



From Instagram to Campus: The Impact of Social Media Marketing on Students' Interest through Trust and Brand Recognition

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
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This study evaluates the influence of social media marketing activities (SMMA) on prospective students' intentions to choose higher education institutions, considering the mediating role of brand recognition and trust. The study was conducted using a quantitative method with the Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) approach on 400 respondents who were followers of higher education institutions' Instagram accounts. The results showed trust was the most significant mediator between SMMA and prospective students' intentions ($\beta = 0.709$, $T = 21.629$). At the same time, brand recognition played a role in strengthening trust but did not directly influence prospective students' intentions ($\beta = -0.018$, $T = 0.462$). These findings emphasize the importance of building trust through authentic, relevant, and engaging social media content to improve educational marketing effectiveness. The implications of this study suggest that higher education institutions should prioritize trust-based marketing strategies integrated with brand recognition through social media. This strategy includes alumni testimonials, videos of campus atmosphere, and direct interactions that create emotional connections with prospective students.



Introduction

Social media has become a very effective marketing tool in various sectors, including higher education. Universities worldwide, including in Indonesia, are increasingly utilizing social media platforms such as Instagram to interact with prospective students and introduce the various academic programs they offer. In recent years, Instagram has developed into one of the main channels in higher education marketing due to its attractive visual nature and ability to reach a wider audience (Carvalho et al., 2017; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Through content uploaded on Instagram, universities can improve their image and brand recognition, as well as create closer relationships with potential audiences, which in turn can influence prospective students' decisions in choosing a higher education institution (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Voorveld et al., 2018). Therefore, the use of social media, especially Instagram, in educational marketing shows its crucial role in shaping the perceptions and interests of prospective students (Taecharungroj, 2017).

As social media marketing develops, an interesting phenomenon is how Instagram followers shape prospective students' perceptions and decisions. Previous studies have shown that the more followers a college Instagram account has, the more likely prospective students are to be interested in considering the college in their educational decisions (Smith, 2022; Chen & Lin, 2019; Xie et al., 2022). The interactions between colleges and their followers on Instagram are simple engagement and create emotional connections that can increase their interest in becoming students (Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Lund, 2019a; Rutter et al., 2016). Although research has shown the positive impact of social media on consumer decision-making in the education sector, studies linking the influence of Instagram followers to interest in choosing a college are still limited, creating a gap in understanding the role of followers in building a college's image (B et al., 2023; Perera et al., 2022a; Sharma & Sharma, 2019).

In addition, brand recognition plays an important role in shaping prospective students' interests. Strong brand recognition can increase prospective students' awareness of the value and quality offered by the college. Research by Makmun et al., (2018); Mourad et al., (2011); Sutrisno, (2020) state that high brand recognition can have a positive effect on purchasing decisions or, in this context, the decision

to enroll in a college. In the context of higher education, college brand recognition can influence prospective students' perceptions of the institution's reputation and credibility, which ultimately influences their interest in becoming students (A. Kurniawan et al., 2022; Kusumah & Yusuf, 2020; Setyanto et al., 2017) However, most existing studies focus on brand recognition in the context of other consumer products and not many have specifically examined brand recognition in the context of colleges promoted through social media. Therefore, this study will fill this gap by exploring how college brand recognition on Instagram can influence prospective students' decisions.

Consumer trust is also a factor that cannot be ignored in social media marketing. Consumer trust in information received from social media, especially when choosing a college, can influence their decision to enroll in an educational institution. According Perera et al., (2022); Puan Rachmadhani et al., (2018)), trust plays a key role in the long-term relationship between consumers and brands. In the context of college marketing, this trust is formed through open and credible interactions on social media, including Instagram. The greater the level of trust that prospective students have in the content posted by a college, the more likely they are to consider the college in their decision to continue their education (Astuti, 2017; Setyanto et al., 2017; Wahdini & Setyobudi, 2022). Although research on consumer trust in social media marketing is growing, understanding how consumer trust mediates the relationship between brand recognition and interest in becoming a student, especially in the context of colleges in Indonesia, is still limited. Prospective students' interest in choosing a college is influenced by various factors, one of which is the influence of social media in shaping their attitudes toward educational institutions.

