

they evaluate and emotionally connect with institutions.

Thematic Analysis of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Theme 1: Authenticity Over Polish, The Credibility of Content Sources

Across all focus groups, participants expressed a stronger sense of trust in user-generated content (UGC) compared to official university branding. Real stories from students, reviews, and informal posts were repeatedly viewed as more believable and relatable.

- In *Group 1 (Prospective Undergraduates)*, participants agreed that highly produced university videos felt “too curated” or “scripted.” One participant remarked: “The official content looks great, but I don’t trust it as much as when a student vlog their day.”

- *Group 3 (International Students)* emphasized cultural relatability in UGC: “When I see a student from my country posting about their experience, it hits differently.”

In contrast, official university branding was appreciated for providing a sense of legitimacy, but participants still viewed it as less emotionally compelling. This divergence created a dual-perception model: UGC = truth; Official = professionalism.

Theme 2: Peer Influence and Social Proof as Decision Drivers

FGDs revealed that students actively benchmark their impressions based on peer responses, testimonials, and influencer content. The power of social validation emerged as a dominant influence on brand perception.

- *Group 2 (Postgraduates)* frequently cited the presence of testimonials and alumni success stories as critical to their perception of university credibility. “When I see someone who got a job through this program, it tells me more than the ranking.”

- *Group 4 (Mixed Demographics)* emphasized influencer collaborations: “When a student ambassador posts frequently, it builds trust... it’s like I’m following a friend, not a school.”

Participants shared that they often explored comment sections, reposts, or tagged content to evaluate authentic peer reactions. The consensus across groups was that real-time peer engagement signals institutional transparency and trustworthiness.

Theme 3: Emotional Appeal and Personal Relevance in Branding Elements

There was a clear preference for branding elements that invoked emotional connection or reflected personal relevance, such as campus tours, behind-the-scenes content, or student-led Q&As.

- *Group 1* valued virtual campus tours that featured informal commentary or student guides: “If I can imagine myself there, that’s what makes it real for me.”

- *Group 3* responded strongly to emotional storytelling: “One university shared a video of a first-gen student... I cried. It stuck with me.”

Branding strategies that used humor, empathy, or everyday student life outperformed traditional stats and visuals. This demonstrates that narrative framing, not just information delivery, is central to influencing student sentiment.

Table 5. Comparative Insight Table

Focus Group	Top Valued Branding Element	Most Trusted Content Source	Key Social Influence
Group 1 (Prospective UGs)	Virtual tours, daily life videos	User-generated vlogs	Peer testimonials and relatable stories
Group 2 (Postgraduates)	Career outcome stories	Alumni profiles	Verified student success
Group 3 (International)	Culturally relatable content	International student accounts	Social media engagement from their community
Group 4 (Mixed)	Influencer/ambassador content	Instagram Stories & Q&As	Brand seen through consistent peer sharing

Interpretation

The focus group discussions revealed a rich interplay between perceived authenticity, emotional resonance, and peer influence, underscoring the complexity of how students interpret digital branding. Unlike interviews that draw on individual reflections, the group dynamics of FGDs allowed participants to build upon one another's perspectives, often validating or refining each other's experiences. This collaborative setting surfaced not only shared themes but also points of contrast, particularly across educational levels and cultural backgrounds. A consistent finding across all groups was the preference for authenticity over aesthetic perfection. Participants voiced skepticism toward overly polished or heavily scripted promotional content, associating it with marketing spin rather than genuine institutional transparency. This aligns with existing literature that highlights how Generation Z and digital-native audiences are more inclined to trust informal, real-life narratives over traditional advertising. Interestingly, this skepticism did not translate into complete dismissal of official branding; participants acknowledged its importance for establishing legitimacy and basic information. However, trust and emotional engagement were anchored in user-generated content, particularly content created by peers or student ambassadors. This distinction suggests that effective branding in higher education must balance institutional polish with peer-driven storytelling.

