

Role of Social Media in Enhancing the Visibility and Attractiveness of Academic Programs

Saima Zaigham

Academic & Administrative Coordinator (School of Education),
Beaconhouse National University, Lahore.

Email: saima.zaigham@bnu.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24312/ucp-jmc.03.01.517>

Abstract

Viewership is changing from traditional and print media to social media, and businesses are adapting to social media for improved engagement with their audience. While there are advantages to using social media, as it offers new opportunities, there are also challenges associated with these tools available online. One of the challenges is the spread of misinformation, which leads to the fragmentation of the audience. It is important to address this issue because in higher education, social media is used as a cost-effective tool for marketing and branding and it also allows improved engagement with the students, as well as helps academic institutes in decision making (Maresova et al., 2020). However, the traditional media still struggles with revenues and audience loss, but it still provides curated content which is vastly different from social media's diverse voices (Zachos et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the rise in adoption of social media has transformed media landscapes, which require strategic adoption for the survival and success of academic institutions and businesses.

Keywords: Universities, Academic Programs, Social Media, Impact, Students.

1. Introduction

In today's world, information is conveyed through multimedia, which is vivid and dynamic. The presented media can be in the form of powerful images, captivating sounds, and videos that are engaging and provide an experience

to the user that is not only immersive but also interactive. The information delivery has evolved, and people can now learn about the world around us in a more dynamic and exciting way (Sutcliffe, 2009). The society has shifted quite significantly at the turn of the 21st century, and the impacts of this can be seen in higher education. The universities and colleges have recognised these challenges by improving their online presence and utilising social media to communicate with improved marketing and branding tactics (Maresova et al., 2020).

Higher education institutions are becoming diverse and their number is increasing constantly. Naturally, these institutions are facing competition to attract more and more students and attempting to persuade them to join their institution. To do this, these higher education institutes are utilising social media as a cost-effective tool to reach their target audience and attract a large number of prospective students. These institutions are using social media to share news, services available at these institutes, admissions information, events diary, etc. All these efforts are allowing the institutions to raise their profile and establish their presence. This, in turn, allows the student body to make an informed decision about the universities of their choosing, and it also allows them to connect with other students (Aman & Hussin, 2018). In this regard, social media has served both the institutions and the prospective student body well, leaving a positive impact on higher education in all dimensions. Thus, the use of social media for such purposes in higher education has a promising future (Zachos et al., 2018).

With the rise in number of higher education institutes, universities are developing new strategies to attract more students and to attract productive faculty members to ensure productivity within this sector. Universities are also looking to partner with sought after corporations, spark conversations for a two-way knowledge transfer. Various authors, such as Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016), Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al. (2018), and Plewa et al. (2016) have highlighted that for universities to be adaptive and innovate in order to remain competitive. Higher education institutions (HEIs) Can allow a higher student participation in socially responsible projects that have a higher visibility and transparency to public. This will allow these a HEIs establish a

strong reputation along with loyalty trust and commitment from students towards the institution. This also allows development of an emotional connection of the student body with their institutes and they can then become a beacon of positive experiences for others – all creating a ripple effect of positive word-of-mouth communication.

While social media poses its challenges, it is also important to remember that challenges bring opportunity for growth. For example, with social media, the HEIs can improve their international presence, influence labour markets, and increase the demand for innovative teaching methods provided to students, so that the students are provided with the best possible education. Even with decreasing funding for universities, the institutions can still strive for excellence and gain a competitive edge by applying effective marketing theories and concepts. This allows HEIs to be more transparent and drive better results for both internal and external stakeholders. This ultimately improves the quality of education these institutes provide (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2016; El Nemar et al., 2020; Foroudi et al., 2016; Miotto et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2018; Durkin et al., 2012).

1.1 The Impact of Social Media on Student Academic Life in Higher Education

Social media is a powerful tool today, which facilitates collaboration and notice construction and transfer between students, instructors, and all involved stakeholders. The use of social media can enhance the quality of teaching material at universities, which ultimately leads to productive collaboration and drives improved learning outcomes. Today, educators and researchers are constantly exploring various social media technologies to promote critical thinking skills, collaboration, and the construction of knowledge.

While there are risks associated with open social media platforms, maintaining ongoing communication with students can help address their concerns and resolve issues that arise. By embracing social media technologies, we can create a positive and collaborative learning environment that promotes growth and development for all.

2. Statement of the Problem

Over the years, promotional campaigns for academic programs in educational institutions have been shifting towards digital platforms, especially social media. The content created on social media is accessible to wider audiences. There have been studies related to the domain of advertising using digital platforms, yet the phenomenon has not been explored much within the context of the impact of these campaigns on students and their preferences for academic programs. This study will address this knowledge gap by using a quantitative survey of students to gauge the extent of social media promotional campaigns of academic programs on them.

