

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

^{1*}Ace N. Bombaes, ²Jennalyn O. Banta, ³Ana Celine G. Esquierdo, ⁴Camille D. Martinzo, ⁵Jenny B. Unico, ⁶Jessica Rose P. Enriquez, ⁷Jeramayne Dahl E. Castor

¹⁻⁷National University Philippines
Email: bombaes_21@yahoo.com

*Corresponding Author: Ace N. Bombaes (bombaes_21@yahoo.com)

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Abstract

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This research investigates the strategic evolution of the global education sector, with a particular emphasis on the Philippines, where Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly embracing commercial and marketing strategies. This transformation is driven by heightened competition and the urgent necessity for HEIs to improve their visibility, branding, and institutional reputation in the digital age. While digital and cyberspace marketing allow institutions like National University-Dasmariñas to expand their outreach, there is a notable lack of research focusing on the specific local challenges faced by Philippine HEIs in utilizing digital marketing to connect with prospective students and their parents. Guided by Facet Theory, this qualitative study seeks to cultivate a localized and detailed understanding of digital marketing practices within the Philippine context. Its primary objectives are threefold: to explore the digital marketing tools and strategies employed by HEIs such as National University-Dasmariñas; to evaluate their effectiveness in attracting and retaining parents by analyzing their influence on decision-making processes; and to assess parents' perceptions of these digital initiatives, including their views on credibility and usefulness. Through purposive sampling, the research conducts semi-structured, in-depth interviews with prospective parents at National University-Dasmariñas to uncover barriers and opportunities in the implementation of effective digital marketing strategies. The findings of this study provide actionable recommendations to enhance digital marketing frameworks for HEIs, thereby improving institutional outreach and competitive positioning in the Philippines. These insights contribute to the advancement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 Quality Education and SDG 17 Partnerships for the Goals, by promoting more effective engagement between educational institutions and their key stakeholders.



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Introduction

The global education sector, including the Philippines, is undergoing a significant transformation as it increasingly incorporates commercial and marketing practices in response to rising competition and evolving expectations from students and parents. Educational institutions now face challenges such as fluctuating demand, intense global competition, and reductions in financial aid, prompting a strategic shift from relying solely on academic excellence to actively employing marketing strategies to enhance visibility and appeal to prospective students and stakeholders. This shift emphasizes branding, institutional image, and reputation building, alongside effective communication and outreach efforts, treating students and parents as informed consumers who make deliberate, data-informed choices (Daoud, M. K., et al., 2023; Calma, A., & Dickson-Deane, C., 2020).

Rationale and Motivation

The exponential marketing approaches primarily leveraging cyberspace and digital media have enabled institutions, such as National University Dasmariñas, to reach and interact with their audiences more effectively, demonstrating benefits and adapting to the dynamic demands of informed students and parents (Nwankwo, S., & Gbadamosi, A., 2021; Ghosal, I., Prasad, B., & Kaur, K., 2020). Analyzing this shift is highly relevant in light of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), to ensure education systems remain responsive, inclusive, and sustainable in an era of digital transformation (Durrani, N. et al., 2023). This study contends that understanding and responding to the challenges and opportunities presented by commercial and exponential marketing in higher education is critical for Philippine institutions to remain competitive, build effective branding, and improve stakeholder engagement in a rapidly evolving, technology-driven educational landscape.

Purpose and Problem Statement

Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to provide insight and localized understanding of the impact of commercial and exponential marketing practices on Philippine higher education institutions (O'Brien, C., 2025). Using qualitative methods, the research seeks to investigate parent behavior and institutional initiatives within this competitive, technology-driven context, aiming to help HEIs refine their marketing strategies for more effective recruitment and retention (Ijaz, M., & Khan, S., 2021; Harbi, A. M., & Ali, M. M., 2022; Uddin, M., & Islam, M. R., 2022).

