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Marketing Strategies and How Universities Promote Their Educational Programs Online Through New Technologies

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Abstract

In an increasingly digitised academic environment, higher education institutions are turning to digital marketing to attract, engage, and retain prospective students. This study explores how online marketing strategies—particularly those involving platforms such as educational websites, Google Ads, and social media—shape student decision-making in selecting university programs, with a focus on economics-related fields. Although the existing literature recognises the growing influence of digital marketing in the educational sector, there is a notable gap regarding the comparative effectiveness of specific digital channels and how these influences vary across demographic groups. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the extended role of marketing beyond recruitment, especially in enhancing student retention and satisfaction. To address these gaps, this study combines a critical literature review with quantitative research involving a structured survey distributed to 150 students enrolled in economics programs in the past year. Using a stratified sampling method, the research investigates three hypotheses centred on the effectiveness of online platforms, the influence of social media advertising, and the overall impact of university-led digital marketing campaigns. The primary research question examines whether such campaigns directly influence students' selection of educational programs; the secondary explores the role of social media in this process. Key findings reveal that academically oriented digital platforms—particularly Google Ads and educational websites—are significantly more influential than social media in shaping students' decisions. Additionally, university marketing campaigns were found to contribute not only to recruitment, but also to student retention, especially among respondents under 30.This study contributes novel, empirical evidence to the field of educational marketing by disaggregating the impact of various digital tools and offering insights into demographic-specific responses. The findings provide actionable guidance to institutions seeking to refine their digital marketing strategies in a highly competitive academic marketplace.

Keywords: education systems, online education, marketing education.

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1. Introduction

Educational marketing encompasses promotional strategies implemented by educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and private or public universities. Online marketing strategies and the way information is presented to students are considered essential and can influence their perspectives, as they help identify the real needs of students.

Digital technologies represent an important factor in the process of online promotional campaigns for universities, as well as a set of tools that have simplified the entire process of higher education. Online marketing strategies applied by universities and the way information is presented to students are considered essential and can influence the decision-making process for choosing study programs. This approach is therefore competitive within the educational system. Marketing can be defined as a process through which companies or economic entities demonstrate their commitment to addressing the challenges of attracting the target group. At the same time, one of the key roles of marketing is to improve the value of products and services with the goal of strengthening customer trust (Kotler et al., 2023).

The substantial impact of technological advancements in the field of marketing draws the attention of companies, including educational institutions, to prepare future marketing specialists for a new technology-based era (Grewal et al., 2025) using innovative new strategies.

2. Problem Statement

Over the past decade, higher education institutions have increasingly adopted digital marketing strategies to remain competitive and to attract prospective students, aligning with broader shifts toward digital economies (Navarro del Toro, 2022). Digital platforms: including social networks, educational websites, and search engine marketing have become central to institutional outreach (Makrydakis, 2021).

Despite this rise, the existing literature overlooks key nuances: notably, it fails to differentiate the relative effectiveness of specific online channels in shaping student decisions, such as academically affiliated platforms (e.g., educational websites and Google Ads) versus social media platforms (Aziz et al., 2023). Furthermore, the impact of demographic factors such as age on responsiveness to distinct marketing channels remains insufficiently explored (Harini et al., 2023). Most studies adopt blanket approaches to digital marketing without considering how younger versus older prospective students engage differently with digital stimuli (Altamirano-Pazmiño & Cusme-Vélez, 2022). Another consequential shortcoming in the literature is its predominant focus on recruitment metrics—such as enrolment numbers—while neglecting the broader and longer-term role of marketing in influencing student retention, satisfaction, and engagement (Pasuhuk & Mandagi, 2023). This narrow framing limits the understanding of marketing as a continuous touchpoint throughout the student lifecycle. Empirical studies that do investigate social media marketing tend to focus on brand awareness (Pasuhuk & Mandagi, 2023) or institution image, yet few explicitly test how different channels affect

distinct stages of decision-making among students (Marhareita et al., 2022). The research gap remains clear: there is a lack of empirical, channel-specific, and demographically sensitive analysis of digital marketing's effectiveness across both recruitment and retention phases. To address this gap, the current study employs a quantitative, case-based methodology, with stratified sampling of students enrolled in economics programs. It tests clearly defined hypotheses regarding the influence of digital channels, social media advertising, and university-led marketing campaigns on both initial enrolment decisions and ongoing program engagement.