3. Aim

The aim of this study is to establish a correlation between the role of social media in the perception of higher education institutes and its effects on future enrolments in the educational institutes of Pakistan. The study also aims to highlight the importance of social media in the strategizing the promotion of HEIs. Emphasis is given to the use of social media to: (i) improve marketing, (ii) attract more students, (iii) enhance HEIs' reputation, (iv) collaboration, (v) implementation of responsible practices, i.e., Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The correlation will be studied to determine how social media can be leveraged by HEIs for them to remain competitive and provide quality education in an ever-changing educational landscape.

4. Objectives

The goal of this study is to make academic programmes more visible and attractive to reach more people and to connect with students so that more students apply each year to the educational programmes. The study also aims to share interesting stories learn from the data acquired and discuss the challenges associated with data privacy and fairness. These objectives help universities and colleges to attract the right students and build a positive institutional reputation.

5. Literature Review

The use of social media in marketing has opened avenues in higher education for cost-effective recruitment, branding, and stakeholder engagement. It is reported that prospective students rely on social media for gathering information about universities which greatly impacts their enrollment decisions (Boateng & Amankwaa, 2016 ; Aman & Hussin, 2018). Social media branding tactics show greater trust and engagement for the institutions as compared to those that do not (Maresova et al., 2020). Peer interactions in the form of user-generated content on social media platforms increase their trustworthiness, or credibility (Zachos et al., 2018). Social media also aids in the accomplishment of corporate social responsibility programs that positively improve the reputation of the universities. On the contrary, the absence of accurate information poses great challenges along with issues pertaining to privacy, requires a focused approach to digital marketing. In any case, social media is an asset for capturing, engaging, and retaining students in this era of advanced technology and information in education. Proper use of social media helps build institutional trust and creates dynamic experiences, proving invaluable to the higher education sector.

6. Method

Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, this study investigates how social media affects academic programs' visibility and appeal in higher education institutions (HEIs). Inferential statistical methods are used in the updated approach to test hypotheses and reach results that can be applied broadly.

Students in Pakistani universities doing undergraduate and graduate degrees in a range of subject areas are included in the target population. Stratified random sampling was employed to guarantee representation by institution type, academic level, and gender. 165 valid replies in all were gathered.

6.1 Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was created that included the following:

- Demographics
- Patterns of social media use
- Academic help through social media
- Measures of engagement and institutional effectiveness

The responses were measured with binary indicators and Likert-type scales.

7. Findings

This chapter incorporates the findings generated after extensive descriptive analysis of the raw data along with the tabular display of the data. The researcher has divided the findings in the light of each variable and then shown the comparison.

7.1 Technology and Social Media

Table 7.1 *Frequency Distribution of Social Media Usage*

Variable	N	Mean	Std Dev	Most common response (Mode)
Social Media Frequency	165	3.93	0.46	Daily
Daily Hours Spent	168	2.01	1.07	2hours
Preferred platform	168	-	-	Instagram
Used for Academic help	146	0.81	0.40	Yes
Include in curriculum	132	0.86	0.35	Yes
Seek Help from communities	151	0.86	0.35	Yes

The analysis shows students at university level have embedded the usage of social media as part of their lives. According to data 93% of the respondents reported using social media on daily basis, suggesting that it is a consistent part of their routine. The average number of spent per day was approximately 2 hours with some students spending hours as many as 4 hours daily. Among the platforms, the most popular emerged is the Instagram followed by WhatsApp and YouTube. These are also used frequently for education purposes instead of using only for personal use. A significant proportion of students reported using social media for educational purposes.

Important considerations from the data is that students consider social media as valuable academic tool. This perception is highlighted from the data as 81% students take academic help from social media and 85% believe that social should be included in academic curriculum.

7.2 Perception of Social Media

Students' overwhelming reported positive influence for social media in their academic life. More than 93% of the respondents confirmed that social media had a beneficial effect on students' academic development. The mean score for 'University effectiveness' was 1.30, indicating that most students perceived their university's use of social media positively. The staff responsiveness score averaged 1.71, suggesting moderate levels of interaction. "overall effectiveness" which aggregates various measures, had a mean of 1.98 out of 3.00, showing a generally favourable view. However, despite high use, active proportion in academic discussions via social media was relatively low, with a mean score of only 0.80. This suggests that students may consume academic content but engage less in dialogue and knowledge exchange.