Main Objectives and Purposes

The primary aim of a qualitative research study in the Philippines would be to explore how digital marketing is being utilized by Higher Education Institutions and to assess its impact on parents' engagement, institutional branding, and enrollment strategies within the local context.

1. Examine the digital marketing tools and strategies used by higher education institutions, such as National University Dasmariñas.
2. To evaluate the efficiency of digital marketing strategies for attracting and keeping parents. This could include determining how various techniques influence parents' decision-making processes, from first awareness to ultimate enrollment.
3. To measure parents' attitudes toward digital marketing initiatives implemented by universities. This would investigate how parents engage with and are influenced by digital material, including their judgments of credibility and usefulness.
4. Identify the difficulties and possibilities for Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines to develop

effective digital marketing strategies. This could be based on observed obstacles in other contexts, such as the requirement for ongoing adaptation to changing digital tools and the transfer of digital marketing knowledge to employees.

5.To propose solutions for strengthening Higher Education Institutions' digital marketing strategies for greater outreach and institutional positioning in the Philippines.

The main objectives and purposes of this qualitative research on digital marketing in Philippine Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) strongly relate to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) in the following ways:

Aspect of Research Objectives	Relation to SDG 4	Relation to SDG 17
Exploring digital marketing tools and strategies used by HEIs	Supports SDG 4 by promoting equal access to quality tertiary education through innovative digital engagement, enhancing institutions' ability to provide relevant, inclusive education aligned with modern needs.	Encourages collaboration among institutions, digital platforms, and stakeholders to enhance outreach and resource sharing.
Evaluating efficiency of digital marketing in attracting and retaining parents	Advances SDG 4 by boosting student enrollment and retention, ensuring more learners access and complete quality education for equitable outcomes.	Facilitates multi-stakeholder engagement, strengthening networks that support education and shared goals.
Measuring parents' attitudes toward digital marketing initiatives	Aligns with SDG 4 by understanding learner perspectives to ensure educational content and outreach are credible, relevant, and accessible to all.	Enables feedback and participation, strengthening partnerships among students, institutions, and digital providers for continuous improvement.
Identifying challenges and opportunities for digital marketing in HEIs	Addresses SDG 4 by identifying barriers to digital inclusion and quality education, promoting solutions for lifelong learning and digital literacy.	Supports SDG 17 by identifying needs for capacity building, knowledge transfer, and collaboration among institutions, tech providers, and policymakers.

Proposing solutions to strengthen digital marketing for greater outreach and positioning	Contributes to SDG 4 by promoting innovative education and expanding quality access through effective digital engagement.	Promotes partnerships and resource mobilization vital for sustainable education and institutional resilience.
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Table 1. Shows the relationship of the objectives to SDG 4 and SDG 17

Literature Review

The Strategic Shift in Higher Education Marketing

The global education sector is undergoing a significant transformation, increasingly incorporating commercial and marketing practices in response to rising competition and evolving stakeholder expectations (Calma, A., & Dickson-Deane, C., 2020). Historically, institutions relied primarily on academic excellence, but they now face challenges such as fluctuating demand and intense global competition, prompting a shift toward active branding and reputation building. This evolution treats students and parents as informed consumers who make deliberate, data-informed choices regarding their education (Hackett, P., (2022); Nwankwo, S., & Gbadamosi, A. (2021); Ijaz, M., & Khan, S. (2021).

The Critical Role of Digital Platforms and Branding

Digital marketing transforms the education sector by expanding access and improving brand visibility. Research identifies social media platforms and institutional websites as the most critical channels for information dissemination and interaction (Pawar, 2024). These digital tools are essential for shaping student satisfaction, managing institutional image, and supporting recruitment and retention efforts. Effective digital marketing significantly influences the overall “student experience” by enhancing engagement and institutional reputation (Bencheckroun et al., (2024); Mai To et al. (2022); Ijaz & Khan (2021).

