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Digital and Social Media Marketing as a Core Strategy in Higher Education: Evidence from Student Engagement and Institutional Branding

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of digital and social media marketing as a core strategic mechanism in higher education, with particular emphasis on its influence on student engagement and institutional branding. The research adopts a qualitative systematic literature review approach by synthesizing evidence from 127 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 that investigate relationships among social media marketing activities, student engagement, and branding outcomes in higher education institutions. The review integrates findings from diverse methodological traditions and institutional contexts to identify recurring patterns, explanatory mechanisms, and strategic implications. The results reveal that digital and social media marketing exerts strong and consistent direct effects on student engagement and institutional branding, while also operating indirectly through engagement-driven pathways that partially mediate branding outcomes. Student engagement is found to play a central role in translating digital marketing activities into brand equity components, including brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The findings further indicate that content quality, authenticity, and platform-specific strategies function as critical determinants of marketing effectiveness. Overall, the study concludes that social media marketing constitutes a foundational institutional strategy rather than a peripheral communication tool, and its strategic integration is essential for sustainable branding and competitiveness in contemporary higher education environments.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Higher Education Marketing, Student Engagement, Institutional Branding, Brand Equity.

I.   Introduction

The marketing landscape of higher education has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade, marked by a fundamental shift from traditional recruitment and promotional practices toward digitally mediated strategies. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly operating in competitive and market-driven environments where attracting, engaging, and retaining students has become a strategic priority rather than a purely administrative function. This transformation is closely tied to the rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media platforms, which have reshaped how institutions communicate their value propositions and how students assess educational choices. As argued by Kumar and Modi (2025), the ability of HEIs to establish a strong and credible digital presence has become a critical determinant of

institutional success in contemporary higher education markets. This shift is further reinforced by changes in student behavior, particularly among digitally native cohorts such as Generation Z and younger millennials. These students rely extensively on social media platforms not only for social interaction but also for information seeking, decision-making, and social validation when selecting higher education institutions. Empirical evidence indicates that prospective students increasingly use platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and LinkedIn to assess academic reputation, institutional culture, peer experiences, and future career prospects (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). Consequently, traditional marketing channels such as print media, brochures, and education fairs have gradually lost their dominance, while digital and social media marketing has emerged as a primary source of influence in shaping student perceptions.

At the same time, the competitive intensity of the higher education sector has increased significantly. The proliferation of public and private universities, the internationalization of academic programs, and the growing availability of online and cross-border education have intensified competition for student enrollment and institutional legitimacy. In this environment, universities can no longer rely on reputation alone or on conventional word-of-mouth mechanisms to sustain their market position. Instead, they are required to adopt strategic marketing approaches that leverage digital and social media channels to enhance visibility, differentiation, and brand credibility (Konstantoulaki et al., 2025). Digital and social media marketing activities have thus evolved into strategic instruments through which HEIs seek to communicate institutional identity, academic excellence, and societal relevance to increasingly diverse and global audiences (Syunita & Tikno, 2025). Within this context, digital and social media marketing is no longer viewed merely as a promotional tool but rather as a core strategic function embedded in institutional branding and relationship management. Social media platforms enable continuous, interactive, and multi-directional communication between institutions and their stakeholders, allowing universities to engage prospective students, support current students, and maintain relationships with alumni and external partners. Through visual storytelling, interactive content, and real-time engagement, HEIs can project institutional narratives that extend beyond academic offerings to include campus life, values, and student experiences (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). These interactions play a crucial role in shaping how institutional brands are constructed and perceived in the digital public sphere.

Central to the effectiveness of digital and social media marketing in higher education is the concept of student engagement. Student engagement refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement of students in institutional activities and interactions. From a marketing and branding perspective, engagement represents a critical mechanism through which digital communication strategies generate value. Engaged students are more likely to interact with institutional content, participate in online communities, and share positive experiences with peers, thereby amplifying institutional messages and contributing to brand visibility. Prior studies suggest that digital and social media marketing activities significantly influence levels of student engagement by offering interactive, entertaining, and relevant content that resonates with students' interests and expectations (Mohamed & Rusli, 2024). Importantly, student engagement is increasingly recognized as a mediating process that links marketing activities to institutional branding outcomes. Rather than being constructed solely through top-down messaging, institutional branding in higher education is now understood as a dynamic and co-created process involving multiple stakeholders, particularly students. Students' interactions with institutional social media content, their online expressions, and their peer-to-peer communications play a decisive role in shaping external perceptions of institutional credibility and attractiveness. In this sense, understanding how digital and social media marketing functions as a core strategy requires examining not only its direct effects but also the pathways through which it enhances engagement and translates into stronger institutional brands (Gupta, 2025).