Several studies have shown that the influence of social media on students' interests is quite significant, both in the context of other consumption behaviors and in choosing higher education (Communication & Road, 2023; Puan Rachmadhani et al., 2018; Reza Abdol Ghani et al., 2023). Using Instagram by universities provides a clearer picture of the campus atmosphere, student life, and ongoing academic activities, which can increase prospective students' interest in joining the college (Surbakti et al., 2021; Vrontis et al., 2018). In this case, brand recognition and consumer trust work simultaneously to strengthen prospective students' decisions

(Foroudi et al., 2020; Mourad et al., 2011) what is of particular significance in this process is brand equity — the value that the consumer ascribes to the brand. The main objective of this research is to enhance academic understanding of brand equity in the higher education (HE). However, although several studies have shown a relationship between social media marketing and interest in becoming a student, there is still uncertainty about how mediating variables such as brand recognition and consumer trust play a role in the process. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the role of brand recognition and consumer trust in linking social media influence to student interest.

Although various studies discuss the influence of social media on educational marketing, there is still a gap in understanding how brand recognition and consumer trust mediate this relationship. Most of the existing literature focuses more on the direct influence of social media on consumer decisions without considering the role of mediating variables such as brand recognition or consumer trust (Adiningtyas & Hasanah, 2023; Foroudi et al., 2020; Mourad et al., 2011). In addition, although there is research on the influence of social media on higher education marketing, most of these studies have not tested the complex relationship between Instagram followers, brand recognition, consumer trust, and prospective student interest. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the influence of Social Media Marketing on higher education Instagram on prospective student interest through the mediating variables of brand recognition and consumer trust. Thus, this study not only develops a model that integrates the three variables but also offers new insights in a more specific educational marketing context, especially in using the Instagram platform by universities in Indonesia.

Method

This study uses a quantitative descriptive method with the Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) approach developed A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012). This theory is considered relevant to describe the dynamics of the decision-making process of prospective students. This theoretical framework integrates SMMA elements with brand recognition and brand trust variables as mediators to evaluate how these factors influence interest in becoming a student. It is the main objective of educational marketing.

A descriptive quantitative approach was chosen to understand the relationship between marketing activities on social media and prospective students' interests. Instagram social media was selected as the leading platform for data collection, given its popularity among the target audience and their digital interaction patterns. This platform offers a broad insight into the behavior of respondents, especially followers of the UIN RM Said Surakarta Instagram account.

The study population consisted of prospective students who followed the UIN RM Said Surakarta Instagram account, with 4,000 followers. The sampling technique used a non-probability sampling method with a voluntary approach, as recommended by Earl Babbie 2013; Malhotra, Naresh K. Nunan, Daniel, Birks 2020; Sekaran, Uma, Bougie 2916; Creswell, J. W., & Creswell 2018. This technique was chosen to ensure the suitability between the research criteria and the characteristics of the respondents. A sample of 400 respondents was determined from the total population, which was considered sufficient to produce strong generalizations according to the sampling guidelines in social research (Sugiyono, 2020). Respondents who met the criteria were prospective students who actively followed the university's Instagram account, with data collected online.

The characteristics of the respondents in this study provide additional insights into understanding the background of the sample. Based on gender, the composition of respondents was relatively balanced, with 53% male and 47% female, which shows good representation in responding to social media marketing activities. In terms of age, the majority of respondents were between 16 and 18 years old, with the following details: 163 people aged 16 (41%), 132 people aged 17 (33%), and 105 people aged 18 (26%). Regarding the school of origin, most respondents came from High School: 55%; Madrasah Aliyah: 24%; and Vocational High School: 20%. These characteristics confirm that the sample includes prospective students from various formal educational backgrounds, which provides diversity in their mindsets and preferences towards social media promotion.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire via Google Forms, distributed to UIN RM Said Surakarta's Instagram followers from August to October 2024. This questionnaire was designed to measure the following elements: 1) Social Media Marketing Activities, referring to the dimensions of A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012), such as entertainment, interactivity, word-of-mouth, customization, and

trends. 2) Brand Recognition: Measuring the extent prospective students know the university. 3) Brand Trust: Describes respondents' level of trust in the university's reputation. 4) Interest in Becoming a Student: Assessing respondents' intention to enroll as a university student. Each indicator is measured using a 5-point Likert scale, with answer choices ranging from "Strongly Agree" (score 5) to "Strongly Disagree" (score 1) (Sugiyono, 2020). In addition, demographic data such as age, gender, and school of origin were also collected for descriptive analysis. Data was collected online to ensure time efficiency and accessibility, considering the target audience's preferences for digital media. This strategy also allows the distribution of questionnaires to a geographically widespread population.

