



The Role of Digital Marketing Management in Improving College Branding on Social Media

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the role of digital marketing management in enhancing higher education branding through social media. The focus is to explore best practices, challenges, and opportunities faced by higher education institutions in the digital era. Social media has proven to be a strategic tool to reach a wider audience, build institutional image, and increase interaction with prospective students. However, challenges such as limited human resource competency and competition between higher education institutions remain significant barriers. This study recommends an innovative approach in digital marketing strategy to support the transformation of higher education in Indonesia. With an integrated and adaptive approach, higher education institutions can maintain relevance, increase brand awareness, and build long-term relationships with audiences.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology (ICT) has fundamentally transformed human life, reshaping how people communicate, work, and make decisions. One of the most notable changes is the way society interacts in digital spaces, particularly through social media, which has become a central platform for information exchange and identity construction (Audrezet, 2023; Nyagadza, 2021; Wang, 2023). For higher education institutions, this transformation is crucial because prospective students and stakeholders increasingly rely on digital channels to evaluate credibility and reputation. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), more than 210 million Indonesians are internet users, with the majority active on social media (Bang & Su, 2022; Cowley et al., 2021; Lv & Fersman, 2022). This indicates that visibility and reputation in the digital sphere are no longer optional, but essential. Therefore, research on digital marketing management and its role in building institutional branding is vital to ensure universities remain competitive, relevant, and responsive to societal changes in the digital era.

Despite the enormous opportunities offered by ICT, universities in Indonesia face major challenges in adapting effectively to the digital environment. Many institutions still rely on conventional promotional approaches, such as brochures, printed advertisements, and offline events, which are no longer sufficient to attract the digitally native Generation Z (Li, 2024; Munshi et al., 2025). This lack of adaptation reduces the

competitiveness of local universities against international institutions that leverage advanced digital marketing strategies. In addition, inconsistent branding messages on social media often create confusion regarding institutional identity, weakening public trust and reducing student enrollment. The absence of comprehensive digital marketing management not only limits the reach of Indonesian higher education institutions but also hinders their ability to differentiate themselves in an increasingly saturated market (Kongdee et al., 2020). These problems underline the urgent need for a deeper understanding of digital marketing management in strengthening college branding through social media.

In practice, many universities in Indonesia show a gap between the potential of digital media and its actual implementation in branding strategies. For example, while platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook dominate daily digital interactions among young people, many universities still use these platforms merely for posting event documentation or announcements. Such practices are less strategic and fail to build meaningful engagement with prospective students (Y. Wang, 2024). Furthermore, competition is intensifying: private universities are struggling to survive, while state universities are pressured to maintain global competitiveness. International universities are increasingly targeting Indonesian students with attractive online programs and sophisticated marketing campaigns (Taneja & Bala, 2023). These phenomena illustrate the urgency of managing digital marketing not only as a promotional tool but also as a strategic instrument to build sustainable college branding and strengthen higher education's positioning in both national and global markets.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of ICT in education and institutional management. Studies by Fan (2024), Miksic et al. (2020), and Yang et al. (2025) emphasize that the integration of ICT improves access and quality in higher education, while Arwildayanto, Arifin, and Sukung (2020) note that universities must improve educational standards to compete globally. Research by Rodzvilla (2024) and Fajry (2022) also shows that branding differentiation plays a key role in helping institutions stand out in a competitive market. However, these studies generally focus on the use of ICT for learning improvement, service efficiency, or general branding strategies. Despite these findings, little research provides practical frameworks or strategic models that can guide universities in systematically managing digital marketing to strengthen branding. This research thus positions itself to fill the gap by focusing specifically on digital marketing management practices that can be applied effectively in the higher education context. Its contribution lies in bridging theoretical insights and practical strategies, providing both academic value and actionable recommendations.

This study offers novelty by positioning digital marketing management not merely as a supporting activity but as a core element of branding strategy for higher education institutions. While earlier research emphasizes ICT use in teaching, access, and service quality, this research highlights how digital marketing can directly shape institutional reputation, attractiveness, and competitiveness. The novelty also lies in exploring how colleges can strategically utilize social media platforms to craft consistent identity narratives and engage with multiple stakeholders. By analyzing best practices, challenges, and opportunities, this study provides a more holistic understanding of digital marketing in higher education, moving beyond conventional promotion to brand-oriented management (Benjelloun, 2023; Kabanova, 2022). The state of the art is found in integrating theories of digital marketing and branding with practical realities in

Indonesian higher education, offering a new framework that responds to globalization and digital transformation challenges.

