

Impact of Social Media Presence of Higher Education Institutions on Students' Admission Decision: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of social media presence of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on students' admission decisions. With increasing digital engagement, institutional branding through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Google has become a critical touchpoint in the student decision journey. Primary data was collected from 210 responses for robust statistical analysis. The study employs descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and hypothesis testing to assess the relationship between social media engagement and admission decisions. Findings reveal that social media significantly enhances institutional awareness, credibility, and perceived value, thereby influencing student choice. Content related to placements, student life, and testimonials emerged as key drivers. The study offers strategic recommendations for HEIs to optimize digital engagement and highlights limitations and future research directions.

Key Words: Digital Marketing, Social Media, HEI's, Decision making, Perception

Introduction

The decision-making process for students selecting Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has undergone a significant transformation in the digital era. Traditionally influenced by word-of-mouth, academic reputation, and physical outreach, the process is now increasingly shaped by digital touchpoints—particularly social media.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Google reviews have evolved into strategic marketing tools for educational institutions. These platforms not only disseminate information but also shape perceptions, build institutional identity, and influence behavioral intent among prospective students.

In the Indian context, where the higher education sector is highly competitive, institutions are leveraging social media to:

- Showcase placements and achievements
- Highlight campus life and infrastructure
- Build emotional connections through storytelling

Students today are **digitally native decision-makers**, relying on peer reviews, visual content, and real-time engagement before making admission choices.

Despite this shift, there remains a gap in empirical understanding of:

- How social media influences **perception vs actual decision-making**

- Which type of content has **maximum impact**
- The extent to which social media affects **final enrolment decisions**

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing student responses and evaluating the **impact of institutional social media presence on admission decisions**, with specific reference to HEIs.

2. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Foundations

The increasing integration of digital technologies into higher education marketing has necessitated the application of established behavioral and communication theories to understand student decision-making. Social media platforms function not merely as information channels but as **interactive ecosystems influencing perception, cognition, and behavioral intent**. This study is grounded in multiple theoretical models that collectively explain how social media impacts admission decisions.

2.1 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) posits that an individual's adoption of technology is primarily determined by two constructs: **Perceived Usefulness (PU)** and **Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)**.

In the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):

- **Perceived Usefulness** refers to the extent to which students believe that social media platforms provide valuable and relevant information about the institution (e.g., placements, infrastructure, faculty).
- **Perceived Ease of Use** relates to how easily students can access and navigate institutional content across platforms.

When students perceive institutional social media as both useful and user-friendly, their likelihood of engaging with the content—and ultimately considering the institution—increases significantly. Thus, TAM provides a foundational explanation for **digital engagement leading to behavioral intention**, i.e., admission decisions.

2.2 AIDA Model (Attention–Interest–Desire–Action)

The AIDA model, widely used in marketing communication, explains how consumers move through a sequence of cognitive stages before making a decision.

Applied to HEIs:

- **Attention:** Social media advertisements, reels, and posts attract student attention
- **Interest:** Informational content such as course details, faculty credentials, and campus visuals sustains engagement
- **Desire:** Testimonials, placement success stories, and student experiences create aspiration
- **Action:** Students proceed to application and admission

This model is particularly relevant as social media allows institutions to **strategically design content aligned with each stage**, thereby influencing decision-making progressively rather than instantaneously.

2.3 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that behavioral intention is influenced by three factors:

1. Attitude toward the behavior

Students' perception of the institution shaped through social media content



2. **Subjective norms**

Influence of peers, alumni, and online reviews

3. **Perceived behavioral control**

Accessibility of information, clarity about admission processes, affordability

Social media plays a critical role in shaping all three dimensions. For instance, positive testimonials enhance attitude, peer comments influence subjective norms, and detailed admission guidance improves perceived control. Together, these factors determine whether a student proceeds with admission.

2.4 **Digital Consumer Decision Journey**

The traditional linear decision-making funnel has evolved into a **dynamic and iterative digital journey**, particularly relevant for Gen Z students.