Thematic Analysis of Social Media Branding Strategies

To triangulate findings from interviews and focus groups, a systematic content analysis was conducted across 100 social media posts from university accounts on Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter/X, and YouTube. The analysis focused on the form, tone, and engagement performance of different branding elements. Engagement indicators (likes, comments, shares, and views) and comment tone were reviewed as descriptive signals of interaction and audience response, rather than as causal evidence of recruitment outcomes. Three

prominent themes emerged from this phase of analysis.

Theme 1: Emotional Storytelling Drives Engagement

A dominant strategy observed across platforms was the use of emotionally compelling narratives, often in the form of student testimonials, alumni success stories, and campus life spotlights. Posts that featured first-generation students, international journeys, or personal challenges overcome consistently received higher engagement.

Across the sampled posts, testimonial-style videos and short-form 'day-in-the-life' content tended to receive higher visible engagement (views, likes, comments) than static announcements. Similarly, Instagram reels featuring students sharing "a day in my life" at university campuses not only garnered likes but invited empathic responses, often from prospective students relating to their experiences. These posts triggered comment threads such as: "This made me cry. I can totally see myself here," or "As a first-gen student, I needed to see this."

Such responses point to a deep affective connection between storytelling content and the student audience. Emotional storytelling content didn't just inform, it created identification and belonging, reinforcing findings from the interviews and FGDs that emotional authenticity is key in shaping perception and intent.

Theme 2: Peer-Led and Influencer Collaborations Build Trust

Another recurring strategy was the use of influencer-style collaborations and student ambassador takeovers. These posts involved current students hosting Q&A sessions, giving informal campus tours, or sharing behind-the-scenes content. Unlike institutionally produced videos, these clips were informal, sometimes even filmed on phones, with minimal editing, a deliberate choice that aligned with Gen Z's trust in unfiltered, peer-led content. These posts were particularly effective on Instagram Stories and TikTok-style reels, where content was casual, humorous, and unscripted. Across the sampled posts, student ambassador takeovers and peer-led clips

typically attracted higher visible interaction (views, likes, comments, saves, and shares) than static announcements. Rather than treating these indicators as proof of recruitment outcomes, we interpret them as descriptive signals of audience attention and peer endorsement, consistent with participants' emphasis on authenticity and social proof.

Visible engagement indicators suggested that student ambassador posts often attracted more interaction (likes, saves, shares) than static announcements, which we interpret as descriptive signals of audience attention rather than evidence of recruitment outcomes.

Theme 3: Interactive Content Sparks Participation and Community Feel

The third key theme was the strategic use of interactive content formats to drive participation and build community. This included polls, quizzes, comment-based challenges, question boxes, and live sessions across Instagram and Twitter/X.

For instance, a weekly "Ask Me Anything" feature on a university Instagram page allowed current students to respond to prospective students' questions in real time. These posts created a dialogical space rather than one-way marketing, allowing users to shape content by asking their own questions. Similarly, universities that hosted "Vote Your Favorite Dorm View" or "Caption This Photo" contests saw spikes in both participation and positive sentiment.

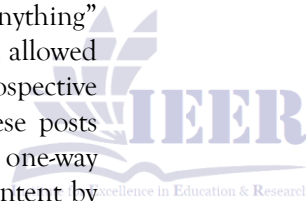
Engagement metrics confirmed that interactive features encouraged not just clicks, but conversation, many comment sections evolved into peer discussions, often with existing students offering unsolicited tips or encouragement to applicants. This behavior reflects a broader shift in digital branding: from broadcasting information to facilitating community-building.

Synthesis and Interpretation

This thematic content analysis reveals that universities succeed in digital branding when they humanize their messaging, prioritize emotional resonance, and create opportunities for interaction. Emotional storytelling provides relatability, influencer collaborations build

trust through peer authority, and interactive content fosters belonging and real-time connection. These findings reinforce the earlier qualitative insights from interviews and FGDs: students are not simply looking for academic information, they are looking for community, representation, and emotional alignment (Afzal & Rafiq, 2025).