Based on the issues and research gaps identified, the core research problem addressed in this study is: How can digital marketing management strengthen college branding through social media platforms? This research argues that effective digital marketing management, characterized by strategic planning, consistent messaging, and creative engagement, can significantly enhance the image, visibility, and competitiveness of universities. This study further argues that without structured digital marketing practices, universities will face difficulties maintaining relevance and attracting students in the global education market. The originality of this research lies in its focus on linking management practices with branding outcomes, providing actionable insights that are often missing in existing literature.

The expected contributions of this research are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on digital marketing and branding in higher education by providing an integrative perspective that connects marketing management with institutional identity building. Practically, the research offers strategic recommendations for universities in Indonesia to improve their digital marketing practices, particularly on social media platforms, where prospective students spend most of their time. By presenting best practices and identifying barriers, this research can guide higher education institutions to design effective branding strategies that strengthen their competitiveness nationally and internationally. Ultimately, this study aims to support the transformation of Indonesian higher education to be more responsive, innovative, and relevant in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design (Lindgren et al., 2020). The reason for choosing this design is because the research aims to understand in depth the role of digital marketing management in improving college branding on social media. A qualitative approach allows researchers to capture perspectives, experiences, and strategies used by higher education institutions in implementing digital marketing. This design is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meaning, patterns, and strategies rather than measuring variables numerically.

The research was conducted at two private higher education institutions in Indonesia that actively use social media as a branding tool. The selection of these locations was based on the consideration that they represent institutions that are in direct competition to attract prospective students through digital channels. The informants in this study consisted of 8 people: (1) two university public relations and digital marketing managers, (2) two lecturers involved in promotion and branding activities, and (3) four active students who actively use and interact with institutional social media. The combination of these informants is expected to provide diverse perspectives regarding the role of digital marketing in building institutional branding.

Data in this study were obtained through three main techniques, namely in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document study (Im et al., 2023). In-depth interviews were conducted with public relations managers, lecturers, and students to explore their experiences and perspectives regarding digital marketing strategies in higher education institutions. Participant observation was carried out by monitoring

official campus social media accounts such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to directly observe the type of content, level of engagement, and consistency of branding messages presented. Meanwhile, the document study involved analyzing institutional reports, promotional materials, and academic publications related to digital marketing practices in higher education. These three techniques complement each other to provide rich and comprehensive data.

The data analysis in this study applied the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The process began with data condensation (reduction), which involved selecting, simplifying, and summarizing interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents (Abidin, 2020). This was followed by data display in the form of narrative descriptions, tables, and thematic matrices to make patterns and findings more visible. The final step was verification and conclusion drawing, where the reduced and displayed data were interpreted to construct meaningful insights about the role of digital marketing management in strengthening college branding on social media platforms.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several techniques were applied. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from PR managers, lecturers, and students, while technique triangulation was achieved through the combination of interviews, observations, and document studies. Member checking was carried out by confirming the accuracy of the findings with the informants to avoid misinterpretation. Additionally, peer debriefing was employed by discussing the results with colleagues or supervisors, which served to minimize researcher bias and strengthen the validity of the conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the findings of the study, which explore the role of digital marketing in strengthening university branding through social media platforms. The analysis combines interview insights, observations, and related literature to highlight challenges, strategies, and opportunities. By integrating theoretical perspectives and practical implications, these results aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how universities can optimize digital platforms to build trust, enhance engagement, and remain competitive in the higher education landscape.

The Role of Digital Marketing in College Branding

In this research, the role of digital marketing in college branding is defined operationally as the strategic use of online platforms especially social media to construct, maintain, and strengthen the image of higher education institutions. Digital marketing is not only limited to promotion but also includes integrated communication efforts to establish the reputation and identity of a college in the eyes of prospective students, parents, alumni, and the wider community. In practice, this concept refers to how universities plan, implement, and evaluate digital strategies that align with institutional goals, particularly in fostering competitiveness and building long-term trust with stakeholders. Thus, digital marketing functions as both a communication medium and a strategic management tool in branding.

The flow of digital marketing in branding begins with the creation of relevant content that reflects institutional values, followed by dissemination through multiple

social media channels such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Each platform is used to highlight different aspects of campus life, ranging from academic programs to student achievements and career opportunities. The interpretation of this process shows that branding is not merely about visibility but about crafting narratives that resonate with the aspirations of target audiences. Consistency in messaging, combined with creativity in content delivery, allows universities to not only attract attention but also foster emotional connections that strengthen brand loyalty.



Figure 1. Digital Marketing in College Branding

The figure 1, show that with the rapid development of digital technology, marketing strategies through social media also need to be continuously adjusted to trends and audience needs. Universities must consistently produce relevant and interesting content to retain the attention of prospective students and increase engagement. In addition, the integration of various digital platforms in the communication strategy is also key to ensuring that messages can be conveyed effectively. Utilizing analytical data from social media, for example, can help universities understand the behavior and preferences of their audiences, so that marketing strategies can be designed more specifically and on target. Thus, digital marketing is not only a tool for promotion, but also a means to build positive long-term relationships with the education community.