Data analysis used Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), a multivariate approach that allows simultaneous testing of relationships between variables in a conceptual model. SmartPLS v3 software was used for the analysis, following two main stages (Hair et al., 2019): 1) Evaluation of the Measurement Model: a). Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a minimum value of 0.7 to indicate measurement consistency. (Hair et al., 2019): b) Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion (Claes Fornell and David F. Larcker, 1981) and HTMT (Hair et al., 2019): c) The quality of the indicators was measured through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) (Hair et al., 2019). 2) Structural Model Evaluation: a) Testing the relationship between exogenous variables (SMMA) and endogenous (interest in becoming a student) through mediating variables (brand recognition and brand trust). b) Hypothesis testing uses path analysis, which produces path coefficient values, significance levels (p-values), and t-statistics (Hair et al., 2019).

The results of the analysis are presented in the form of tables and graphs to visualize the relationship between variables in detail. Data interpretation is also complemented by a discussion linking the findings to the theoretical framework to strengthen this study's academic contribution. This methodology allows for in-depth insight into the effectiveness of social media marketing in attracting prospective students while evaluating the importance of brand recognition and trust as mediating variables. This quantitative approach also ensures objective and reliable results to support the development of digital-based educational marketing strategies.

Hypothesis Development

Social media becomes a virtual space for individuals with similar interests to share and discuss, building communities through continuous communication. Intensive information exchange encourages audiences to share and grow, increasing member loyalty (Kim & Ko, 2012; Jibril et al., 2019). Research by Serra & Campaniço, (2024) shows a positive relationship between the amount of information users share on social media and the number of their followers. This positive experience expands the reach of institutions, such as universities, while attracting more prospective students (Hamadi et al., 2020; Lemoine et al., 2016; Lund, 2019b; Manggopa et al., 2023; Perera et al., 2022a). Based on these findings, the framework for developing this research hypothesis is designed as follows:

H1: Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand trust

Social media marketing (SMM) activities are crucial in shaping consumer trust in brands. SMM dimensions such as entertainment, interactivity, trends, customization, and word of mouth (WOM) contribute significantly to building brand trust. A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012) emphasized that entertaining and interactive content can increase consumers' emotional engagement, which in turn strengthens their trust in the brand. Hajli (2014) added that authentic interactions on social media, including reviews and recommendations from other users, can build trust perceptions through emotional engagement and authenticity of the content. Lou et al., (2020) also found that SMM activities that include entertainment and interactivity contribute to the formation of brand trust through consumers' emotional engagement.

Quick responses and positive testimonials on social media platforms can strengthen audience trust in educational institutions. Direct interaction with prospective students through social media increases credibility and emotional connection, ultimately building trust in the institution. Based on the above explanation, adequate SMM activities, especially those emphasizing entertainment and interactivity, positively affect consumer trust in the brand. Therefore, the H1 hypothesis stating that SMM has a positive effect on brand trust is supported by these findings.

H2: Social media marketing has a positive effect on brand recognition

Social media marketing (SMM) activities are important in increasing

consumer brand recognition. SMM dimensions such as entertainment, interactivity, trends, customization, and word of mouth (WOM) significantly form a strong and memorable brand identity. A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012) emphasized that entertaining and interactive content can increase consumer engagement, strengthening brand recognition. Adiningtyas & Hasanah, (2023) stated that consistency in brand communication, including social media, is important in building brand awareness and recognition. Consistent content and effective visual branding strategies on social media can influence consumer recall of the brand. A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012) also found that SMM activities that include entertainment and interactivity contribute to the formation of brand recognition through consumer engagement.

In education, using social media by educational institutions to share informative and engaging content can increase the institution's brand recognition among prospective students. Strategies such as consistent visual branding and content relevant to current trends can strengthen the institution's identity and increase prospective students' recall. Based on this information, practical SMM activities positively affect brand recognition, especially those that emphasize entertainment and interactivity. Therefore, these findings support hypothesis H2, which states that SMM positively affects brand recognition.

H3: Brand recognition has a positive effect on brand trust

Good brand recognition plays an important role in building brand trust among consumers. When consumers are familiar with a particular brand, they feel comfortable and confident in its products or services (Smith, 2022). This recognition process involves consistent communication and emphasis on the values held by the brand to create an emotional connection between consumers and the brand. Thus, consumers who trust the brand will be more loyal and tend to continue to choose the brand over competitors (Johnson, 2021; Moran et al., 2020). This trust can also increase positive perceptions and consumer loyalty, which drives long-term brand growth and sustainability.

H4: Brand recognition has a positive effect on student intentions

Strong brand recognition plays an important role in influencing consumer

decisions, including in the context of higher education. According to Adiningtyas & Hasanah, (2023) and Keller, (2014), brand recognition includes consumer awareness of the brand and the associations they have related to the brand. Positive associations formed through strong brand recognition can increase an individual's intention to choose an educational institution. Howard et al., (1988) emphasized that good brand recognition can reduce uncertainty and risk perceived by prospective students, thereby increasing their intention to enroll. Cervera and Sánchez Garza et al., (2024) image and loyalty in social networks of a public higher education institution, based on the social networks theory and Bilgin's model (2018) also found that strong brand recognition increases an individual's intention to choose a particular educational institution.