Despite the growing scholarly attention to digital marketing and social media in higher education, significant gaps remain in the existing literature. While numerous studies have examined the role of social media in student recruitment, brand awareness, or institutional visibility, there is limited empirical research that integrates these dimensions into a comprehensive framework. In particular, the mechanisms through which digital and social media marketing activities enhance student engagement and subsequently

strengthen institutional branding remain insufficiently explored. Ramos (2025) emphasizes that the key challenge facing HEI marketers is not simply whether social media marketing is effective, but how it works and through which processes it generates strategic branding outcomes. Another unresolved issue concerns the relative importance of different dimensions of digital and social media marketing. Although prior research has identified factors such as content quality, interactivity, entertainment value, and customization as potential drivers of engagement and branding, empirical evidence remains fragmented regarding which of these dimensions exert the strongest influence in higher education contexts (Mohamed & Rusli, 2024). This lack of clarity creates practical challenges for universities seeking to allocate limited marketing resources effectively and design evidence-based digital strategies aligned with institutional branding objectives.

The phenomenon motivating this study is therefore the growing dependence of higher education institutions on digital and social media platforms as primary channels for communication and brand construction, coupled with persistent uncertainty regarding their strategic effectiveness. Although HEIs invest substantial resources in social media marketing, many lack systematic empirical insights into how these activities function as core strategies that enhance student engagement and institutional branding simultaneously. This gap between widespread practice and limited integrative evidence highlights the need for quantitative descriptive research that examines these relationships in a holistic manner. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine digital and social media marketing as a core strategy in higher education by empirically investigating its relationship with student engagement and institutional branding. Specifically, the study aims to explore how digital and social media marketing operates strategically within HEIs to enhance student engagement while simultaneously strengthening institutional branding, to assess the extent to which digital and social media marketing influences student engagement, and to analyze how student engagement contributes to the formation of institutional branding. Furthermore, the study examines whether student engagement serves as a mediating mechanism linking digital and social media marketing to institutional branding outcomes, while also identifying which dimensions of digital and social media marketing are most influential in strengthening institutional branding through student engagement.

II.   Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1.   Digital and Social Media Marketing in Higher Education

Digital and social media marketing has become an essential component of higher education marketing strategies as institutions increasingly operate within competitive, digitally mediated environments. In the higher education context, social media marketing refers to the strategic use of digital platforms to communicate institutional value propositions, foster engagement, and build long-term relationships with prospective students, current students, alumni, and other stakeholders (Syunita & Tikno, 2025). Unlike traditional marketing approaches that rely on one-way communication, social media marketing emphasizes interactivity, dialogue, and participation, allowing stakeholders to actively engage with institutional narratives (Isaacs & Mulder, 2024). The evolution of social media marketing in higher education reflects broader transformations in digital communication and consumer behavior. Universities have shifted from broadcasting institutional announcements toward creating participatory digital spaces where students can interact with content, share experiences, and co-create institutional meaning (Tang et al., 2025). This shift aligns with contemporary service marketing perspectives that emphasize value co-creation and relationship management rather than transactional promotion alone (Ramos, 2025). Empirical studies indicate that prospective students perceive social media-based institutional communication as more authentic and credible than traditional advertising, particularly when it includes user-generated content and peer testimonials (Adhikari et al., 2025).

Different social media platforms serve distinct strategic functions in higher education marketing. Instagram and TikTok have emerged as highly effective platforms for visual storytelling and engagement with

Generation Z audiences, while Facebook remains relevant for community building and outreach to parents and alumni (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024; Laini et al., 2025). LinkedIn plays a specialized role in communicating academic credibility, research achievements, and career outcomes, particularly for graduate and professional programs (Mihajlovi & Gaji, 2025). These platform-specific dynamics highlight the need for integrated and strategically aligned social media marketing approaches rather than fragmented platform-level tactics. Research further identifies key dimensions of social media marketing activities that influence engagement and branding outcomes. Content quality, interactivity, entertainment value, electronic word-of-mouth, and personalization consistently emerge as critical drivers of social media effectiveness in higher education contexts (Mohamed & Rusli, 2024; Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2025). Institutions that deliver relevant, visually appealing, and interactive content demonstrate higher engagement levels and stronger brand perceptions than those relying on purely informational or promotional messaging (Sahli & Gillet, 2025).

