

Exploring the role of social media marketing in students' decision to select universities in Lebanon: a proposed emerging framework

Fatima Al Husseiny^{1*}, Hasan Youness¹

¹ Lebanese International University
Beirut, Lebanon

* Email: info@fatimaalhusseiny.com

ABSTRACT

In the era of technological advancement, personalized learning trends are rising rapidly. Consequently, we are swiftly developing the traditional education scope, the social networking dimension, and its relationship with data acquisition. Notably, we live in a prospective learning ecosystem characterized by the demand of being cognitively flexible with a prolonged effect of the growth mindset. Social Media (SM) is becoming the new norm in students' personal and academic lives. Surprisingly, SM consumption in the Middle East is critical, where 9 out of 10 Arab youths use at least one social media channel daily. This study explores the role of SM on thoughts and behaviors in students' decision-making to select a university in Lebanon. The following questions were examined (1) what role does social media marketing play in Lebanese high school students' decision-making when selecting a university to study? and (2) How do universities use social media marketing to attract new students' enrolment? Little research was published to explore the challenging role of social media in higher educational institutions in Lebanon and how it influences the decision-making of students. Hence, this research is an exploratory study where qualitative methods were adopted to investigate the above two objectives, resulting in a proposed emerging framework.

Keywords: social media, branding, marketing of universities, decision-making, Lebanon

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century was marked by a digital revolution that transformed the personal and academic life of learners. Every student uses at least one smart device daily. Therefore, it is inconceivable to imagine a classroom without technology. To achieve the competencies of the digital era, students must be actively engaged in and invested in their learning experience.¹ As a result of the pandemic, the world has been profoundly disrupted and tested. This pandemic has affected all sectors of Society, particularly education, altering students' learning environments, perceptions, and abilities. Governments on a global scale were required to pass laws mandating the end of in-person learning in schools and universities, forcing them to adopt online delivery methods. Due to the rapid transition to online learning, educators and institutions must develop more innovative teaching strategies to

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help students adapt to these rapid changes, particularly in online assessment.² Significantly, in the higher education market, universities position their branding image as a priority, which is how they stand out from the competition and enroll more students.³ As a result of the competitive market, universities need to position themselves on the frontline of the digitalized world and be more aware of how to communicate their values to prospective students. Individuals have different tastes, meaning they are digitally diverse and prefer other communication channels. Those platforms highly influence the student's decision-making, and that is why considering social media marketing will reflect positively on the brand image of the universities.³ In this sense, a social comparison study was conducted to survey 37,729 participants across 18 countries and correlated it to the respondents' activity on Facebook. Results showed how these differences, country, culture, and socioeconomic norms and values might influence how people develop and act on social media.⁴

Due to the emergence of interactive digital and social media approaches, networking and information acquisition, and open sharing resources, students' decisions were massively influenced. Students tend to trust their perception of choice and what others recommend through digital intelligence, i.e., what social media presents for them.⁵ Adopting a new innovative shift that requires information and communications technology (ICT) integration necessitates consideration of learners' behavioral intentions and challenges.⁶

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What role does social media marketing play in Lebanese high school students' decision-making when selecting a university to study?
- 2) How do universities use social media marketing to attract students' applications?

3. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method is defined as research means of applying deep, systematic, and reliable data processing and input. It focuses on comprehension through observation, cautious documentation, and in-depth analysis of people's words, behaviors, and records. It stresses developing a complex, holistic picture, created through words, reporting complete detailed feedback on participants' views in a very conducive and natural setting.⁷

3.1 Grounded theory

The term 'grounded theory' is extracted from the belief that a theory should be developed from the systematic analysis of empirical data. The purpose of grounded theory strategies is to create middle-range approaches. The grounded theory method has three major techniques: coding, memo-making, and theoretical sampling. These build and distinguish grounded theory from other kinds of qualitative analysis.⁸

3.2 Sampling

In this study, 30 individuals participated in attaining the research goals. The 30 individuals were chosen from different universities across Lebanon. The interviewees were distributed as follows with their consecutive roles within the higher education context: dean (1), postdoctoral researcher (1), research coordinator (1), media channel owner (2), quality assurance expert (1), campus coordinator (1), campus director (2), digital marketing expert (1), non-governmental organization (NGO) founder (1), business instructor (2), social sciences instructor (2), author (1), journalist (1), language instructor (1), university student (2), high school teachers (4), and high school students (6).