Moreover, the data suggests that high engagement is not necessarily linked to production quality, but rather to perceived authenticity and relevance. Posts that allowed students to participate or see themselves reflected were consistently more impactful than professionally crafted yet impersonal media. This suggests that future branding strategies should prioritize relational over promotional communication, leveraging student voices, narratives, and engagement-driven formats.



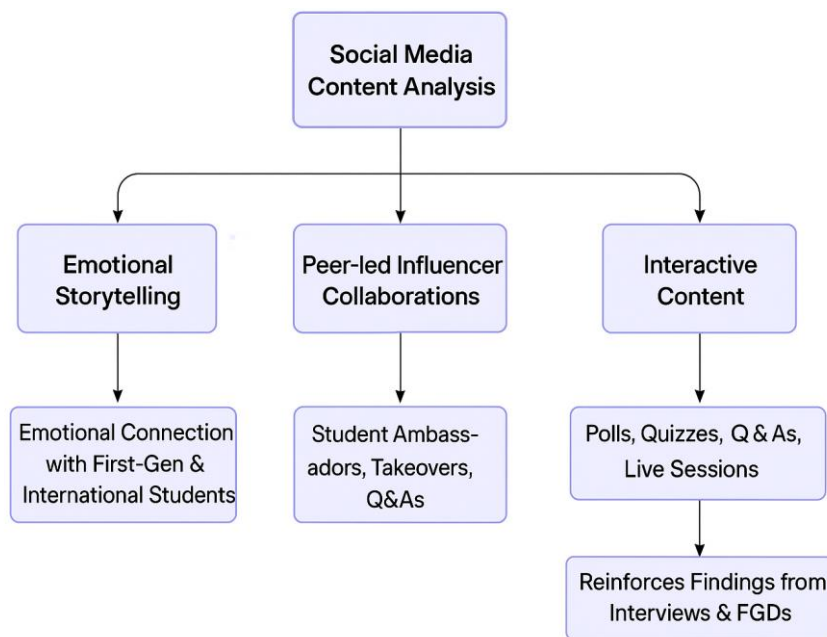


Figure 2. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Discussion

The findings from this study collectively underscore the critical influence of digital branding strategies and social media engagement on prospective and current students' perceptions, trust, and decision-making processes in higher education. Drawing insights from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and content analysis of university social media, a comprehensive understanding emerges regarding how digital platforms shape university branding effectiveness and student recruitment dynamics (Rafiq et al., 2024). One of the most prominent revelations is the personalized influence of social media content. Participants in interviews emphasized how emotionally resonant narratives and authentic content enhanced their perception of a university's credibility and trustworthiness. This supports the argument by Rutter, Roper, and Lettice (2016) that emotionally appealing branding enhances relational trust, a critical driver of student loyalty. Students valued real stories from current students, behind-the-scenes campus content, and posts that reflected inclusivity and responsiveness. This aligns with Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011), who noted that Generation Z audiences prefer

authenticity and social proof over polished promotional content.

Theoretically, these findings extend brand equity theory by demonstrating how its core dimensions, trust, perceived quality, and reputation, are actively co-constructed in digital and socially networked environments rather than passively received through institutional messaging. Traditional applications of brand equity in higher education often conceptualize branding as a top-down process, where universities communicate value propositions to prospective students. This study shows instead that brand equity in digital contexts emerges through ongoing interaction, peer validation, and emotional resonance within social media spaces. Social influence mechanisms, such as peer testimonials, visible engagement, and influencer-led narratives, function as amplifiers of brand meaning, shaping how credibility and institutional quality are interpreted. By integrating brand equity with social influence, this study highlights how digital branding operates as a relational and participatory process, reframing brand equity as something negotiated through student sensemaking rather than solely produced by institutions.

The focus group discussions illuminated how peer influence and shared interpretation of content further shape collective trust in a

brand. When participants discussed digital branding together, their preferences for specific types of branding, such as testimonials, virtual tours, and influencer-led content, surfaced more clearly. This finding confirms Song et al. (2023), who argue that peer interactions in digital spaces often reinforce or challenge brand narratives. Social validation, particularly through user comments, reactions, and shares, was noted as pivotal in shaping credibility.