Influence on Engagement and Enrollment Decisions

Digital marketing is increasingly viewed as the primary and most effective way to attract and influence students, often surpassing traditional marketing methods in its ability to capture the attention of high-quality applicants. Studies show that institutions utilizing effective digital strategies report significantly higher engagement and enrollment rates. These strategies are most effective when they target the entire enrollment journey, influencing the decision-making process from the initial stage of awareness to the final point of enrollment (Ijaz & Khan (2021); Nwankwo & Gbadamosi (2021); Rajkumar et al. (2022); Kusumawati (2018).

Trust, Credibility, and Parental Perceptions

For marketing initiatives to be successful, they must prioritize credibility and transparency. Prospective parents and students judge digital content based on its perceived usefulness and the trustworthiness of the institution. Innovations in digital marketing, such as tailored platforms, multimedia content, and interactive sessions, foster stronger institutional connections and provide a competitive advantage. Conversely, a lack of transparency or irrelevant content can serve as a barrier to engagement (Edwards, A. L., & Omilion-Hodges, L. M. (2022); Calma, A., & Dickson-Deane, C. (2020); Mai To, A., Mindzak, M., Thongpapanl, N., & Mindzak, J. (2022).

Strategic Frameworks and Localized Challenges

The use of comprehensive frameworks, such as Facet Theory, allows HEIs to structure complex social phenomena into defined components like stakeholders, digital dimensions, and outcome measures. In the Philippine context, HEIs face specific challenges, including the need for ongoing technological adaptation and the transfer of digital marketing knowledge to staff (Valdiviezo Sir et al. (2024). To remain competitive, institutions must align their digital strategies with overall institutional goals and utilize advanced analytics to track efficiency and return on investment (ROI) (Hackett, P. (2022); Valdiviezo Sir et al. (2024); Bhati, P., & Mangal, M. (2025); Kumar, P., & Modi, R. K. (2025).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring and understanding complex phenomena in depth. Qualitative methods allow for a nuanced investigation of “how” universities like National University Dasmariñas react and how digital marketing impacts parents' perceptions and choices

The research was conducted at the National University Dasmariñas. The population for the study comprised prospective parents whose children are entering the School of Tourism Management as students. Focusing on parents provides insights into their digital habits and decision-making. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who can provide meaningful insights into the effectiveness of digital marketing. This included ten (10) parents whose children have gone through the enrollment process and enrolled at the institution

The primary tool for collecting data was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This technique allows for exploring perceptions and views in depth, revealing conceptions about a research area and providing open access to participants' thoughts and feeling. Questions were open-ended, flexible, and relevant to participants' experiences. Interviews were conducted with the identified prospective parents to align with the study's primary objectives and population focus.

Findings

The thematic analysis is designed to provide a qualitative and holistic understanding of digital marketing effectiveness in higher education by exploring specific facets such as platform usage, perception, outcomes, and best practices.

Theme 1: Key Digital Platforms, Tools, and Institutional Branding Strategies

This theme investigates the specific digital channels utilized by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the subsequent impact on their public image and branding. It focuses on identifying which digital platforms, such as social media, institutional websites, and email campaigns, are encountered most frequently in HEI marketing.

A central focus is determining the perceived impact of these tools on the institution's brand. Participants are asked to share examples of digital tools or campaigns that they believe have contributed significantly to an HEI's public image. According to Benchekroun et al. (2024), these platforms were critical Social media platforms and university websites were critical channels for information dissemination and interaction. Effective digital marketing contributes to improved student satisfaction, helps in shaping expectations, and supports recruitment and retention. Digital marketing significantly influences student experience by enhancing engagement, communication, and institutional reputation.

Kumar & Modi (2025), solidify the findings that digital marketing transforms the education sector by expanding access and improving brand visibility of educational institutions. It enhances student engagement, facilitates personalized communication, and supports data-driven decision-making in marketing strategies. Integration of digital tools is essential for competitive positioning and attracting prospective students. Furthermore, this theme compares different digital platforms in terms of their effectiveness in communicating an institution's core values and strengths. By identifying effective practices and strategies, this theme sets the foundation for understanding how tools translate into positive institutional positioning. This strengthens its alignment with the objectives examining the digital marketing tools and strategies used by higher education institutions, such as National University- Dasmariñas.