H5: Brand trust has a positive effect on the intention to become a student

Brand trust is a crucial factor in influencing consumer decisions, including in the context of higher education. Brand trust is defined as a consumer's belief in the reliability and integrity of a brand (Haudi et al., 2022; Perera et al., 2022). In the context of higher education, brand trust can reduce the perception of risk perceived by prospective students, thereby increasing their intention to enroll. ÇELİK, (2022); and Haudi et al., (2022) added that brand trust is important in building brand loyalty and influencing purchase intentions. Trust in educational institutions can increase prospective students' confidence that they will receive quality education and positive learning experiences.

Howard et al., (1988) emphasized that brand trust can reduce consumers' perceived uncertainty and risk, which affects their intention to take action, such as enrolling in college. High brand trust can give prospective students a sense of security and confidence that they are making the right decision to choose an educational institution. Based on the explanation above, brand trust positively affects the intention to become a student. Therefore, these findings support hypothesis H3, which states that brand trust has a positive effect on the intention to become a student.

H6: Brand recognition and brand trust mediate the relationship between social media marketing and college student intention

Effective social media marketing (SMM) activities can build their trust. A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012) identified that SMM dimensions such as entertainment, interactivity, trend, customization, and word of mouth (WOM) contribute significantly to building brand trust. Authentic and interactive social media content can increase consumers' emotional engagement, strengthening brand recognition and trust. Büyükdağ, (2021); dan Chen & Lin, (2019) emphasized that authentic interactions on social media can build trust perceptions through emotional engagement and content authenticity. Consumer engagement through social media plays a significant role in building brand trust and influencing individuals' intentions to take action, such as enrolling in college (B et al., 2023; Chen & Lin, 2019b; Dinya & Azzam, 2023)

Based on the above explanation, brand recognition and trust mediate the relationship between SMM activities and student intentions. Therefore, these findings support hypothesis H6, which states that brand recognition and trust mediate the relationship between SMM and student intentions.

H7 Brand recognition mediates the relationship between social media marketing and student intentions

Marketing activities through social media play an important role in shaping brand recognition and influencing an individual's intention to choose an educational institution. The use of consistent and attractive visual elements on social media platforms can increase brand awareness and recognition among target audiences. A. J. Kim & Ko, (2012) emphasized that SMM dimensions such as entertainment, interactivity, trends, customization, and word of mouth (WOM) contribute significantly to building brand recognition. Entertaining and interactive content can increase consumer engagement, ultimately strengthening brand recognition. Büyükdağ, (2021); and Chen & Lin, (2019) found that social media is an effective tool for building brand awareness through direct consumer interactions. This interaction allows educational institutions to convey their values more personally and authentically, thereby increasing brand awareness among prospective students. Howard et al., (1988) highlighted that strong brand awareness can reduce uncertainty and risk perceived by prospective students, thereby increasing their intention to enroll.

H8 Brand awareness and trust mediate the relationship between social media marketing and student intention

Brand awareness and trust are crucial in mediating the relationship between social media marketing and an individual's intention to enroll. Through effective social media marketing strategies, educational institutions can increase their brand awareness, building trust among prospective students (Hemsley-Brown, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Nguyen, B., Hemsley-Brown, J., & Melewar, 2017). When prospective students feel familiar with and trust the institution, they tend to have a stronger intention to enroll and continue their education there (Dayoh et al., 2022; Fauziridwan, 2024; Lund, 2019a). Therefore, brand awareness and trust increase the effectiveness of social media marketing campaigns and directly influence an individual's decision to pursue further education.

Based on the above explanation, brand awareness mediates the relationship between SMM activities and student intentions. Therefore, these findings support hypotheses H6, H7, and H8, which state that brand awareness and trust mediate the relationship between SMM and student intentions.