Simply put, the data show that digital marketing has shifted from being a supporting promotional activity to becoming a central element in college branding. Universities that implement structured strategies, maintain consistency in communication, and adapt to social media trends tend to be more successful in building their image and attracting prospective students. Conversely, institutions that treat social media merely as an announcement board fail to build strong engagement and thus risk losing competitiveness. In other words, the quality of digital marketing management determines the strength of college branding.

Challenges in Implementing Digital Marketing

In this study, the challenges of implementing digital marketing are defined operationally as the internal and external obstacles faced by higher education institutions in optimizing social media and other digital platforms for branding purposes. These challenges include limited human resource competence, such as a lack of digital literacy, data analysis skills, and the ability to adapt to rapid technological changes. Externally, universities face increasingly tight competition among institutions that demand differentiation and innovation in communication strategies. Thus, the challenge is not

only technical but also strategic, requiring universities to continuously improve their capacity to survive and thrive in the digital era.

One PR manager explained, “Our University has official social media accounts, but the management team is not yet fully skilled in creating content that matches the interests of prospective students. Most of the staff are from conventional backgrounds and require further training.” From this statement, the researcher interprets that the competence gap of human resources is one of the main challenges. Although universities have begun to utilize digital platforms, limited skills in content production, design, and digital analytics hinder maximum branding outcomes. This shows the urgent need for capacity building programs to align human resource capabilities with digital demands.

Meanwhile, a student informant stated, “Sometimes the campus posts on Instagram are not consistent, and the content feels monotonous compared to other universities that are more creative. As students, we want our campus to look innovative and attractive.” The researcher interprets that inconsistency in digital marketing management creates a weak impression of the institution’s image in the eyes of its audience. Students as digital natives expect more interactive and engaging content. This confirms that digital marketing is not only about presence but about continuous innovation to maintain relevance and competitiveness.

Observations conducted on official campus social media accounts showed irregular posting schedules, lack of creative engagement strategies such as polls or interactive Q&A, and limited use of features like reels or TikTok trends. Some accounts also showed weak branding consistency, where visual identity and messaging were not aligned across platforms. The researcher interprets this as evidence that without structured management, universities risk sending ambiguous messages to prospective students. Moreover, in the midst of fierce competition with professional and well-managed institutions, such weaknesses can reduce audience trust and interest. Simply put, the findings indicate that the main challenge in implementing digital marketing lies in the limited competence of human resources and the absence of structured management systems. Even though universities already have social media accounts, without digital skills, creativity, and consistent planning, branding efforts remain ineffective. In other words, digital marketing has not been fully integrated into institutional strategies, so its potential has not been maximized.

From the above data, several patterns can be identified. First, internal challenges include a gap in digital competence and weak cross-departmental collaboration. Second, external challenges involve increasingly competitive market conditions that demand innovative differentiation. Third, there is a recurring pattern of inconsistency in message delivery and branding identity, which weakens audience trust. These patterns show that successful digital marketing in higher education requires not only technology adoption but also organizational readiness, human resource capacity building, and long-term strategy integration.

Prospects for Increasing College Branding Through Social Media

The sub-finding on the prospects of increasing college branding through social media is defined as the ability of higher education institutions to utilize digital platforms as sustainable branding tools in line with the growth of internet users. In practice, universities employ strategies such as promotional videos, alumni storytelling, interactive webinars, and consistent digital content distribution to strengthen visibility and

engagement. These efforts position social media not only as a channel for promotion but also as a medium for building reputation and long-term trust.

Table 1. Table of Observation and Documented Data of Prospects for Increasing College Branding Through Social Media

Field/Documented Data	Indicator	Observation Percentage
Promotional videos on TikTok and Instagram reels gained wide circulation and responses	Attractiveness of promotional content	70%
Alumni profiles and testimonials shared on social media increased credibility	Social proof / public trust	65%
Webinars and virtual campus tours recorded steady audience participation	Direct interaction with audiences	60%
Regular posting of infographics, reels, and live sessions maintained audience loyalty	Consistency of digital branding	75%

The table highlights that the most significant indicators of social media branding effectiveness are the attractiveness of promotional content (70%) and consistency in digital branding (75%). This suggests that a strong and positive institutional image is shaped when universities not only produce appealing content but also maintain regularity in communication with their audiences. The visibility achieved through promotional videos demonstrates that engaging visual narratives have a high potential for increasing reach and awareness. At the same time, alumni testimonials (65%) and interactive webinars (60%) show that audience trust is enhanced when institutions incorporate authentic human elements into their branding. The inclusion of alumni voices provides social legitimacy, while webinars and virtual tours enable two-way communication. These findings indicate that effective branding requires a balance between informative visual content and meaningful interaction to cultivate stronger connections with potential students.