Theme 2: Effectiveness in Driving Engagement, Inquiry, Application, and Enrollment

This theme directly assesses the efficiency and effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in achieving institutional enrollment and engagement goals. It seeks to understand how campaigns influence a parent's decision to engage or enroll their child. This aligns with the study's objective aimed at evaluating the efficiency of digital marketing strategies for attracting and keeping parents. The analysis examines the link between online marketing efforts and actual enrollment or engagement outcomes. Participants are asked to discuss specific digital marketing elements that they believe directly contributed to their decision-making process regarding HEI applications. This includes how digital initiatives influence their likelihood to inquire, apply, or ultimately enroll at an HEI. Understanding what aspects of digital marketing strategies have been most effective in capturing attention or interest is critical for evaluating efficiency. The findings of Makrydakis (2021) highlights that digital marketing is seen as the primary and most effective way to attract and influence students, surpassing traditional methods, and is necessary for attracting quality students. This means digital marketing has been most effective in capturing attention of students. Therefore, strategic use of emerging social media trends and analytics in higher education marketing must be considered and used in capturing more audience and clients (Pawar, 2024). This is also supported supported by Rajkumar et al. (2022) whose study highlights that universities using effective digital marketing strategies report higher student engagement and enrollment rates. This is aligned with the study's objective which aims at evaluating the efficiency of digital marketing strategies for attracting and keeping parents, including how various techniques influence decision-making processes, from first awareness to ultimate enrollment.

Theme 3: Student/Parent Perceptions, Behaviors, Trust, and Engagement

This theme delves into the subjective experience of those targeted by HEI digital marketing, focusing on perceptions and subsequent behaviors. A key area is determining the factors that make participants more likely to trust or engage with an HEI's digital marketing campaign, which speaks directly to issues of credibility and usefulness. The analysis measures how digital marketing efforts have changed participants' perception of the institution or influenced their engagement with it. It documents how individuals typically respond to digital marketing messages from HEIs and what actions they have taken as a result. This finding is supported by Shukla & Pande (2023) that stresses how it enhances access to information, helping students make informed decisions about college choice. Furthermore, it captures recalled campaigns that left a lasting impression, identifying the elements that made them memorable. Lastly, according to Sotomayor-Vidal et al. (2022), institutions adopting innovative digital marketing approaches gain competitive advantages in attracting high-quality applicants, and strategic digital campaigns improve student engagement and have measurable effects on application rates and enrollment decisions. This alignment matches the study's objective which aims at measuring parents' attitudes toward digital marketing initiatives implemented by universities, investigating how they engage with and are influenced by digital material, including their judgments of credibility and usefulness.

Theme 4: Identifying Areas for Improvement and Strategic Avoidance

This theme focuses on identifying current weaknesses and best practices, thereby illuminating the difficulties and possibilities inherent in developing effective strategies. It aims to move beyond simple effectiveness measures to understand strategic failures and opportunities. Based on their experiences, participants are asked to identify any digital marketing approaches or strategies that they believe should be avoided by HEIs, and the rationale for avoidance. This provides qualitative insight into observed obstacles or unsuccessful tactics. Conversely, the analysis captures what participants consider to be the most effective practices for digital marketing in higher

education, highlighting successful adaptive strategies and opportunities for institutional growth. These findings underscore the crucial role of digital marketing in higher education student recruitment, emphasizing the need for universities to adopt effective, student-centered digital communication strategies Kusumawati, A. (2018). The study highlights the importance of selecting appropriate digital marketing channels tailored to student preferences and suggests that well-executed digital marketing strategies can be efficiently tracked and measured, yielding good returns on investment for universities as supported by Valdiviezo Sir et al. (2024). This answers the study's objective which aims at identifying the difficulties and possibilities for Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines to develop effective digital marketing strategies.