2.2.   Student Engagement in the Digital Higher Education Context

Student engagement has long been recognized as a central construct in educational research, traditionally associated with academic involvement and learning outcomes. In the digital era, however, the concept of engagement has expanded to encompass students' interactions with institutional digital communications and social media content (Sahoo & Khuntia, 2024). In the context of social media marketing, student engagement refers to students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to institutional digital stimuli and their participation in online institutional communities (Yunishafira et al., 2025). Cognitive engagement reflects the extent to which students attend to, process, and evaluate institutional information communicated through social media. High-quality and informative content stimulates deeper cognitive engagement, enabling students to assess institutional fit, academic quality, and program relevance (Gupta, 2025). Emotional engagement involves affective responses such as enthusiasm, pride, and a sense of belonging, which are particularly important in higher education branding due to the high involvement nature of educational decision-making (Perera et al., 2023). Behavioral engagement manifests through observable actions, including liking, commenting, sharing content, and undertaking offline actions such as campus visits or enrollment applications (Na et al., 2025).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that social media marketing activities significantly influence student engagement levels. Interactive features, timely responsiveness, and authentic communication enhance students' perceptions of institutional care and accessibility, thereby increasing engagement (Song et al., 2023; Mohamed & Rusli, 2024). Moreover, user-generated content and peer endorsements amplify engagement by providing social proof and credibility, particularly for prospective students who lack direct institutional experience (Saksono et al., 2025). These findings suggest that engagement is not merely an outcome of digital marketing but a central mechanism through which marketing strategies generate institutional value.

2.3.   Institutional Branding in Higher Education

Institutional branding in higher education refers to the strategic development and management of a university's identity, reputation, and perceived value in the minds of stakeholders (Bilyk et al., 2025). Unlike commercial branding, which often emphasizes functional product attributes, higher education branding integrates academic quality, institutional values, campus culture, and societal contribution (Gregorio & Chavez, 2025). Strong institutional brands enhance recruitment efficiency, attract high-quality students and faculty, and foster long-term loyalty among alumni and stakeholders (Yiadom et al., 2025). Brand equity frameworks are increasingly applied to higher education branding research, conceptualizing brand equity as comprising brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty (Khan, 2025). Social media marketing plays a crucial role in shaping each of these dimensions by increasing institutional visibility, communicating institutional narratives, and facilitating stakeholder engagement

(Dwitasari et al., 2024). Through consistent visual identity, coherent messaging, and authentic interaction, universities can strengthen brand perceptions and differentiate themselves in crowded educational markets (Demirer, 2025). Empirical studies indicate that students' perceptions of institutional branding are strongly influenced by their digital interactions with institutions. Positive social media experiences enhance brand image and trust, while negative or inconsistent digital communication can undermine institutional credibility (Hasri & Barus, 2024). Consequently, social media has become a central strategic arena where institutional brands are constructed, contested, and reinforced.

2.4. Linking Social Media Marketing, Student Engagement, and Institutional Branding

Recent research increasingly emphasizes the interconnected relationships among social media marketing, student engagement, and institutional branding. Empirical evidence demonstrates that social media marketing activities exert significant direct effects on both student engagement and institutional branding outcomes (Konstantoulaki et al., 2025). Meta-analytic studies report strong standardized effect sizes, suggesting that digital marketing activities play a substantial role in shaping student perceptions and behaviors (Sahoo & Khuntia, 2024). Beyond direct effects, student engagement has been identified as a critical mediating mechanism linking social media marketing to branding outcomes. Engagement-driven branding perspectives argue that marketing activities generate branding value primarily through their ability to stimulate meaningful engagement, which subsequently shapes brand perceptions and loyalty (Ramos, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025). Engaged students contribute to branding through active participation, content sharing, and peer-to-peer communication, thereby amplifying institutional messages and enhancing brand credibility (Perera et al., 2023). Existing research also suggests that social media marketing retains a direct influence on institutional branding independent of engagement, indicating partial mediation effects (Syunita & Tikno, 2025). This pattern underscores the complexity of branding processes in higher education and highlights the need for integrative research frameworks that account for both direct and indirect pathways.

III. Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in a systematic literature study to develop an in-depth understanding of how digital and social media marketing operates as a core strategy in higher education, particularly in relation to student engagement and institutional branding. A qualitative literature-based design was selected because it enables the exploration of concepts, meanings, mechanisms, and contextual factors reported across prior studies, rather than limiting the inquiry to the aggregation of statistical effects. In line with qualitative evidence synthesis traditions, the method prioritized interpretive integration of findings to identify recurring themes, dominant conceptualizations, and explanatory patterns within the literature.

The study was conducted as a systematic qualitative literature review, following transparent and replicable procedures for locating, selecting, and analyzing relevant sources. Searches were carried out in major academic databases commonly used in education and marketing research, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined key terms related to social media marketing and higher education with terms representing engagement and branding, ensuring coverage of studies addressing institutional communication, stakeholder interaction, and brand equity outcomes. To reflect contemporary digital dynamics, the search focused on publications from 2015 to 2025 and included peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings available in English. The selection process applied explicit inclusion criteria emphasizing empirical relevance to higher education settings and substantive discussion of social media marketing practices, student engagement processes, or institutional branding outcomes. Studies focusing solely on social media for instructional delivery without a marketing or branding lens were excluded to maintain conceptual coherence.

After study selection, qualitative data extraction was conducted to capture both descriptive characteristics and interpretive content from each article. Extracted materials included definitions of social media marketing in higher education, platform-specific practices, operational meanings of student engagement, branding constructs (such as brand image, brand awareness, and loyalty), and any reported mechanisms explaining relationships among these concepts. Attention was also given to contextual variables such as institutional type, student segment, and platform affordances, because qualitative synthesis benefits from comparing how findings vary across settings. To enhance trustworthiness, study quality was appraised using criteria appropriate for qualitative and mixed empirical literature, including clarity of conceptual definitions, transparency of methods, adequacy of data sources, and rigor of analytical procedures.

The synthesis phase employed thematic analysis to integrate findings across studies. First, open coding was applied to extracted text segments to identify recurring ideas related to the strategic roles of digital and social media marketing, drivers of student engagement, and pathways to institutional branding. Second, codes were refined and grouped into higher-order themes such as authenticity and user-generated content, interactivity and responsiveness, platform-based storytelling, engagement as co-creation, and branding as a relational outcome. Third, the themes were interpreted to propose an integrative explanatory model describing how social media marketing activities stimulate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement that subsequently strengthens institutional branding. Throughout the synthesis, constant comparison was used to reconcile convergent and divergent findings and to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the included studies. The outcome of this qualitative method is a coherent, theory-informed understanding of the phenomenon and a logically derived foundation for hypothesis development and future empirical testing.

IV. Result and Discussion

The results and discussion section synthesizes evidence from the qualitative systematic literature review to explain how digital and social media marketing functions as a core strategic mechanism in higher education. Rather than reporting primary empirical data, this section integrates and interprets patterns emerging from prior studies to construct a coherent explanation of the relationships among social media marketing activities, student engagement, and institutional branding. The discussion is organized around four major thematic findings that collectively demonstrate the multi-pathway role of social media marketing in shaping institutional brand outcomes. These findings also provide a foundation for future research directions and sustainable strategic development in higher education marketing.

4.1. Social Media Marketing as a Multi-Pathway Strategic Driver of Student Engagement

The synthesis of existing empirical studies consistently demonstrates that social media marketing activities exert strong and robust direct effects on student engagement across diverse higher education contexts. Meta-analytic and comparative literature indicates that the magnitude of the relationship between social media marketing activities and student engagement is substantial, with standardized effect sizes frequently ranging between $\beta = 0.68$ and $\beta = 0.72$, reflecting large effects by conventional standards in marketing and behavioral research (Konstantoulaki et al., 2025; Sahoo & Khuntia, 2024). These findings are remarkably consistent across institutional types, geographical regions, and methodological approaches, suggesting that the engagement-generating capacity of social media marketing is not contextually marginal but structurally embedded in contemporary student behavior.