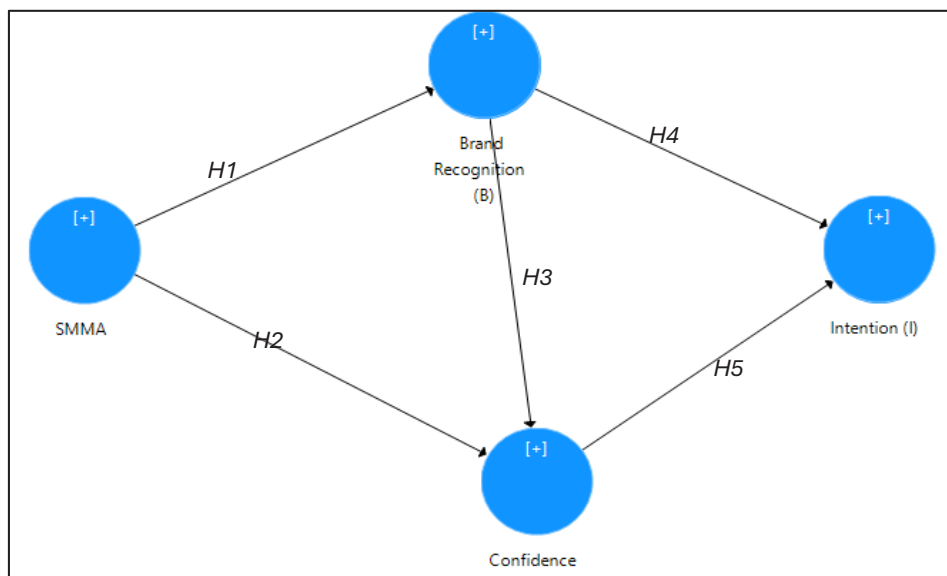


Figure 1. Research Framework

Research Findings

Measurement Model

In evaluating the measurement model, the reliability of the measurement scale for each construct was analyzed by examining the loading values of the indicators. Hair et al., (2019) state loadings must be greater than 0.708. In this study, all loadings, except for one item on the attitude construct, exceeded 0.708, so the results of other measurement indices need to be verified. For the individual reliability of each construct, the composite reliability (CR) and Dijkstra–Henseler's rho (ρ_A) were calculated, both of which were more significant than 0.7 (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., (2019)). Table 1 displays the high level of internal consistency in each construct. Convergent validity was evaluated using the average variance extracted (AVE), which should be greater than 0.5 (Claes Fornell and David F. Larcker, 1981). The results showed that all AVE values for each construct were more significant than 0.5, ranging from 0.566 to 0.862. The significance of each loading was determined through a bootstrap resampling procedure with 10,000 subsamples, which showed that all loadings were significant with a 99.9% confidence level (Hair et al., 2019).

The next step was the discriminant validity analysis using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, where the square root of each construct AVE value must be higher than the construct correlation with other latent variables (Claes Fornell and David F. Larcker, 1981) The results show a higher construct AVE value. Discriminant validity was also analyzed using hetero-trait-monotrait evaluation (HTMT), which showed values below 0.90 or 0.85, according to the established criteria, indicating good reliability and validity (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., (2019) (see Table 2)

Table 1. Results of the Measurement Model

Construct/item	Loading	Cronbach' alpha	Dijkstra–Henseler's rho (ρ_A)	CR	AVE	Variance explained (R^2)	R^2 adjusted	Pre-dictive relevance (Q^2)
<i>SMMA</i>		0,949	0,955	0,956	0,662			
Hiburan (Hib1)	0,820							
Hiburan (Hib2)	0,808							
Intention (Int1)	0,788							

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Intention (Int2)	0,788							
Intention (Int3)	0,861							
Customization (Kust1)	0,773							
Customization (Kust2)	0,828							
Trendiness (Tren1)	0,861							
Trendiness (Tren2)	0,703							
Word of Mouth (Wom1)	0,809							
Word of Mouth (Wom2)	0,896							
Construct/item	Loading	Cronbach' alpha	Dijkstra-Henseler's rho (A)	CR	AVE	Variance explained (R ²)	R ² adjusted	Pre-dictive relevance (Q ²)
Brand Recognition (B)		0,793	0,795	0,878	0,707	0,020	0,017	0,013
Brand Recognition (B1)	0,838							
Brand Recognition (B2)	0,848							
Brand Recognition (B3)	0,836							
Confidence (C)		0,801	0,891	0,881	0,715	0,206	0,202	0,139
Confidence (C1)	0,662							
Confidence (C2)	0,942							
Confidence (C3)	0,905							
Intention (I)		0,929	0,935	0,942	0,671	0,497	0,494	0,318
Intention (I1)	0,876							
Intention (I10)	0,712							
Intention (I2)	0,840							
Intention (I3)	0,899							
Intention (I4)	0,780							
Intention (I5)	0,754							
Intention (I6)	0,829							
Intention (I7)	0,844							

Note(s): CR composite reliability; AVE average variance extracted

Table 2. Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion and HTMT)