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

It is commonly known that qualitative methods include implementing interviews (focus group or one-on-one), observation (face-to-face or virtual), and document or content analysis (soft or hard). Notably, a qualitative method has a broader purpose and includes in-depth inquiry forms.⁹

4. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) How do universities in Lebanon use social media marketing to attract new students? Which channels do they use the most, and why?
- 2) What are the core values universities are presenting to prospective students?
- 3) In what way do you believe the universities are presenting their values on social media?

5. DATA ANALYSIS

After the interviews, the data went through four stages of organizing before coding. First, data derived from the interviews were transcribed manually. Second, Arabic transcriptions were translated into English. Third, both English and Arabic versions were summarized. In the last stage, to ensure they abide by the ethics of the research, they were sent back to the interviewees for a second approval before starting data analysis.

5.1 Coding

Coding is the initial step for data sorting while developing an emergent study. It is important to note that data collection and coding are two parallel processes when researching this type.¹⁰

5.2 Types of coding

- **Inductive coding:** This type of coding is relevant when following an exploratory study or when there is a knowledge gap in the theoretical concepts to support the emerging phenomenon.
- **Deductive coding:** This type of coding requires a pre-set list of codes before starting the coding process. Codes derived from deductive coding are themes extracted from the existing literature. Within the process of deductive coding, it is noted that the number of codes will be relatively limited and not flexibly open to be expanded.¹¹
- **Memos:** Memo writing is a reflective stage for every qualitative research while the coding process is still active. This stage rotates around systematic reflective writing about the data collected. They represent a link between created codes and suggested interpretations and meanings associated with this code. It also documents impressions, ideas, and interpretations to develop further the emerging theory in the data.¹²
- **Thematic analysis:** Thematic Analysis (TA) was adopted for data analysis from the interviews. Thematic Analysis refers to “identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data.”¹³ The Thematic Analysis method follows six stages:

Stage 1: Being familiar with the data.

The researcher here has a closer look at the data to get a general look.

Stage 2: Initial coding

They are referred to at later stages as labels, tags, or categories derived from the initial coding process of data. This is done through summarizing sentences from the whole text derived from transcripts and known as open coding.

Stage 3: Developing themes

Here, themes emerging from the data are identified and formed. Attention to details lying within data is essential to ensure that content meaning is not affected. At the end of this stage, themes are created from the initial codes for each transcript and grouped by common words or phrases.

Stage 4: Theme review

This stage is connected to the previous step, developing themes. Themes are reviewed to match and ensure data meanings.

Stage 5: Define themes

In another way, it is the final refinement stage of handling themes. It aims to “identify the ‘essence’ of each theme” and their relation to other themes.

Stage 6: Constructing the written analysis

This is the final writing stage, where all data and themes collected within the research study are connected in one composition of different forms: journal, report, etc.

6. RESULTS

This study explored the role of social media marketing in impacting youth's decision to join certain higher educational institutions in Lebanon. This section briefly analyzed and discussed the descriptive analysis of data collected through the interviews.

Question 1: "How does your institution invest in social media marketing to attract students?"

When exploring the first question in the interview, the following phrases were expressed, *financial approach, geographical proximity, announcement approach, less stress on social media, visual reports for resources and system, experience and activity exposure, website exposure, traditional approach, interactive atmosphere, ongoing competition, communication medium, targeting strategies, facilitation and saving time, and the lack of knowledge and interest in social media.*

To begin with, reflecting on the financial approach tendency of higher education institutes to market themselves on social media to shape the students' decision-making process, repeated phrases like *"affordability, availability, focus on the fees, and scholarships"* were used.

Similar to the *financial* aspects, *geographical proximity* was repeatedly used with phrases like *"they show the environment, it is available, a lot of branches,"* to reflect how universities try to shed light on the size and physical environment. Next comes the frequent slight emphasis on the *announcement approach* when it comes to their current practices in marketing or branding themselves for the students. It was reflected that there is less stress on Social Media Marketing in the higher education market. For this purpose, they used terms like *"Lately they started using social media, they invest the minimal amount,"* to reflect this viewpoint.