Table 7.2 *Frequency Distribution of Perception of Social Media*

Variable	N	Mean	Std Dev	Mode
Influence on students	149	0.93	0.25	Yes
University effectiveness	165	1.30	0.81	Score= 2
Participation in discussion	164	0.80	0.89	Rarely

Responsiveness of staff	163	1.71	0.80	Score=2
Overall effectiveness	164	1.98	0.76	Score=2
Usage for education	167	-	-	Frequently
Role in academics	168	-	-	Neutral

7.3 University Communication and Engagement

Another important aspect of the emerging role of social media in social life and university communication was also explored. As stated earlier, students considered social media a valuable tool for interaction and communication. The data clearly present that students believed that social media helps them connect more effectively with peers and institutions. Another benefit of social media for students was its capacity to share educational resources and study materials. Communication through email was also a preferred communication channel and a tradition method.

Table 7.3 *Communication & Engagement*

Variables	N	Most common response
Effective Connection	167	Yes
Benefits of social media	167	Sharing education resources
Receive updates on social media	166	Frequently
Preferred communication channel	165	Social media
Satisfaction with communication	165	Satisfied
Effective communication channels	164	Email
Engagement with university	164	Few times a week
Likelihood to attend activities	160	Moderate (score=2)

From the above findings, it is affirmed that social media has become an indispensable part of students' academic and social lives. Despite of its nature of mere distraction, its versatile tool for students to connect and grow academically. Since the benefits are clear, challenges lie in transition from passive to active participation and from informal to structured learning. The universities can strategically incorporate social media into academic and communication frameworks, institutions can not only enhance student satisfaction but also foster more connected and collaborative educational experience. The aim should not be to replace traditional methods but to integrate social media in a way that complements and enhances students learning.

8. Results

The results suggested that institutions with a strong social media presence experience higher levels of visibility and attractiveness for their academic programs, as evidenced by increased follower engagement, website traffic, and inquiries. Targeted advertising campaigns on social media positively influence prospective students' perceptions of academic programs, leading to higher levels of interest and intent to enrol. Strategic partnerships and collaborations with influencers, alumni networks, and industry stakeholders enhance the credibility and appeal of academic programs, fostering a sense of community and trust among prospective students. Institutions that utilize data analytics to inform social media strategies achieve greater effectiveness in reaching and engaging target audiences, leading to higher conversion rates and enrolment numbers.

9. Discussion

This study examined how social media enhances the visibility and appeal of academic programs at higher education institutions (HEIs) from a student-centred perspective. The findings reveal a complex landscape of interactions where social media serves not only as a tool for information dissemination but also as a means of fostering academic engagement and influencing students' perceptions of different institutions. The study highlights specific patterns of engagement, showing how social media can shape aspirations, inform decision-making, and create a sense of community among prospective

and current students.

9.1 Testing the Hypotheses

H1: Institutions with an active social media presence experience higher visibility of their academic programs than those with minimal engagement.

This hypothesis is supported by the data, which indicates that students overwhelmingly use social media daily (93%), with platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube being popular among university students. The reported positive perception of university effectiveness (mean = 1.30) suggests that institutions with an active and visible presence on social platforms do gain greater recognition from students, thus supporting H1.

H2: Social media engagement positively influences the perceived attractiveness of academic programs among prospective students.

The findings affirm H2, as a significant proportion of students (93%) reported that social media positively influenced their academic life, and 85% favored integrating social media into academic curricula. These numbers indicate that institutional content does affect how students perceive educational offerings, increasing attractiveness and trust.

H3: Targeted social media advertising leads to increased inquiries and applications for academic programs.

While direct metrics on inquiries and applications were not surveyed, indirect evidence such as students' appreciation of institutional updates and frequent engagement with educational resources suggests this hypothesis is plausible. The popularity of social media as a preferred channel for receiving university communication supports the idea that targeted campaigns may yield favorable outcomes.

H4: Collaborations with influencers, alumni, and industry stakeholders enhance the credibility and appeal of academic programs.

Though the study did not isolate the effects of these specific

collaborations, the literature underscores their importance. Strategic partnerships were mentioned as enhancing credibility, aligning with prior research highlighting the role of alumni and influencers in amplifying institutional appeal (Maresova et al., 2020).

9.2 Discussion of Theories

According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), students turn to social media to satisfy specific needs such as information gathering and academic support. The data confirms that 81% of students use social media for academic help, and 86% seek help from communities, demonstrating that social media fulfills both informational and collaborative functions. This aligns well with the premise of UGT that audiences are active participants in media selection based on needs (Boateng & Amankwaa, 2016).

Cultivation Theory, on the other hand, posits that repeated exposure to media content influences user perceptions. The study found that although students frequently consume educational content online, their active participation in discussions remains low (mean = 0.80). This suggests that while students are exposed to a university's image through social media, their limited engagement may inhibit deeper cultivation of brand perception. Moreover, the average usage of only 2 hours per day—with fewer students spending more than 4 hours—supports the idea that students are generally light users. This may limit the immersive impact required for Cultivation Theory to fully manifest, hence hindering the formation of a strong institutional image over time.