		Brand Recognition (B)	Confidence (C)	Intention (I)	SMMA
Fornell-Larcker Criterion	Brand Recognition (B)	0,841			
	Confidence (C)	0,254	0,846		
	Intention (I)	0,162	0,705	0,819	
	SMMA	0,141	0,407	0,412	0,814
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)	Brand Recognition (B)				
	Confidence (C)	0,323			
	Intention (I)	0,190	0,765		
	SMMA	0,164	0,436	0,429	

Structural Model

Collinearity should be checked before analyzing the structural relationship to ensure no bias in the regression results. Ideally, the variance inflation factor (VIF) value should be less than 3 (Hair et al., 2019). This study found no collinearity problems because the VIF value was below the set limit (see Table 3). The next step is to assess the structural model using the bootstrap procedure of 10,000 subsamples to evaluate the significance of the indicators and path coefficients (Chin et al., 2008). Model quality assessment is carried out before testing the hypothesis using the criteria of the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), cross-validated redundancy (Q^2), and coefficients (Hair et al., 2019). The results show R^2 for intention (Intention/I) of 0.494, Confidence (Confidence/C) of 0.139, and Brand Recognition (B) of 0.013, which indicates the influence of exogenous variables with moderate criteria.

The effect size for each path model is calculated by f^2 according to the criteria of 0.02 (small), 0.15 (medium), and 0.35 (large) (Hair et al., 2019) yet concise, overview of the considerations and metrics required for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The effect of SMMA on Brand Recognition has a low effect size of 0.020, and the effect of SMMA on Confidence has a medium effect of 0.177, while the effect of Brand Recognition on Confidence and Intention is 0.050 and 0.001; this means it has a low effect. At the same time, the effect of Confidence on Intention is 0.936. This shows that Confidence in Intention has a strong effect. To conclude the evaluation

of the structural model, this study examines the predictive relevance of the model using Q^2 Stone–Geisser (Hair et al., 2019) yet concise, overview of the considerations and metrics required for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that all Q^2 values are above zero (see Table 1), indicating the model has acceptable predictive power.

The results of hypothesis testing using one-tailed tests are presented in Table 4. One-tailed tests are recommended if the coefficient is assumed to have a sign (positive or negative) (Kock, 2015). The effect of SMMA on Brand Recognition has a positive effect size ($\beta = 0.141$, $t = 2.507$), and the effect of SMMA on Confidence also has a positive effect ($\beta = 0.379$, $t = 9.783$). In contrast, the effect of Brand Recognition on Confidence has a positive effect ($\beta = 0.201$, $t = 3.087$). In contrast, the effect of Brand Recognition on Intention has a negative effect ($\beta = -0.018$, $t = 0.462$), while the effect of Confidence on Intention has a positive effect ($\beta = 0.709$, $t = 21.629$; therefore, H1, H2, H3, and H5 are accepted. At the same time, H4 is rejected (see Figure 2).

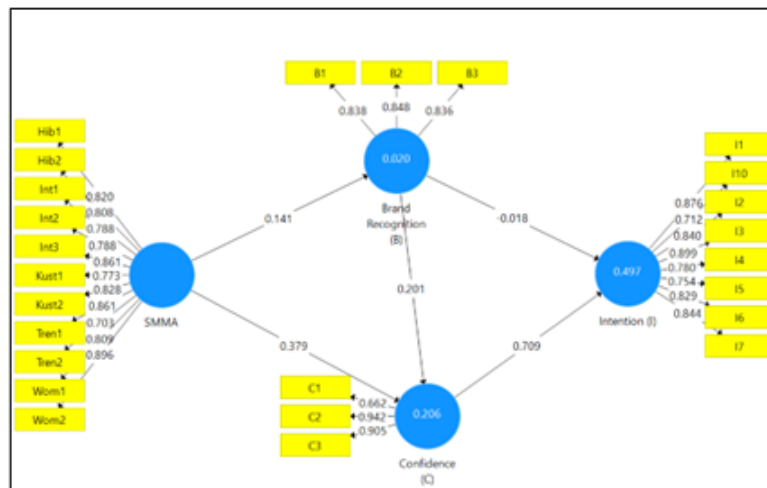


Figure 2. Structural Model Results

Table 3. Evaluation of the structural model

Relations	β	T value	Effect size (f^2)	VIF
SMMA -> Brand Recognition (B)	0.141	2.507	0.020	1,000

SMMA -> Confidence (C)	0.379	9.783	0.177	1,020
Brand Recognition (B) -> Confidence (C)	0.201	3.087	0.050	1,020
Brand Recognition (B) -> Intention (I)	-0,018	0.462	0.001	1,069
Confidence (C) -> Intention (I)	0.709	21.629	0.936	1,069