To highlight the visual reports for resources and system representation on social media to attract students, participants ensured that universities indirectly use this approach to shape the decision. A common ground was identified among the participant's reflections when they stated that *experience and activity exposure* and *interactive atmosphere* are part of the social media strategies used by universities in the marketing process. When mentioning the words reflecting these two perspectives, they used *"present, workshops, events activities, conferences, contests, and challenges."*

Comparing *website exposure to the traditional approach*, participants indicated that most universities use their social media to *publicize their websites* while few others use *traditional approaches*. Some participants reported that *ongoing competition and targeting strategies* were the least to be spotted. In this sense, several participants attributed the role of social media as a *communication medium* influencing youths' decision. Extracting phrases from the transcripts to ensure the reflection of those two emerging themes, phrases like *"spotting light on the competition, attracting students, great means, through campaigns, competitive advantage,"* were used.

Time was a determinant factor for some participants, and some indicated that social media plays a role in *facilitating and saving time*. Some repetitive phrases were used, like, *"makes it way easier, the timing where everything is changing so fast, easier, faster."* Ending this short, *lack of knowledge and interest in social media* was also reflected by some interviewees.

Question 1 (second part). "Which channels do they use the most and why?"

Considering the replies about the channels used the most by the universities and their reasons, the below description was obtained.

For the most used social media platforms, most voted for Facebook, while other significant replies go for Instagram, with minor emphasis on Twitter and LinkedIn. It was noted that only a few mentioned *QS university ranking platforms*. When they discussed the reasons behind their choices, some pointed out that *they were not following the trend*, while others *stated that universities are not following the generation trends*. It is important to mention other reasons like *marketing based on the university perspective; it creates communities, a platform of communication, doing it for website exposure, and a fast, easy medium, doing it for student exposure, interactivity, and communication; I am only aware of the platforms I use, holistic feature, Facebook top app for business, power of leaders and influencers, word of mouth and networking, and universities have communication gap on channels.*

To begin with, reflecting on the universities' perspective in marketing themselves on social media to help the students shape their decision-making process, repeated phrases such as *"the university uses social media, like every other institution that simply promotes their online courses,"* were expressed. This was followed by social media acts as a people's medium, a target community, a platform of communication, and the youths' medium. To show the intersection between these

categories, phrases like *“most important one for people and the youths, to communicate with more students because most of them would be more active on Instagram, most active on Instagram because they are targeting young people, everyone is there,”* were reflected.

Adding to this is the frequent slight emphasis on website exposure regarding their *“visibility, targeting strategies, and publicizing the website.”* It was also identified that *“the power of leaders and influencers, word of mouth, and networking”* play a role. For this purpose, they used terms like *“power of influencers and leaders, students recruit students, and word of mouth,”* to reflect this view. To highlight the communication gap on social media channels, an estimation of % 3.3 of the total participants ensured that universities are using this approach to shape the decision indirectly.

It was revealed among the participant's opinions that *social media acts as a holistic feature. Facebook is the top app for business*, and it is an essential part of social media strategies used by universities in shaping the decision of the young people. When mentioning the phrases reflecting these two perspectives, they used *“holistic feature; and Facebook is the top app used by most businesses.”* In comparison, other participants reflected that *they were not following the trend and not following the generation.* In addition, it was noted that *“students are more visual, and need to see proof, they are not following the trend or the generation's needs,”* to reflect their views regarding why most institutions are emphasizing the use of specific channels more than the other. Extracting phrases from the interviewee's replies to stress the reflection of those two emerging themes, we mention *“spotting light on the competition of these attractive students, great means, through campaigns, competitive advantage.”*

Question 2: What core values do universities present to prospective students?

When participants were asked about the core values representation, some said that social media has social, academic, international, personality, financial, and professional values.

Phrases like *“quality, students' autonomy, listed their majors, University's vision and mission, they can lead, innovation, diversity, learning for life, emotional, honesty, human dignity, accreditation, international nationalities, global citizens, costs of studying, discounts, prices, fees, integrity, social responsibility, diversity, accepting others,”* were used to reflect the values identifies from the replies.

Question 3: In what way do you believe they are presenting that on social media?

Once the interviewees were asked about their perception of how those universities are presenting these values on social media, answers rotated around these themes: *announcement approach, word of mouth, visual reports about university resources, not communicating well, people interactivity, unrealistic representation, and direct promotion.*

Starting with the emerging categories to reflect uncertainty about how the process goes, participants revealed *unrealistic representation* and that *values were not communicated well.* To reflect these emerging themes, repeated phrases were used to disclose uncertainty *“I don't know, I am unaware, I only know.”* To reflect that the values were not communicated well, phrases like *“If they have other values, they are not communicating it well, they don't communicate it well,”* were reported. As for the critical representation of unrealistic representation,” words and terms like *“do not think they are presenting, maybe they are showing some, through the image more than the reality, and unrealistic,”* were repeated.