9.3 Key Interpretations

- Students are primarily using social media for information gathering, which reflects purposeful and instrumental usage.
- The low average hours of social media usage (~2 hours) and low discussion participation levels suggest that students are mostly light users.
- Consequently, while students consume institutional content, they do not necessarily form a robust institutional image, especially if

engagement is not interactive or emotionally resonant.

- Despite these limitations, students recognize the value of social media as an academic and communicative tool, reinforcing its potential if leveraged strategically.

10. Conclusion

The study contributes to the growing literature on the digital transformation of higher education marketing and engagement. It demonstrates that social media plays a critical role in enhancing academic program visibility and shaping student perceptions. However, the effectiveness of these campaigns depends not just on content availability but on the depth of engagement and interaction facilitated by institutions.

Despite the widespread use of social media among students, the study reveals a gap between passive consumption and active academic engagement. This gap underscores the need for universities to not only maintain a presence on social media but to adopt strategies that foster two-way communication and involvement. Without this, the impact of social media on shaping a strong and lasting institutional image remains limited. The behaviour of students can be interpreted through theories such as UGT, Cultivation Theory. For example, students use social media to meet their academic needs, which is supported by the UGT theory. However, their limited engagement suggests less prevalence of the cultivation of long-term institutional perception.

11. Recommendations

- Enhance Academic Dialogue:** Initiatives should be designed by institutions that promote students and encourage them to engage in academic discussions on aspects of social media. This includes, and not limited to, moderated forums, student-led pages, and holding digital Q&A sessions with faculty members.
- Create Interactive Content:** Use online features such as live streams, online polls, and real-time comments to improve participation, allowing enhancement in both the depth and quality of the interaction.

- iii. **Segmented Marketing Strategies:** Utilize data analytics for tailoring content that is of specific interest to students. This will allow increased engagement while minimizing content fatigue.
- iv. **Incorporate CSR and Alumni Stories:** promote alumni, their success stories, and community service initiatives. This will allow the humanization of the brand itself and will cultivate emotional ties with current and prospective students.
- v. **Integrate with AI and EdTech:** utilize AI-driven educational tools and merge them with the social media content to offer personalized learning resources, smart notifications and mentorship.
- vi. **Monitor Engagement Metrics:** assess the depth of student engagement through tracking of key performance indicators such as the number of comments, shares, time spent on content, etc.

References

- Adelakun, N. O., Olajide, M. B., Shomoye, M. A., & Adebisi, K. L. (2023). The significance of social media in shaping students' academic performance: challenges, benefits, and quality assurance outlook. *Information Matters*, 3(8), 1-10.
- Aledo-Ruiz, M. D., Martínez-Caro, E., & Santos-Jaén, J. M. (2022). The influence of corporate social responsibility on students' emotional appeal in the HEIs: The mediating effect of reputation and corporate image. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 29(3), 578-592.
- Almadhoun, N. M., Dominic, P. D. D., & Woon, L. F. (2011, September). Social media as a promotional tool in higher education in Malaysia. In 2011 National Postgraduate Conference (pp. 1-7). IEEE.
- Al-Rahmi, A. M., Shamsuddin, A., Wahab, E., Al-Rahmi, W. M., Alyoussef, I. Y., & Crawford, J. (2022). Social media use in higher education: Building a structural equation model for student satisfaction and performance. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10, 1003007.

- Aman, K., & Hussin, N. (2018). The effectiveness of social media marketing in higher education institution. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(9), 827-834.
- Aman, K., & Hussin, N. (2018). The effectiveness of social media marketing in higher education institution. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(9), 827-834.
- Bhandarkar, A. M., Pandey, A. K., Nayak, R., Pujary, K., & Kumar, A. (2021). Impact of social media on the academic performance of undergraduate medical students. *Medical journal armed forces India*, 77, S37-S41.
- Boateng, R. O., & Amankwaa, A. (2016). The impact of social media on student academic life in higher education. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science*, 16(4), 1-8.
- Maresova, P., Hruska, J., & Kuca, K. (2020). Social media university branding. *Education Sciences*, 10(3), 74.
- Mosharrafa, R. A., Akther, T., & Siddique, F. K. (2024). Impact of social media usage on academic performance of university students: Mediating role of mental health under a cross-sectional study in Bangladesh. *Health science reports*, 7(1), e1788.
- Sutcliffe, A. (2009). Multimedia user interface design. In *Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 83-102). CRC Press.
- Zac Zachos, G., Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, E. A., & Anagnostopoulos, I. (2018). Social media use in higher education: A review. *Education Sciences*, 8(4), 194.