Note(s): *n* : bootstrapping 10.000 subsample

Table 4. Hypothesis Test Results

Relation/Hipotesis	β	T value	Supported
H1 : SMMA -> Brand Recognition (B)	0.141	2.507	Yes
H2 : SMMA -> Confidence (C)	0.379	9.783	Yes
H3 : Brand Recognition (B) -> Confidence (C)	0.201	3.087	Yes
H4 : Brand Recognition (B) -> Intention (I)	-0,018	0.462	NS
H5 : Confidence (C) -> Intention (I)	0.709	21.629	Yes

Note(s): *n* :bootstrapping 10.000 subsample; *p* < 0.01; ns: not significant (one-tailed test)

Table 5. Results of Hypothesis Testing of Mediating Variables

Relations/Hipotesis	β	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	Supported
SMMA -> Brand Recognition (B) -> Confidence (C)	0,028	1,740	Yes
Brand Recognition (B) -> Confidence (C) -> Intention (I)	0,143	2,940	Yes
H6: SMMA -> Brand Recognition (B) -> Intention (I)	-0,003	0,424	NS
H7: SMMA -> Confidence (C) -> Intention (I)	0,269	8,199	Yes
H8: SMMA -> Brand Recognition (B) -> Confidence (C) -> Intention (I)	0,020	1,682	Yes

Note(s): *n* :bootstrapping 10.000 subsample; *p* < 0.01; ns: not significant (one-tailed test)

Table 5 shows the results of the analysis of specific indirect effects of the relationship between the variables Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA), Brand Recognition (B), Confidence (C), and Intention (I). Some paths show significant influence, while others do not. For example, the indirect relationship of SMMA to Confidence through Brand Recognition is significant ($\beta = 0.028$; $T = 1.740$; $p < 0.01$), indicating that marketing activities on social media effectively increase trust through brand recognition. However, the path of SMMA to Intention through Brand Recognition is insignificant ($\beta = -0.003$; $T = 0.424$), indicating that brand recognition alone is not enough to drive intention, perhaps because

other factors are more dominant in influencing consumer decisions.

Furthermore, the cascading effects from Brand Recognition to Intention through Confidence ($\beta = 0.143$; $T = 2.940$) and SMMA to Intention through Confidence ($\beta = 0.269$; $T = 8.199$) are highly significant. The path from SMMA to Intention through Confidence has the most potent effect, as reflected in the highest coefficient value (β) among all significant paths. This indicates that Confidence is the primary mediator capable of strengthening the influence of social media marketing activities on consumer intention. Meanwhile, the indirect effect of SMMA on Intention through the combination of Brand Recognition and Confidence ($\beta = 0.020$; $T = 1.682$) shows marginal significance, highlighting that the influence of SMMA on intention is complex and requires a multi-aspect strategy. Overall, these results emphasize the dominant role of trust, both directly and as a mediator, in bridging the effects of social media marketing activities on consumer intention.

Discussion

This study highlights the importance of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) in influencing prospective students' intentions through two mediating variables, namely brand recognition and trust. The results show that Confidence has the most significant influence as a mediator between SMMA and student intentions ($\beta = 0.709$, $T = 21.629$), indicating that trust in universities built through social media marketing activities plays a central role in prospective students' decisions. This aligns with the Commitment-Trust theory of Dessart et al., (2015), which emphasizes that trust is a key element in building long-term relationships between brands and consumers. In addition, Hajli, (2014) showed that authentic interactions through social media increase emotional engagement and strengthen consumer trust, which is also supported by Brodie et al.'s (2013) study on the role of online communities in building brand loyalty.

Furthermore, the indirect relationship from SMMA to Confidence through Brand Recognition ($\beta = 0.028$; $T = 1.740$) is also significant, indicating that brand recognition strengthens prospective students' trust in educational institutions. Previous studies by Apriananta & Wijaya, (2018) and Kaharmudzakir et al., (2020) showed that strong brand recognition can increase consumers' positive perceptions of the quality of institutions. In this context, consistent visual content

on platforms such as Instagram helps strengthen brand image and build trust through positive associations. Studies Zahid & Raja, (2014) and Perera et al., (2022) also show that interactive visual content increases brand recognition, while ÇELİK, (2022); Putranto et al., (2022); Rayat et al., (2017) emphasize the importance of emotional connections in creating brand loyalty.