Significantly, almost all participants stated that universities use *visual reports about their resources to attract new students, indirectly affecting their decision.* Terms used were like *“form of events that they have done, I saw a video, life inside the dorms, international days connect, and they're using a lot of visuals and consistency.”* Correspondingly, there was a slight emphasis on the announcement approaches and word of mouth. Regarding the announcement approach, they used terms like *“what they did this year, announcement, and how they campaigned for the major.”* As for word of mouth, they used *“word of mouth, students as their social media, networking, students as outreach.”*

To highlight the direct promotion of the university on social media, phrases like *“how the university works, how this university has changed your life, to show us what they are doing over social media”* reveals how universities are investing in their virtual image to influence the digital making of youth. Few reflected *people's interactivity* representation of values on social media. Extracting terms from the transcriptionist and coding, we mention *“what they are doing now, interactive atmosphere.”*

7. ANALYSIS: EMERGING THEORY FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework comprises five emerging themes, as shown in Figure 1 below.

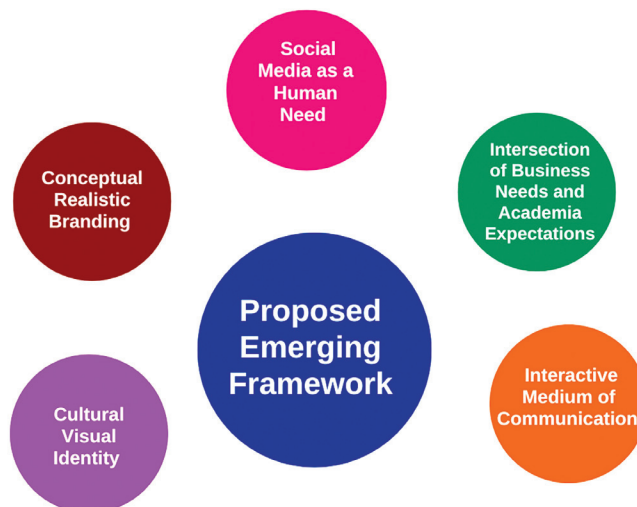


Figure 1. The proposed framework for social media's role in influencing the decision-making for university selection among youth in Lebanon

In our modernized approach to decision-making, we go beyond traditional factors. This is due to the massive power of digitalization in our everyday life and, more precisely, youth's regular interaction and communication. These create a social and behavioral code of conduct shaping youth's understanding and guided behavior within the virtual medium. Little research was conducted to explore the role of social media marketing in the decision-making of youth and their university selection through the social marketing processes used by universities in Lebanon. The emphasized fact that the social media powerful impact on youth is a reality we cannot escape and demands a holistic eco-systemic framework that would guide universities, students, parents, instructors, and decision-makers to better understand the massive role of social media in youth educational life. Toward the end of the discussion, a summary will be provided through a recommendation diagram to enlighten the research path for future studies on the role of social media in decision-making and university selection in Lebanon.

7.1 Social media as a human need

Human needs evolve across generations based on the transformative trends on all levels: social, economic, cultural, financial, and, most importantly, digital. For this, Maslow's hierarchy of needs demanded updates to meet the needs of the age. Elaborating on this, and through the interviews, some participants expressed that there is less stress on social media in higher education in Lebanon. Participants reflected on how social media constructs or reflects on their new needs. It was not clearly stated that social media is an immediate need for them since the nature of the questions was about the general exploration of the social media role in decision-making but rather on the overall level.

To begin with, quoting one of the participants stated, *"Everyone is on social media, I am a person who achieved a lot, and I have a need to be recognized; they prohibited me from this need."* Followed by another participant, who added, *"we need to see, we need to have a feel of security."* In this sense, some participants showed the need for a secure and accepting environment. Adding to this, another participant stressed that *"the customer has needs, and they want those needs fulfilled,"* equally important to this. A holistic indicator of the fulfillment of a real need on social media was expressed by another participant who emphasized, *"Everything I need to know."* Significantly speaking, one of the participants summed up the fundamental importance by stating that *"we need to be aware that no one can live without social media, and if they decided so, they decided to live in the darkness."*