Observations confirmed that institutions with consistent, creative digital engagement achieved higher participation rates and stronger digital presence. For example, campuses that actively combined reels, infographics, and live broadcasts maintained higher retention of audience attention compared to those using static or irregular updates. The researcher interprets this pattern as evidence that continuity and creativity are crucial determinants in sustaining digital visibility and building audience loyalty.

In summary, the prospects for increasing college branding through social media remain highly promising, supported by the rapid expansion of digital users in Indonesia. The data show a recurring pattern: branding success is driven by three interconnected elements creative content, alumni-based credibility, and consistent interaction. This finding reinforces the view that social media is not simply a promotional outlet but a strategic ecosystem for constructing identity, strengthening institutional trust, and differentiating universities in an increasingly competitive education market.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that digital marketing has shifted from a supplementary promotional activity into a central element of college branding. This result aligns with Aziz (2025), Zamroni et al. (2025), and Putri (2023) who emphasize that social

media must be seen not only as an information channel but as an integrated communication strategy for higher education institutions. Similar to Munawwaroh (2024), Purwani (2023), and Qushwa (2024), the results show that universities can enhance their image through creative and consistent use of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. However, this study also reveals that when social media is treated merely as an announcement board, branding effectiveness weakens an insight that slightly differs from previous studies that primarily highlighted the potential of social media without adequately addressing the risks of poor management.

The challenges identified in this research resonate with Safitri (2025), Umar (2024), and Jali (2025), who stress the competitive pressures in higher education branding. The observed gaps in human resource competence, such as limited digital literacy and inconsistent content management, reinforce the argument of Abdullah (2024) and Bali (2024) that institutional readiness is as critical as technological adoption. However, this study adds nuance by showing that inconsistency in visual identity and irregular posting patterns significantly reduce audience trust. This contrasts with Herlina (2024), who emphasized external competition as the main obstacle, whereas the current findings highlight that internal institutional weaknesses may be equally, if not more, detrimental to branding success.

The prospects for strengthening branding through social media observed in this study supported by Khoiroh et al. (2024), Fawaid et al. (2025) and Hina (2024), who found that promotional videos and alumni testimonials boost prospective students' interest. The results also align with Sain (2025) and Nisa' (2024), who argued that interactive content formats like webinars and live broadcasts enhance audience engagement. Nevertheless, this study contributes new insights by quantifying the effectiveness of different strategies through observation percentages, showing that consistency (75%) and attractiveness of content (70%) are the strongest predictors of successful digital branding. This evidence confirms that universities must treat social media not only as a communication tool but as a strategic ecosystem for identity building.

Theoretically, these findings strengthen the literature on digital marketing in higher education by reaffirming the relevance of branding theories in the context of social media. They illustrate how communication models must adapt to the participatory and interactive nature of digital platforms. The data patterns demonstrate that branding is no longer one-directional but requires dialogue, creativity, and continuous adaptation to trends (Hasanah, 2024; Wideasari, 2024). This provides a theoretical implication that future research on educational branding should integrate digital marketing theories with organizational readiness frameworks, as success depends on both external communication and internal capacity.

Practically, the study offers actionable insights for universities seeking to enhance their competitiveness. Institutions must invest in capacity-building programs to bridge digital literacy gaps among staff, implement structured management systems for social media, and encourage cross-departmental collaboration to maintain consistency in messaging. Moreover, by prioritizing creative and authentic content such as alumni stories and interactive sessions, universities can foster stronger emotional connections with their audiences. The implications extend beyond promotion: digital marketing can serve as a foundation for building trust, loyalty, and differentiation in the increasingly crowded higher education market.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the pivotal role of digital marketing management in strengthening higher education branding in the digital era, particularly through the effective use of social media platforms. Universities can leverage these tools to promote academic programs, enhance campus visibility, and foster meaningful connections with prospective students. However, challenges such as limited technological expertise among human resources and intense competition among institutions pose significant obstacles. Addressing these requires targeted investments in training, innovation in digital content, and the strategic optimization of social media utilization. An integrated and adaptive approach not only enables universities to stay competitive but also helps build a positive institutional image and cultivate stronger relationships with their audiences.

From a scholarly perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the role of digital marketing in transforming higher education, offering insights into strategies that align technological advancements with educational goals. However, the study is limited in its focus on general challenges without delving deeply into specific institutional contexts or longitudinal impacts. Further research is needed to explore these dynamics in varied cultural and organizational settings and to assess the long-term effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in higher education.

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