The literature further reveals that social media marketing stimulates engagement through multiple complementary pathways. First, content-based pathways operate through the provision of relevant, visually appealing, and informative material that captures students' cognitive attention and encourages information processing. Students engage more deeply with content that addresses academic programs, career outcomes, and campus experiences than with generic promotional messaging, indicating that engagement is driven by perceived informational value rather than exposure alone (Ibrahim & Abdullah, 2025; Gupta, 2025). Second, interaction-based pathways emerge through two-way communication facilitated by social media platforms.

Responsiveness to comments, direct messages, and student inquiries significantly enhances students' perceptions of institutional accessibility and care, fostering emotional attachment and trust (Mohamed & Rusli, 2024; Song et al., 2023).

Third, peer-mediated pathways operate through electronic word-of-mouth and user-generated content. Students consistently perceive peer testimonials, student-created videos, and shared experiences as more credible than institution-generated messages, amplifying engagement through social proof mechanisms (Ramos, 2025; Adhikari et al., 2025). These pathways collectively illustrate that social media marketing does not merely inform students but actively involves them in relational processes that deepen engagement. From a sustainability perspective, these findings suggest that institutions seeking long-term engagement benefits must invest in relationship-oriented social media strategies rather than short-term promotional campaigns (Kumar & Modi, 2025).

4.2. Direct Effects of Social Media Marketing on Institutional Branding Outcomes

Beyond engagement, the literature demonstrates that social media marketing also directly influences institutional branding outcomes, including brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, and overall brand equity. Empirical studies consistently report moderate to strong direct effects, with standardized coefficients typically ranging from $\beta = 0.60$ to $\beta = 0.68$ (Syunita & Tikno, 2025; Khan, 2025). These effects are explained by social media's capacity to increase institutional visibility, communicate institutional values, and signal legitimacy in competitive educational markets. Brand awareness emerges as the most immediate branding outcome influenced by social media marketing. Institutions that maintain consistent and strategic social media presence demonstrate significantly higher recall and recognition among prospective students compared to institutions with limited digital engagement (Yiadom et al., 2025). Visual platforms such as Instagram and YouTube play a particularly important role in this process by repeatedly exposing students to institutional symbols, narratives, and experiences (Mihajlovi & Gaji, 2025; Sulistyowati & Husda, 2023). Over time, repeated exposure contributes to familiarity, which is a critical antecedent of institutional consideration during decision-making stages.

Social media marketing also shapes brand image and perceived quality by enabling institutions to curate narratives about academic excellence, campus culture, and societal contribution. Studies show that content showcasing faculty achievements, student success stories, and research output significantly enhances perceptions of institutional quality and credibility (Dwitasari et al., 2024; Demirer, 2025). Importantly, these direct branding effects remain significant even when engagement variables are controlled, indicating that social media marketing functions both independently and interactively with engagement processes (Perera et al., 2023). This dual role highlights the strategic importance of social media marketing as a branding instrument rather than merely an engagement facilitator.

4.3. Student Engagement as a Partial Mediator Linking Marketing and Branding

One of the most theoretically significant findings emerging from the literature is the mediating role of student engagement in the relationship between social media marketing and institutional branding. Across multiple mediation studies, engagement is found to account for approximately 35% to 58% of the total effect of social media marketing on branding outcomes, indicating a consistent pattern of partial mediation (Ramos, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025). This finding suggests that while social media marketing directly influences branding, a substantial portion of its impact operates through engagement-driven mechanisms. Engagement mediates branding outcomes by transforming exposure into meaning. Cognitive engagement enables students to process institutional information more deeply, leading to informed evaluations of institutional fit and quality (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Emotional engagement fosters affective bonds, which are particularly influential in high-involvement decisions such as university selection and long-term loyalty formation (Yunishafira et al., 2025). Behavioral engagement amplifies branding through observable actions such as sharing content, recommending institutions to peers, and participating in institutional events, thereby extending branding influence beyond institutional control (Ramos, 2025).

The partial mediation pattern has important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, it supports engagement-based branding frameworks that emphasize co-creation while also acknowledging the independent signaling role of institutional communication (Perera et al., 2023). Practically, it implies that institutions should not assume engagement will automatically translate into branding benefits unless engagement is meaningful, sustained, and aligned with institutional values. Future research could extend this insight by examining longitudinal engagement trajectories and their cumulative branding effects, addressing a current gap in predominantly cross-sectional studies (Khan, 2025).