The consistent theme of "Social media as a human need" arises from this research study. Human needs vary from essential to emotional needs. On social media, the highest level of conditions can be achieved. However, most institutions promote basic human needs, not abiding by the social media structure. Chiefly, a study that critically reviewed Maslow's law in the digital age reported a developed

categorization for traditional needs. This development came because of Maslow's pyramid of needs strengthened the evaluation and added to it "granularity".¹⁴

The participants in the interviews were highly aware of this informative aspect; where one participant stated that *"universities are going to high schools to tell students about their majors and instructors,"* followed by others who expressed the fact that social media goes beyond entertainment and is used by students with a high level of awareness. They emphasized that *"they are maybe updating websites, they are entertaining the current students, through Facebook groups or Instagram."*

7.2 Conceptual realistic branding

Branding in higher education was becoming a high need. It caught the attention of many researchers in the domain where the competitive market that stands out from the crowd is prevailing.¹⁵

However, when considering the interviewees' perspective about universities competing value in the global market, some participants showed this need. A few stated, *"I believe that for the university to compete with other universities, they must promote giving scholarships; Lebanon unis cannot go abroad and compete, showing the tools they are using and the technological tools that show a competitive value."* Here we understand the knowledge gap on the level of social media presentation of global competitiveness that is what the new generation is looking for.

As mentioned before, branding is necessary for any organization to develop its cultural representation in front of the audience; in this case, students think beyond local institutional concerns. To ensure this claim and relate it to our study findings, it was noted that social media is creating a *"behavioral attitude or social behavior conduct."* For this, we need to brand the university's image in a way that appeals to the audience and reflects the truth about the university; this will create a misleading society. Responses like *"I care to see content about real examples if I did not see an example of the students who graduated and how they were helped, I wouldn't believe, and I will consider everything is marketing, a realistic visual image of what's going on in this college, have a peek at what the university looks like and not the artificial image created, they are trying to show maybe something more attractive for students, rather than reflecting reality. They are trying to show the power of their students through the image more than the reality."* This reflected the need for having a realistic representation and, currently, universities are not doing that.

7.3 Cultural visual identity

Social networks shape various aspects of global society, including culture.¹⁶ One of the cultural constructs of an individual is the social aspect. Like in real life, we are affected by the medium we live in; in this case, we target the virtual environment.

The integrated cultural concept of social media gathered the interest of 26.6% of the total participants. Here we quote a response from one interviewee that reflects this cultural need: *"Social media played a huge role."* Then we started to look at social media differently and how it is essential and in parallel with the situation that was happening in our culture and society; it's a cultural concept, a cultural concept created in the brains of the people.

For this, we are transitioning from merely investigating how our actual environment affects our identity to the digitized media's role in constructing it. Significantly speaking, 70% reflected that universities used visual reports for resources and system promotion to attract new students and affect their decision-making.

More or less, social media is developing a sense of conceptualized identity among youths.¹⁷ In this sense, universities *"are creating a visual identity, and this is the nature of human beings. We are visual; many universities have a political and religious identity, and this identity affects the decision-making of the students and their parents."*

Social media is becoming a medium for identity expression, self-exploration, and experimentation. It has its own oratory culture. Oratory is the art of public speaking, delivering a speech in front of an audience with two aims: persuade and explain.¹⁸

For this, social media is an environment where people exist and need a culture to govern their behaviors. There are six levels of self-representation on social media used by individuals and communities. These six levels are the performative self, the public self, the articulated self, the asynchronous self, the augmented reality self, and the branded self.¹⁸

It was clear from the respondents' answers that universities in Lebanon vary in their value representation and deliverance to the audience, in this case, students. It is significant to show youths how to be active, responsible individuals in society; however, a gap exists in preparing them to

embrace these qualities. To illustrate, some participants reflected that the university's social media activity targets "*personality values*." It is contradicting in the sense that the new trend is personalization, whether in marketing or education. Youths care about being given targeted attention and not being targeted in a general way. For this, more attention to personality values must be present to communicate the university's message directly to the students. It promotes activities and posts on building a responsible citizen who is aware of his own needs and expectations before society makes an active contribution and strategic decision-making.