Theme 5: Recommendations for Enhanced Outreach and Institutional Positioning

The final theme synthesizes findings from all other areas to generate actionable recommendations aimed at improving outreach and institutional positioning. Participants are asked directly what recommendations they would offer to HEIs aiming to improve their digital marketing campaigns for greater impact. Crucially, the analysis includes specific suggestions aimed at a particular institution, asking what additional steps National University can take to improve its digital marketing across platforms, messaging, engagement, and outcomes. This facet is designed to propose concrete solutions for strengthening strategies within the Philippine higher education context.

As recommended by Shaikh & Laxman (2022), institutional marketing strategies, particularly digital marketing efforts that utilize tailored digital platforms, multimedia content, interactive sessions, and consistent updates, significantly influence students' admission decisions by effectively communicating program strengths, institutional reputation, and unique value propositions; integrating social media and digital ads boosts visibility and fosters stronger institutional connections with prospective students, emphasizing credibility and transparency as key to attracting and converting applicants. Also, Bhati & Mangal (2025), recommended to adopt and integrate marketing communication strategies and aligning digital efforts with overall institutional goals to enhance outcomes in recruitment and retention. This is aligned with the study's objective which aims at proposing solutions for strengthening Higher Education Institutions' digital marketing strategies for greater outreach and institutional positioning in the Philippines.) In essence, this thematic structure acts like a lens, using the qualitative questions to focus on how digital campaigns (Theme 1); shape parental trust and behavior (Theme 3); leading to measurable institutional outcomes (Theme 2); This understanding then informs strategic avoidance and identifies opportunities (Theme 4); and culminating in practical advice for improvement (Theme 5).

Discussion

Based on the findings of the study conducted at National University Dasmariñas, the following conclusion highlights the strategic impact of digital marketing on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines: The study concludes that digital marketing has become a strategic necessity for Philippine HEIs to remain competitive in a technology-driven educational landscape. As parents and students transition into informed consumers making data-driven choices, institutions must shift from a sole reliance on academic excellence to actively managing their institutional image and branding through digital channels.

The key findings leading to this conclusion include:

1. Platform Effectiveness: Social media and institutional websites are identified as the most critical channels for information dissemination, interaction, and shaping the overall student experience. These platforms are essential for expanding institutional reach and improving brand visibility. Superiority Over Traditional Methods: Digital marketing is perceived as the primary and most effective way to attract quality students, often surpassing

traditional marketing methods in its ability to capture attention and influence the decision-making process.

2. The Role of Trust and Credibility: The effectiveness of digital campaigns is heavily dependent on parents' perceptions of credibility, transparency, and usefulness. Institutions that adopt innovative and transparent digital approaches gain a significant competitive advantage in attracting high-quality applicants.

3. Strategic Enrollment Management: Digital marketing is most successful when it influences the entire enrollment journey, from the initial stage of awareness to the final point of enrollment.

4. Continuous Adaptation: For long-term institutional resilience, HEIs must address internal challenges, such as the need for ongoing staff training and the rapid pace of technological change, while ensuring digital strategies are aligned with overall institutional goals.

Ultimately, the study suggests that by refining digital marketing frameworks and fostering effective stakeholder engagement, Philippine HEIs can directly contribute to global sustainability targets, specifically SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Conclusion

Based on the research conducted at National University Dasmariñas, the following conclusion can be drawn regarding the influence of digital marketing on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines:

The research concludes that digital marketing has emerged as a crucial strategy for Philippine HEIs to sustain their competitiveness in an increasingly global and technology-driven educational landscape.

As students and parents evolve into informed consumers who base their decisions on data, institutions must shift from relying solely on academic reputation to actively managing their institutional image and visibility through digital platforms.

Key findings from the research indicate that:

Platform Importance: Social media and institutional websites are the most critical channels for disseminating information, facilitating interaction, and shaping the "student experience" even before enrollment.