However, the effect of brand recognition on intention directly showed insignificant results ($\beta = -0.018$; $T = 0.462$), indicating that brand recognition alone is not enough to influence prospective students' decisions without mediation from the trust. This supports research by Krishnamurthy, (2022) and Mangold & Faulds, (2009) emphasizing the importance of combining brand recognition with other factors, such as trust, to achieve optimal results in marketing. Studies by Hanaysha, (2022); Omeish et al., (2024) and Peruta & Shields, (2017, 2018) show that brand recognition can drive interest only if followed by authentic direct interaction. In addition, ÇELİK, (2022); Constantinides & Stagno, (2012); Fauzi et al., (2024); Francis & Hoefel, (2018); Wu et al., (2023) also noted that recommendations from third parties, such as influencers, can have a significant impact on increasing trust through brand recognition.

The cascading effect from brand recognition to intention through trust ($\beta = 0.143$; $T = 2.940$) highlights the significant relationship between these two mediating variables. This supports the findings by ÇELİK, (2022); ; Fauzi et al., (2024); Francis & Hoefel, (2018); Wu et al., (2023), which show that strong brand recognition can increase consumer loyalty through trust. Hollebeek & Macky, (2019) added that consumer engagement on social media contributes to trust formation, especially when consumers feel personally involved. Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, (2013); Erdoğan & Çiçek, (2012); Putranto et al., (2022) also support this finding, stating that personalization elements in social media marketing can increase brand loyalty through trust.

These overall findings underline that the success of social media marketing in attracting prospective students is highly dependent on the institution's effectiveness in building emotional connections through brand recognition and trust. Strategies that integrate these two elements will have a more significant influence on prospective students' decisions. Studies conducted by Adam & Gunarto, (2021); Ahmed, (2020); dan Moore, (1989) emphasize that trust can reduce risk

perceptions in decision-making, while Christy Ashley and Tracy Tuten, (2015); and Tuten & Solomon, (2018) show that consistency in cross-platform marketing strategies is key to strengthening emotional connections with consumers.

The results of this study provide practical guidance for higher education institutions to maximize the effectiveness of their social media marketing, especially on platforms such as Instagram. Since trust is the most potent mediator in influencing prospective students' intentions, institutions should focus on strategies that build trust through authentic, informative, and relevant content. For example, institutions can leverage alumni testimonials, videos of campus events, or live Q&As with faculty and students to create an interactive experience that engages prospective students. This strategy builds trust and supports brand recognition through positive associations with the institution.

In addition, social media marketing activities should be designed to integrate elements of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA), such as interactivity, entertainment, trends, personalization, and word of mouth (WOM). Visually appealing and trending content will help increase brand recognition. Universities should also encourage audience engagement by collaborating with influencers with a good reputation among their target market. These influencers can strengthen the perception of trust and attractiveness of the institution, which ultimately increases prospective students' intention to enroll.

Conclusion

This study shows that Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) significantly influence prospective students' intention to choose a higher education institution, with trust as the most potent mediator. Brand recognition also plays an important role, although its direct effect on intention is insignificant. These results confirm that effective social media marketing must build trust through brand recognition and authentic interactions. In addition, activities that integrate SMMA elements, such as interactivity, entertainment, trends, personalization, and word of mouth, can increase audience engagement and strengthen the influence of social media marketing on prospective students' decisions.

This study contributes to the educational marketing literature by highlighting the mediating role of brand recognition and trust in influencing prospective

students' intentions. The findings also offer strategic guidance for higher education institutions to optimize social media-based marketing to attract more prospective students through a trust-based approach and content relevance.

This study has limitations that need to be considered. First, the data used in this study was only collected from one social media platform, namely Instagram, so the results may not fully reflect the influence of other social media, such as TikTok or Facebook, in shaping prospective students' intentions. This limits the generalizability of the findings and provides opportunities for future research that encompasses a broader range of platforms or compares the effectiveness of different social media platforms in an educational context.

Second, this study used a quantitative method with an online questionnaire approach, which may not fully capture prospective students' emotional aspects or more profound perceptions. Respondents were also limited to those who followed a specific Instagram account so that the results may be biased toward groups with an initial interest in the institution. Further studies using mixed methods or in-depth interviews could provide richer insights into the relationship between trust, brand recognition, and prospective student intentions.

Based on the findings of this study, higher education institutions are advised to prioritize marketing strategies that focus on building trust. This can be done by presenting authentic and transparent content, such as alumni testimonials, virtual campus tours, or live Q&A programs with faculty and students. In addition, collaboration with relevant influencers can also help strengthen prospective students' trust in the institution.

Further research is recommended to explore the role of other social media, such as TikTok or Facebook, in building brand recognition and trust. Additionally, a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative can provide deeper insights into prospective students' perceptions. Studies involving more extensive and diverse samples are also needed to ensure the generalizability of the findings in a broader context. With this approach, social media marketing in the education sector can continue to develop into a more effective and innovative strategy.

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