Further, thematic content analysis revealed that universities most successful in engagement often combine visual storytelling, interactive media, and consistent brand messaging across platforms. This reinforces Tuten and Solomon's (2022) emphasis on integrated social media marketing strategies that consider platform-specific user behavior and content formats. The frequent use of influencer collaborations and emotional storytelling also emerged as strong engagement tools, corroborating findings from Hung and Yen (2022), that such strategies humanize institutional brands and foster student affinity. Collectively, the study suggests that effective digital branding in higher education must balance strategic content creation, audience engagement, and trust-building. The triangulation of qualitative interviews, focus groups, and content analysis adds depth and validity to these findings, highlighting the importance of multimodal engagement strategies in today's competitive educational landscape. This is particularly crucial as institutions globally compete for digitally native students who expect not only informative but also interactive and emotionally intelligent communication (Maringe & Chiramba, 2020).

While previous studies have established that social media engagement, authenticity, and peer influence matter in higher education marketing, this research advances existing knowledge by explaining how students interpret and prioritize these elements during decision-making. Rather than treating engagement metrics or content types as predictors of recruitment outcomes, this study foregrounds students' interpretive processes, revealing how authenticity, emotional

storytelling, and peer-generated content are evaluated as credibility cues. The findings move beyond descriptive accounts of 'what works' in digital branding by showing why certain strategies resonate more strongly, particularly through the reduction of uncertainty and the creation of perceived fit and belonging. In doing so, the study shifts the analytical focus from institutional communication strategies to student sensemaking practices, offering a deeper conceptual understanding of digital branding as an experiential and socially mediated process.

Moreover, this research contributes to the growing discourse on student-as-consumer models, where the brand value proposition of universities increasingly hinges on their digital storytelling capacity. Universities must move beyond static marketing to create engaging digital ecosystems that foster ongoing interaction, personalization, and responsiveness, core values that resonate with digitally literate students (Guilbault, 2016).

Limitations

This study is qualitative and interpretive; findings describe perceived influence rather than causal effects on enrolment. The social media analysis is based on a purposive sample of posts within a defined period and may not represent all institutional content. Participants were recruited through social media and student networks, which may over-represent more digitally engaged students. Future research could combine this approach with longitudinal platform analytics, application/enrolment data, or comparative multi-institution sampling to test patterns at scale.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the strategic role of digital branding in shaping student perceptions, trust, and decision-making in higher education. Through a multi-method qualitative approach comprising semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and thematic content analysis of university social media platforms, the research offers a comprehensive and detailed understanding of how branding messages are created, received,

and interpreted by prospective and current students.

The findings reveal that authentic, emotionally resonant, and interactive content is at the heart of effective university branding in the digital age. Students are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages; instead, they actively engage with and evaluate content based on relatability, peer influence, and emotional connection. This study highlights the importance of trust-building through transparency, user-generated content, and storytelling that reflects real experiences and values.

Moreover, the integration of different data sources emphasized the collective nature of perception-building, showing that while individual experiences are shaped through personal interaction with branding content, group discussions and peer validation further reinforce or challenge those interpretations. The comparative analysis of social media posts confirmed that the most engaging branding strategies are those that go beyond traditional promotional rhetoric to offer participatory, meaningful, and student-centered content. The research also underscores the growing need for higher education institutions to rethink their digital branding strategies. As competition intensifies in a globalized education market, universities must embrace a dynamic, student-informed approach to branding, one that not only markets their offerings but also creates a sense of belonging, community, and purpose through their digital presence.

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on digital marketing in higher education by providing empirical evidence on what works, why it works, and how institutions can align their branding efforts with student expectations. The insights derived can inform strategic communication planning, content development, and audience engagement practices, ultimately helping universities foster stronger, trust-based relationships with their student communities. Future research can build on this foundation by incorporating longitudinal data, exploring cross-cultural perspectives, or evaluating the impact of emerging platforms like TikTok and Threads in shaping educational brand identities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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