1. The Importance of Trust: The effectiveness of digital campaigns is greatly influenced by credibility, transparency, and perceived usefulness. For parents, trust is a vital factor in their engagement with or influence by an institution's digital content.

2. Influencing the Decision-Making Process: Digital marketing is most effective when it strategically targets the entire enrollment process, from initial awareness to final enrollment, by utilizing tailored and interactive content that highlights an institution's unique value propositions.

3. Internal Adaptation: To achieve sustained success, HEIs must address internal challenges, such as the need for continuous staff training and the rapid pace of technological advancements, ensuring that marketing teams possess localized insights into parental behavior.

Ultimately, the research suggests that by enhancing digital marketing frameworks, HEIs can not only improve their recruitment and retention efforts but also contribute to broader global objectives, such as SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), by promoting more inclusive and equitable educational opportunities.

A.Focus on Content, Credibility, and Engagement

1. **Prioritize Credibility and Transparency:** Institutional digital marketing strategies must emphasize credibility and transparency. Parents' attitudes toward digital initiatives are measured partly on their perceptions of credibility and usefulness.

2. **Tailor and Diversify Content:** Utilize tailored digital platforms, multimedia content, and interactive sessions to communicate program strengths and institutional reputation. This approach addresses the need to influence parental decision-making processes.

institutional reputation, and unique value propositions. This tailored approach addresses the need to influence student choice and decision-making processes.

3. **Integrate Interactive Sessions:** Include interactive sessions in digital campaigns. This enhances engagement and communication with prospective students and parents, fostering stronger institutional connections.

B. Strategic Alignment and Measurement

For digital marketing to provide a good return on investment (ROI), it must be strategically aligned and rigorously measured.

1. **Align Digital Strategy with Institutional Goals:** Adopt and integrate comprehensive marketing communication strategies, ensuring that all digital efforts are aligned with overall institutional goals to enhance outcomes in recruitment and retention.

2. **Track Efficiency and ROI:** Implement systems to efficiently track and measure digital marketing strategies. Using advanced analytics should be considered to capture more audience and clients.

3. **Focus on Critical Digital Channels:** Allocate resources primarily to social media platforms and institutional websites, which are identified as critical channels for information dissemination and interaction. Integration of these tools is essential for maintaining a competitive position.

4. **Influence the Enrollment Journey:** Strategically deploy content aimed at influencing parents' decision-making processes across the entire journey, from first awareness to ultimate enrollment.

C. Institutional Capacity and Resilience

Doable recommendations must address the practical difficulties encountered by HEIs in the Philippine context, such as adapting to fast-changing technology and knowledge transfer.

1. **Mandate Continuous Digital Adaptation Training:** Provide consistent training and resources to employees to address the need for ongoing adaptation to changing digital tools. This is vital for addressing the knowledge transfer challenge concerning digital marketing among staff.

2. **Develop Localized Insight:** Ensure marketing teams possess localized understanding of the impact of marketing practices, specifically investigating parent behavior within the competitive, technology-driven setting of the Philippines. This insight is necessary to successfully contact and influence prospective parents, thereby improving recruitment and retention efforts.

3. **Identify and Avoid Unsuccessful Tactics:** HEIs should formalize protocols to identify and strategically avoid digital marketing approaches or strategies that participants believe should be shunned, preventing unsuccessful outcomes.

Co-Author Contribution

Author 1 conducted the fieldwork, assembled the literature review, and supervised the thorough writing and development of the manuscript. Authors 2, 3, and 5 formulated the research methodology, performed data entry, and assessed the results of the thematic analysis. Author 4 structured the manuscript, reviewed and improved its grammatical composition, evaluated the overall quality of the paper, and reformatted the document to comply with the designated template. Author 6 also helped with the thematic analysis and data visualization, ensured data integrity, and prepared research table for publication. Author 7 provided oversight for the project, secured funding and resources, managed ethical approvals, and acted as the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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