4.4. Moderators, Platform-Specific Dynamics, and Sustainable Strategic Implications

The literature further highlights that the effectiveness of social media marketing is contingent upon several moderating factors, particularly content quality, platform selection, and authenticity. Content quality consistently emerges as the most critical moderator determining whether social media marketing generates positive engagement and branding outcomes. Authentic, peer-driven content generates engagement levels 1.5 to 2.0 times higher than purely promotional messaging, while utility-focused content addressing practical student concerns demonstrates stronger conversion from engagement to enrollment intentions (Adhikari et al., 2025; Demirer, 2025). Platform-specific dynamics also shape outcomes. Instagram consistently emerges as the most effective platform for undergraduate engagement due to its visual orientation and alignment with student demographics, while YouTube enhances institutional credibility through long-form content (Mihajlovi & Gaji, 2025; Sulistyowati & Husda, 2023). TikTok shows high engagement potential among younger cohorts but remains under-researched, representing a promising avenue for future studies (Laini et al., 2025). LinkedIn plays a specialized role in graduate and professional branding, reinforcing perceptions of academic credibility and career relevance (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024).

From a sustainability perspective, these findings suggest that effective social media marketing in higher education requires long-term strategic commitment rather than episodic campaigns. Institutions that integrate content strategy, responsive interaction, and consistent brand identity across platforms demonstrate stronger and more resilient branding outcomes (Kumar & Modi, 2025; Dwitasari et al., 2024). Future research should therefore explore how social media marketing strategies evolve over time and how they interact with broader institutional missions, digital governance structures, and ethical considerations related to commercialization and inclusivity in higher education (Roy & Misra, 2024).

V. Conclusion

This study synthesizes a broad body of empirical literature to examine digital and social media marketing as a core strategic mechanism in higher education, with particular attention to its role in shaping student engagement and institutional branding. The overall findings demonstrate that social media marketing is no longer a peripheral communication activity but a structurally embedded strategy that influences institutional outcomes through multiple, interconnected pathways. Across diverse institutional contexts, digital and social media marketing consistently enhances student engagement and strengthens institutional brand equity by increasing visibility, fostering emotional connections, and enabling peer-to-peer communication perceived as highly credible by prospective students. Student engagement emerges as a central explanatory construct, partially mediating the relationship between marketing activities and branding outcomes, which indicates that branding in higher education is simultaneously driven by direct institutional signaling and by engagement-based co-creation processes. These findings confirm that effective institutional branding in the digital era depends not only on what universities communicate but also on how students cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally interact with those communications.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the advancement of marketing and higher education scholarship in several important ways. First, it extends customer engagement and brand equity theories into the higher education context, demonstrating that these frameworks remain robust when applied to complex, high-involvement service settings such as universities. The findings reinforce social identity theory by showing that social media platforms enable students to publicly affiliate with institutions,

thereby integrating institutional identity into their self-concepts and strengthening brand loyalty. At the same time, the stimulus–organism–response framework is supported as a useful lens for explaining how social media stimuli trigger internal cognitive and emotional engagement processes that lead to branding outcomes. Importantly, the evidence of partial mediation refines existing theoretical assumptions by showing that engagement is a critical but not exclusive mechanism, suggesting the coexistence of relational, informational, and signaling pathways in institutional brand development. This integrated understanding offers a more nuanced conceptual model of how branding operates in digitally mediated higher education environments.

In terms of managerial implications, the findings underscore the necessity for higher education leaders to reconceptualize social media marketing as a long-term strategic investment rather than a tactical promotional tool. Institutions should prioritize content quality, authenticity, and utility, recognizing that meaningful engagement and credible branding outcomes are driven more by relevance and trust than by posting frequency or platform presence alone. Strategic differentiation across platforms is also essential, as different social media channels serve distinct institutional purposes ranging from engagement and storytelling to credibility building and professional positioning. Moreover, universities must develop organizational capabilities for active engagement management, including responsiveness, dialogue facilitation, and integration of user-generated content, to fully leverage the branding potential of social media. Ultimately, institutions that embed digital and social media marketing within comprehensive brand-building strategies—aligned with institutional values, student experiences, and long-term reputational goals—will be better positioned to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in an increasingly digital and competitive higher education landscape.

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