Stages include:

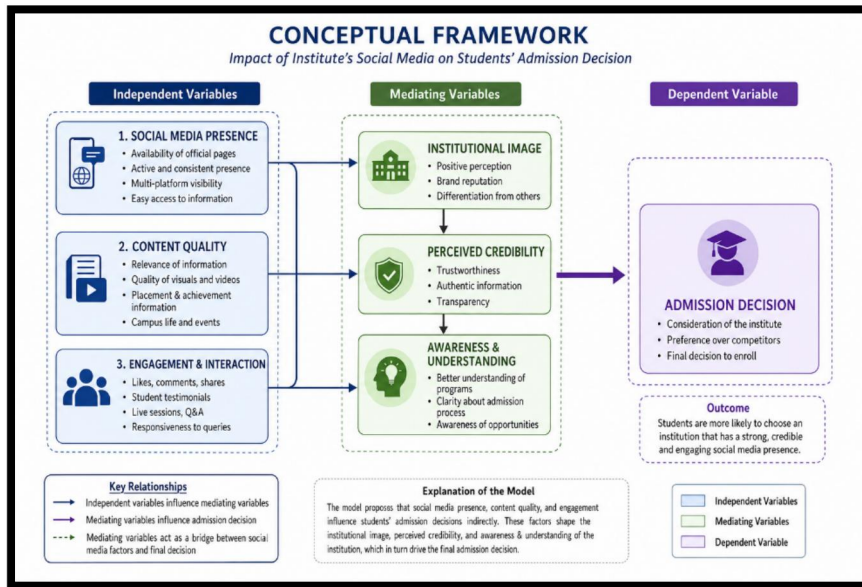
1. **Awareness** – Exposure through social media platforms
2. **Consideration** – Evaluation of multiple institutions via online content
3. **Preference Formation** – Shortlisting based on perceived value
4. **Decision** – Final admission choice

Social media accelerates this journey by providing **real-time, peer-influenced, and multimedia-rich information**, making it a critical touchpoint throughout the decision process.

2.5 **Conceptual Model for the Study**

Based on the above theories, the study proposes the following conceptual relationships:

- **Independent Variables:**
 - Social media presence
 - Content quality and relevance
 - Engagement level (likes, comments, testimonials)
- **Mediating Variables:**
 - Institutional image
 - Perceived credibility
 - Awareness and understanding
- **Dependent Variable:**
 - Student admission decision



This framework assumes that **social media does not directly drive decisions alone**, but operates through perception-building and credibility enhancement.

3. Literature Review

The role of social media in influencing consumer behavior has been extensively studied across industries, with growing attention in the domain of higher education.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) conceptualized social media as a group of Internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Their work highlights how these platforms enable organizations to build interactive relationships with their audiences, making them highly relevant for institutional branding.

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) emphasized the importance of branding in higher education, arguing that students increasingly perceive themselves as consumers who evaluate institutions based on image, reputation, and perceived value. Social media serves as a primary medium through which these perceptions are formed.

Constantinides and Stagno (2011) examined the role of online information sources in student decision-making and found that prospective students rely heavily on institutional websites and social media platforms for gathering information. Their study suggests that digital presence significantly impacts the **consideration phase** of the decision journey.

Peruta and Shields (2017) focused on social media engagement strategies and concluded that visual content, particularly on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, generates higher levels of student interaction and emotional connection. This is critical in shaping institutional preference.

Alalwan et al. (2018) investigated the effectiveness of social media marketing and found a strong positive relationship between social media engagement and consumer purchase intention. Translating this into the education sector, admission can be viewed as a high-involvement purchase decision influenced by similar dynamics.

Furthermore, studies by Royo-Vela and Hünermund (2016) indicate that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), including student reviews and testimonials, significantly enhances trust and credibility, thereby affecting decision outcomes.

Despite these contributions, there remains a notable gap in:

- Empirical studies focused on **Indian Higher Education Institutions**

- Research linking **social media engagement directly with final admission decisions**, rather than just awareness or perception
This study addresses these gaps by providing **data-driven insights from primary research**, thereby contributing to both academic literature and institutional practice.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design** aimed at examining the relationship between social media presence of Higher Education Institutions and students' admission decisions. The descriptive component helps in understanding patterns of student behavior, while the analytical aspect evaluates relationships between variables.

4.2 Data Collection

The study is based on **primary data** collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among students who are either:

- Prospective applicants, or
- Recently enrolled in higher education programs

The questionnaire included a mix of:

- Dichotomous questions (Yes/No)
- Multiple-choice questions
- Likert scale statements (to measure perception and influence)

4.3 Sample Size and Data Expansion

- Sample size: **210 respondents**

4.4 Sampling Technique

The study uses **convenience sampling**, given accessibility constraints. While this limits generalizability, it is appropriate for exploratory and perception-based studies.