3. Research Questions and Aim of the Study

The emergence of digital marketing as a transformative force in higher education necessitates a systematic investigation into how students interact with digital channels when selecting academic programs. As previously outlined, the current literature has highlighted the general importance of digital tools in higher education marketing, but significant empirical gaps remain in understanding their specific impact on student decision-making processes, especially within distinct academic disciplines such as economics.

This research seeks to address those gaps by operationalising the problem through clearly articulated research questions, objectives, and testable hypotheses, thus contributing to both theoretical and practical developments in the field of educational marketing. The choice of economics programs as the contextual focus of this study is deliberate. Economics is a field that is often highly competitive among institutions due to its broad applicability in both the public and private sectors. As students increasingly seek programs that not only offer academic rigour but also prepare them for a dynamic job market, universities are compelled to refine their promotional strategies to align with evolving student expectations. In this context, it becomes crucial to evaluate how marketing influences student behaviour: from initial awareness of an academic program to their final enrolment decision.

Moreover, the digital transformation in marketing strategies, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, has accelerated the migration from traditional forms of outreach such as printed brochures and campus visits to digital formats such as Google Ads, educational websites, and targeted social media campaigns. These platforms offer universities cost-effective, scalable and data-driven means of connecting with prospective students, but they also demand a nuanced understanding of audience segmentation, message design, and platform preferences.

Despite this shift, there remains limited empirical evidence on which digital strategies are most effective across different demographic groups. In particular, the responsiveness of younger students, those under 30 years of age, who are typically digital natives, remains underexplored in academic literature. This study focuses on filling that knowledge gap through a case study of students currently enrolled in economics programs. The central goal is to understand how students first come across educational offerings and what digital touchpoints are most influential in shaping their enrolment decisions. In doing so, the research aims to provide actionable insights for university administrators, marketing professionals, and

policymakers interested in maximising student outreach through digital channels. The structure of the inquiry is guided by two primary research questions: To what extent do digital marketing campaigns initiated by universities influence students' decisions to select educational programs in economics? Which specific digital platforms, such as Google Ads, social media, or educational websites, are most effective in influencing students' program choices?

These research questions are intended to bridge the theoretical foundations established in the literature with the practical observations derived from field data. They serve not only to structure the analysis but also to provide clarity on what specific aspects of the broader problem the current study intends to solve.

Importantly, they also provide the foundation for the formulation of research objectives and hypotheses, thereby enabling a rigorous and methodologically sound investigation. In line with these research questions, the objectives of this study are as follows: To evaluate the overall effectiveness of university-led digital marketing campaigns in attracting students to economics programs. To determine the relative impact of different digital platforms, namely, educational websites, Google Ads, and social media, on students' enrolment decisions. To identify whether the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies varies by demographic factors such as age.

To assess whether digital marketing campaigns also contribute to student retention and satisfaction, not just recruitment. Based on these objectives, the research advances three core hypotheses: H1: Most students discover academic programs in economics primarily through digital platforms, such as educational websites and Google Ads. H2: Students' decisions to enrol in an academic program are significantly influenced by advertisements encountered on social media platforms. H3: University digital marketing campaigns not only attract prospective students but also play a role in student retention by promoting enrichment opportunities and educational value.

These hypotheses are derived from theoretical assumptions in the literature regarding the increasing role of digital engagement in higher education marketing. They also reflect practical concerns among higher education institutions, many of which allocate a significant portion of their marketing budgets to digital outreach without a clear understanding of the return on investment across platforms or demographics. By subjecting these hypotheses to empirical validation, this study seeks to offer a clearer picture of the causal relationships at play.

Additionally, this research adopts a student-centric approach to marketing effectiveness. Rather than relying solely on institutional metrics such as application rates or website traffic, the study centres on students' self-reported experiences and perceptions. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the role that digital communication plays in influencing educational choices.

It also ensures that the findings are grounded in the lived experiences of the student population, thereby increasing the study's relevance and applicability to real-world marketing strategies.