The younger generation is interested in seeing how the university helps them pursue their goals by representing academic and professional values. In comparison, the older generation considers the constituents behind academic excellence and quality to be part of the overall institution. How their facilities contribute to students' lives is not given much attention. Youths care to see the quality of the teachers who are convincing them into action and not a mere promotion for this. Many stressed that there is a need to see real examples of students who benefited from what was promoted on social media about a particular university. Considering the financial value representation on social media posts, some participants indicated that the university is appealing to their fundamental needs when promoting, especially in promoting international taste. A student's primary concern when deciding on any university is its ability to prepare him to compete in the global market. Little attention was given to this value from the interviewee's perspective.

7.4 The Intersection of business needs and academia expectations

"Any learning institute is a business institute" in the era of globalization. Terms such as knowledge society, knowledge workers, and knowledge economy have added a new paradigm to the field of knowledge, especially for universities.¹⁹ It is essential to emphasize the fulfillment of quality learning and skills within an institution.²⁰ This satisfies the business goals, creates audience loyalty, and attracts more audiences.

Several sub-themes were identified throughout the interviews to elaborate on the role of a balanced perception between academia and business. Here comes the importance of having an ecosystem of all elements presented to reach a balanced decision based on realistic branding and away from fraudulent marketing.

Adding to this, there was a growing need to balance business and education. It was stressed that there is a need "to invest in both business and education plans for the students and keep their level. Another thing, universities should not cover the educational process in their business approach or marketing approach because this will affect the whole system and the whole decision-making of students. *"When we talk about this balance, we are targeting the holistic role of social media in youths decision-making"*

There is an existent challenge in incorporating business models within the higher education context. Though both are driven by external forces, mainly rapidly evolving and changing markets and customers satisfactions, yet the latter does it at different levels.²¹ As stressed, there is "*a need to be an active learning institution, not just a business.*"

It is noted that universities are in an ongoing competition. Some interviewees stated, "*Universities are always in a state of continuous competition.*" *This created a sense of competition to appear in front of the public and especially students.*" They showed a need to post about their competing value in the global market. It was reflected that "*universities want to show how strong they are in the Global market. Furthermore, some universities use targeting strategies,*" where some interviewees stated, "*They are using strategies targeting majors and students.*" As a matter of fact, universities are not showing the intersection between business and academia, where interviewees reflected that most universities deal with marketing from a university perspective. When we talk about a university's perspective, it means that through social media, they appeal to the university more than the students. As a matter of fact, some interviewees stated that "*Facebook is a top app for business.*" *Some stated, "Facebook is the top advertisement tool in business even we, as media agencies, focus on Facebook."*

7.5 Interactive medium of communication

Social media motivates students to communicate, collaborate, participate, and create in-depth learning through an interactive medium. Education has become more open and digitized.²² When investigating how universities use the platform for marketing themselves, notably speaking, few reported that they used it in its traditional way. One of the participants' expert opinion was, "*you don't want to make it look like a very targeted type of communication.*" This shows the gap between what

the university is communicating, what the student is looking up to speak, and where the brand loses its value within this gap that is not professionally researched yet.

Adding to this, throughout the interviews, there was continuous stress over the need for communication. They do not communicate what they have and usually use such social media tools, basically to communicate with existing students.

“Still, it does not give an attitude; when I see them talking on social media; they talk about the outcomes of each major, bring the students to talk about their experiences, they are talking about the university, the academic reputation of the university, the content that they have presented on social media plus their facilities inside the university, and the instructional staff itself, talk a lot about international education and collaborative teaching.”

Elaborating on this, communicating an existing message is the main target for using any marketing approach. When it comes to social media, the content and news are how it is transmitted to the audience. As a matter of fact, universities plan their communicated messages or prior content marketing for it in a targeted strategic way while the audience, in this sense, is spontaneous. Students come to social media to engage with other students and institutions without prior expectations. In this way, universities govern and control this open free medium of communication by communicating universities' expectations and needs.

8. CONCLUSION

This study's findings have diverse holistic beneficiaries starting with policymakers and ending with the students, considering that social media plays an essential role in everyone's life today. The growing demand for branding among higher educational institutions to increase their current enrollment rate justifies the need for a more comprehensive and holistic framework guide. Therefore, universities who decide to follow up with the latest trends will benefit from this study and its findings to be enlightened about social media's role in decision-making and adapt their strategies accordingly. Not only university administrators and instructors will be enlightened by this study, but also policymakers who could use this study as a guide on what should be emphasized on social media to enhance their brand image. For the researchers and other interested academics, this study would uncover critical aspects of social media in the educational sector to explore new dimensions of decision-making within a virtual context.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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