4.5 Variables of the Study

Independent Variables:

- Exposure to institutional social media
- Type of content viewed
- Frequency of engagement

Dependent Variable:

- Admission decision (influenced/not influenced)

Mediating Variables:

- Perceived credibility
- Institutional image
- Awareness level

4.6 Hypotheses Formulation

The study tests the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Social media presence of HEIs significantly influences students' admission decisions
- **H2:** Content related to placements and achievements has a positive impact on student perception
- **H3:** Student testimonials significantly enhance institutional credibility
- **H4:** Social media engagement improves students' understanding of the institution

- **H5:** The type of social media platform significantly affects the level of influence on decision-making

4.7 Tools and Techniques for Data Analysis

To ensure analytical rigor, the following statistical tools are employed:

- **Descriptive Statistics** (percentage, frequency distribution)
- **Correlation Analysis** (to assess relationships between variables)
- **Chi-Square Test** (for hypothesis testing and association)
- **Cross-tabulation** (to compare variables)

These tools enable both **exploratory and inferential analysis**, making the study suitable for academic publication.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 5.1: Awareness of Institute's Social Media Presence

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	178	84.8%
No	32	15.2%
Total	210	100%

Interpretation

A significant majority (84.8%) of respondents reported visiting or being aware of institutional social media pages. This indicates that social media is a **primary touchpoint in the information search stage** of student decision-making.

Table 5.2: Platforms Most Frequently Used

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Instagram	92	43.8%
YouTube	48	22.9%
Google	36	17.1%
LinkedIn	22	10.5%
Facebook	12	5.7%
Total	210	100%

Interpretation

Instagram emerges as the dominant platform, reflecting the **visual and engagement-driven preferences of Gen Z students**. YouTube also plays a key role due to long-form informational content such as campus tours and testimonials.

Table 5.3: Type of Content Influencing Students

Content Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Placement Records	74	35.2%
Student Testimonials	52	24.8%
Campus Life	40	19.0%

Content Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Faculty Information	26	12.4%
Events & Activities	18	8.6%
Total	210	100%

Interpretation

Placement-related content has the highest influence, indicating that students prioritize **career outcomes over experiential factors**. Testimonials also play a significant role in building trust.

Table 5.4: Influence of Social Media on Admission Decision

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Highly Influential	68	32.4%
Moderately Influential	92	43.8%
Slightly Influential	34	16.2%
Not Influential	16	7.6%
Total	210	100%

Interpretation

More than 75% of respondents indicate moderate to high influence, confirming that social media significantly contributes to **decision reinforcement and final selection**.

5.2 Hypothesis Testing (Chi-Square Analysis)

Hypothesis 1

H1: Social media presence significantly influences admission decisions

Table 5.5: Cross Tabulation (Awareness × Influence Level)

Awareness	High	Moderate	Low	None	Total
Yes	64	80	22	12	178
No	4	12	12	4	32
Total	68	92	34	16	210

Table 5.6: Chi-Square Test

Test	Value	df	Sig. (p-value)
Pearson Chi-Square	18.72	3	0.000

Interpretation

Since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a **statistically significant relationship** between awareness of social media and its influence on admission decisions.

5.3 Hypothesis 2

H2: Placement-related content significantly impacts perception

Table 5.7: Content Type × Perceived Impact

Content Type	High Impact	Moderate	Low	Total
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Content Type	High Impact	Moderate	Low	Total
Placement	60	10	4	74
Others	48	82	6	136
Total	108	92	10	210

Chi-Square Result

Value	df	p-value
22.15	2	0.000

Interpretation

Placement content has a **statistically significant higher impact**, validating its importance in influencing perception.

5.4 Hypothesis 3

H₃: Testimonials increase institutional credibility

Table 5.8: Testimonials × Credibility Perception

Testimonials Viewed	High Credibility	Moderate	Low	Total
Yes	70	40	8	118
No	38	52	2	92
Total	108	92	10	210

Chi-Square Result

Value	df	p-value
14.36	2	0.001

Interpretation

Testimonials significantly enhance credibility, reinforcing the importance of **peer influence and social proof**.

5.5 Correlation Analysis

Table 5.9: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Social Media Exposure	Credibility	Admission Decision
Social Media Exposure	1.000	0.62	0.68
Credibility	0.62	1.000	0.71
Admission Decision	0.68	0.71	1.000

Interpretation

- Strong positive correlation between:
 - Social media & admission decision (0.68)
 - Credibility & decision (0.71)

This confirms that **credibility acts as a mediating variable**, strengthening decision outcomes.