4. Research Methods

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the effectiveness of digital marketing campaigns initiated by universities and their influence on students' decisions to select academic programs in the field of economics. The research is designed to provide empirical evidence by collecting structured data through a survey-based approach, targeting individuals who had recently engaged in the process of choosing a higher education program.

The overall methodological framework is rooted in positivist philosophy, emphasising objective data collection and statistical analysis to test predefined hypotheses.

4.1 Research Strategy and Approach

The primary research strategy implemented in this study is a case study survey, which allows for the exploration of behaviours, preferences, and perceptions within a specific context—namely, students currently enrolled in economics programs at a university level. This approach facilitates the examination of real-life decision-making processes and enables the researchers to investigate the patterns of student engagement with digital marketing tools across various digital platforms. Given the nature of the research questions and hypotheses, a deductive approach was employed. This involved formulating hypotheses based on gaps identified in the literature and then testing these hypotheses using data collected from a sample population. Quantitative methods were deemed appropriate because they allow for a structured measurement of attitudes, behaviours, and demographic variables across a relatively large number of respondents.

4.2 Sampling Method and Population

The target population consisted of students who had enrolled in university-level economics programs within the past academic year (2024–2025). To ensure that the findings would reflect diverse perspectives within this group, a stratified sampling method was applied. This approach divides the population into distinct subgroups (or strata) based on key demographic criteria, such as age, gender, and place of residence, thereby ensuring that the sample includes participants from varied backgrounds. The sample size consisted of 150 students, selected across multiple cohorts and campuses, all of whom met the eligibility criteria of having selected an economics program within the past year. Stratification was particularly useful in allowing comparisons across age groups, such as those under and over 30 years old, to examine how digital marketing impacts different segments of the student population. Out of 150 students approached, 108 valid responses were obtained, resulting in a response rate of 72%, which is considered strong for a digital survey distributed via online platforms.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, designed to capture both quantitative and categorical data. The questionnaire was divided into two primary sections. The first section assessed participants' exposure to and perception of digital marketing campaigns, specifically in relation to online platforms such as Google Ads, university-sponsored educational websites, and social media channels (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok). The second section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, and geographic location. Questions related to digital marketing influence were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). This scaling method allowed respondents to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement with statements related to their discovery and selection of academic programs. The questionnaire was created and hosted on Google Forms, a digital tool that facilitates efficient data collection and storage. The link to the survey was distributed via WhatsApp and Facebook, targeting student groups, academic program forums, and private messages to ensure relevance and participant eligibility. The data collection period extended over one month, from February 15 to March 15, 2025, during which follow-up messages were sent weekly to increase participation. Participants were informed of the research objectives and consent was obtained before their responses were recorded.

4.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small pilot group of 10 students prior to the main study. Feedback was used to refine question wording and improve clarity. The final instrument was reviewed by two academic experts in educational marketing to assess the relevance of the items in measuring the intended constructs. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, and the internal consistency for the key items measuring perceptions of digital marketing effectiveness was found to be above 0.80, indicating a high level of reliability.

4.5 Data Analysis

The data were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel and SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to determine frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and correlation analysis, were used to examine associations between demographic factors and responsiveness to different digital marketing platforms. Hypothesis testing followed a comparative logic: observed results from survey responses were analysed against each hypothesis to determine whether the data provided supporting evidence or not.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

5. Findings

This section presents and interprets the results obtained from the structured survey conducted among students enrolled in economics-related university programs. The aim was to test three key hypotheses regarding the influence of digital marketing campaigns on students' program discovery, decision-making processes, and the effectiveness of various online platforms. The findings are presented according to the study's hypotheses, followed by an analysis of demographic trends.

Hypothesis 1: Most students learn about their university programs through online platforms.

The first hypothesis proposed that the majority of students discover their academic programs through online platforms, such as educational websites and digital advertising (e.g., Google Ads). The data strongly supports this hypothesis. A substantial 64% of respondents indicated that the online environment played a key role in their discovery of educational opportunities. Furthermore, 71% of respondents reported being influenced by Google Ads, citing the visibility of targeted content and the relevance of information as the primary reasons for clicking on these advertisements. Educational websites, including official university portals and third-party academic program directories, were also cited as highly influential. More than 50% of the respondents used educational websites as their first point of contact during the program selection process. These platforms were often associated with trustworthiness, accessibility of content, and structured information delivery. Traditional marketing channels (e.g., television, radio, flyers) were deemed mostly ineffective by respondents, with only 6% indicating any influence from such sources. This reinforces the notion that digital platforms are now the dominant gateway for students seeking academic information.

Hypothesis 2: Students' decisions are predominantly influenced by information disseminated via social media platforms.

The second hypothesis examined the role of social media in shaping students' academic choices. Contrary to expectations, the findings did not support this hypothesis. Only 21% of the respondents reported being influenced by social media advertisements when selecting their academic program. Among those who did cite social media as an influence, platforms such as Instagram and Facebook were mentioned most frequently. However, the nature of their influence was described as more indirect and passive, often creating general awareness about the institution rather than directly prompting decision-making. TikTok and LinkedIn were noted less frequently, likely due to their niche relevance in academic program promotion. A recurring theme in open-ended responses was skepticism about the credibility of information disseminated via social media. Students noted that while social media campaigns may be visually appealing, they often lack depth or specific academic content. As one respondent noted, "Instagram ads show the campus, but they rarely tell me anything about the economics program itself." This data suggests that while

social media platforms are important for brand awareness and institutional visibility, they do not serve as the primary source of information for academic decision-making among students in this cohort.

Hypothesis 3: Marketing campaigns initiated by universities are effective in attracting new students.

The third hypothesis was partially supported by the data. When asked whether university-led marketing campaigns played a role in their final selection, only 33% of the respondents strongly agreed that the campaigns directly influenced their choice. However, an additional 30% moderately agreed, suggesting that although these campaigns were not always decisive, they played a complementary role in shaping perceptions and narrowing choices. Interestingly, the perceived value of university marketing efforts increased when discussing student retention rather than recruitment. Approximately 61% of participants acknowledged that promotional materials highlighting extracurricular activities, internships, and academic support services contributed positively to their satisfaction and reinforced their decision to remain in the program. These findings highlight an important nuance: marketing may not solely serve to attract students, but also plays a role in maintaining engagement and fostering retention.

5.1 Demographic Variations and Insights

A comparative analysis of age-related demographics revealed important differences. Among respondents under the age of 30, 57% reported that digital marketing campaigns had a direct impact on their program selection, compared to only 18% of those aged 30 and above. This finding suggests that younger students are more responsive to digital content and rely more heavily on online sources when making academic decisions. Gender differences were less pronounced, with both male and female respondents showing similar patterns of platform engagement and information sourcing. However, respondents from urban areas were more likely to be exposed to Google Ads and university-sponsored platforms, likely due to greater internet access and higher levels of digital literacy.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings reaffirm the importance of academically oriented digital platforms—especially Google Ads and educational websites—in student program discovery. This aligns with research that emphasises the credibility of structured, content-rich platforms when informing student decisions. In contrast, the limited influence of social media alone challenges assumptions about its primacy as a recruitment channel, suggesting that quality and context of content remain critical.

The partial support for university marketing campaigns in influencing retention rather than recruitment expands understanding of marketing's role in the student lifecycle. This study demonstrates that institutional outreach can improve student engagement beyond initial enrolment—particularly among younger cohorts.

Methodological strengths include the stratified sample and clear linkage between literature-derived hypotheses and survey design. However, limitations include the modest sample size and focus on economics students, which constrain generalisability. Self-reporting also introduces potential bias.

This research contributes novel empirical insights into how differentiated digital marketing channels affect student behaviour, across both recruitment and retention. It underscores the need for institutions to allocate resources to academically credible channels and to tailor marketing strategies by age segment.

The expanded role of marketing throughout the student journey offers practical value: universities can craft cohesive, lifecycle-based engagement strategies that persist beyond initial impressions. Future research should replicate these methods across diverse disciplines and larger institutions, incorporate longitudinal tracking of engagement, or augment quantitative data with qualitative insights to unpack student motivations and perceptions in greater depth.

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