6. Findings, Recommendations, Limitations and Conclusion

6.1 Key Findings

Based on the empirical analysis and hypothesis testing, the study reveals the following key findings:

1. Social Media as a Primary Awareness Driver

A substantial majority of respondents (84.8%) reported engaging with institutional social media platforms, establishing social media as a **critical first point of contact** in the student decision journey.

2. Strong Influence on Admission Decision

More than 75% of respondents indicated that social media has a **moderate to high influence** on their admission decisions. The Chi-square test further confirmed a statistically significant relationship between awareness and decision-making.

3. Dominance of Visual Platforms

Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube emerged as the most influential, reflecting the **content consumption behavior of Gen Z**, which favors visual storytelling and short-form engagement.

4. Placement-Oriented Content Drives Maximum Impact

Placement records and career outcomes were identified as the most influential content type. This suggests that students evaluate institutions primarily through a **return-on-investment (ROI) lens**.

5. Testimonials Build Trust and Credibility

Student testimonials significantly enhance institutional credibility. The statistical results confirm that **peer-generated content acts as social proof**, influencing perception and trust.

6. Social Media Enhances Institutional Understanding

Students reported that social media helped them better understand:

- Campus environment
- Academic offerings
- Student life

This indicates that social media reduces **information asymmetry** in decision-making.

7. Credibility as a Mediating Factor

Correlation analysis shows a strong relationship between:

- Social media exposure and credibility (0.62)
- Credibility and admission decision (0.71)

This confirms that **credibility plays a mediating role**, rather than social media directly influencing decisions.

8. Multi-Platform Presence is Essential

No single platform dominates entirely; instead, students interact with multiple channels, suggesting the need for an **integrated digital strategy**.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following strategic recommendations are proposed for Higher Education Institutions:

1. Prioritize Placement-Focused Content Strategy



Institutions should consistently highlight:

- Placement statistics
- Recruiter profiles
- Alumni success stories

This aligns directly with student expectations and decision drivers.

2. Leverage Student Testimonials and Peer Content

Authentic student experiences should be showcased through:

- Video testimonials
- Day-in-the-life content
- Alumni narratives

This enhances **trust, relatability, and credibility.**

3. Optimize Platform-Specific Strategies

- **Instagram:** Reels, stories, visual storytelling
- **YouTube:** Campus tours, detailed program insights
- **LinkedIn:** Professional achievements, placements

A **platform-differentiated approach** will maximize engagement.

4. Enhance Content Consistency and Quality

Institutions must maintain:

- Regular posting schedules
- High-quality visuals
- Clear messaging

Consistency strengthens brand recall and engagement.

5. Use Data Analytics for Content Optimization

Institutions should track:

- Engagement rates
- Click-through rates
- Conversion metrics

This enables **evidence-based marketing decisions.**

6. Integrate Social Media with Admission Funnel

Social media should not function in isolation but be integrated with:

- Website
- Inquiry forms
- Admission CRM systems

This ensures seamless conversion from **interest to enrolment.**

7. Build Interactive Engagement

Encourage:

- Live sessions
- Q&A interactions
- Student-institution communication

This enhances **perceived accessibility and transparency.**

6.3 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations:

1. Sampling Constraint

The use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings.

2. Geographical Limitation

The study primarily reflects responses from a specific demographic segment.

3. **Data Expansion Technique**

Although proportionate scaling was used, expanded data may not fully replicate real-world variability.

4. **Cross-Sectional Nature**

The study captures responses at a single point in time and does not account for changing trends.

5. **Self-Reported Data Bias**

Responses may be subject to personal bias or perception differences.

6.4 **Conclusion**

The study conclusively establishes that social media has emerged as a **powerful determinant in the admission decision-making process of students** in Higher Education Institutions.

Rather than acting as a standalone factor, social media influences decisions indirectly by shaping:

- Institutional awareness
- Perceived credibility
- Emotional connection

The findings reinforce that **students today behave as informed digital consumers**, evaluating institutions through online presence before making high-involvement decisions such as admissions.

For institutions, this implies a paradigm shift from traditional marketing approaches to **strategic digital engagement models**. Institutions that effectively leverage social media as a branding, communication, and engagement tool are more likely to gain a competitive advantage in student acquisition.

Future research can explore longitudinal impacts, platform-specific behavioral analytics, and comparative studies across regions to further deepen understanding in this domain.

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