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Social Media Marketing, Brand Awareness, and Student Enrollment Decisions: The Mediating Role of Perceived Value

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ABSTRACT
Private higher education institutions increasingly depend on digital communication to compete for prospective students, yet the mechanism through which social media marketing translates into enrollment decisions remains insufficiently understood. This study examined the direct effects of social media marketing and brand awareness on student enrollment decisions and assessed perceived value as a mediating mechanism. A cross-sectional survey was administered to 170 prospective students selected through purposive sampling. The constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale, and the data were analyzed in SPSS using multiple linear regression and a causal-steps mediation procedure. Perceived value showed the strongest positive association with enrollment decisions (coefficient = 0.580, $p < .001$), followed by brand awareness (coefficient = 0.255, $p < .001$). Social media marketing did not have a statistically significant direct association with enrollment decisions (coefficient = 0.053, $p = .233$), although it significantly predicted perceived value. The model explained 69.7% of the variance in enrollment decisions ($R^2 = .697$; $F(3, 166) = 127.485$, $p < .001$). Under the mediation criterion adopted in this study, the results are consistent with complete mediation: social media marketing appears to influence enrollment decisions primarily by strengthening prospective students' perceptions of institutional value. The findings indicate that universities should prioritize credible value communication and sustained brand salience rather than relying on promotional exposure alone.

Keywords
social media marketing; brand awareness; perceived value; enrollment decisions; private higher education

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INTRODUCTION

Competition among private higher education institutions has intensified as institutions seek to maintain enrollment, financial sustainability, and market relevance. In parallel, prospective students have shifted from relying predominantly on brochures, school visits, and education fairs to evaluating institutions through digital platforms. Social media now enables students to compare academic programs, observe campus life, assess institutional reputation, and interact with institutional content in real time (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Consequently, digital communication has become an important component of student recruitment, particularly for private institutions whose sustainability is closely tied to enrollment volume (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Social media marketing refers to the deliberate use of social platforms to communicate, engage, and create value for target audiences. Its effectiveness is commonly associated with entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and electronic word of mouth (Kim & Ko, 2012). These activities can strengthen engagement and influence brand-related perceptions (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016; Yadav & Rahman, 2018). Nevertheless, evidence regarding their direct effect on final decisions is mixed. Social media exposure can generate attention and interaction, but behavioral outcomes often depend on whether communication changes more proximal evaluations such as trust, brand image, or perceived value (Godey et al., 2016; Hanaysha, 2022; Raji et al., 2019).

Brand awareness is another central element of the institutional choice process. It reflects the extent to which prospective students can recognize or recall an institution when evaluating alternatives (Aaker, 1996). Strong awareness increases the probability that an institution enters the consideration set and may reduce uncertainty by signaling familiarity and continuity (Keller, 1993; Pappu et al., 2005). Marketing communication, including institution-generated and user-generated social media content, can reinforce awareness and broader brand equity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Hutter et al., 2013; Yoo et al., 2000).

Perceived value provides a more evaluative explanation of enrollment choice. It represents an individual's overall judgment of the benefits received relative to the monetary, psychological, and opportunity costs incurred (Zeithaml, 1988). In higher education, this judgment may encompass expected academic quality, career prospects, campus facilities, affordability, social experience, and institutional prestige. Perceived value has consistently been associated with satisfaction and behavioral intentions in service settings (Cronin et al., 2000; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Accordingly, social media communication may affect enrollment decisions indirectly when it makes institutional benefits more credible, concrete, and relevant to prospective students.

Although social media marketing, brand awareness, and perceived value have each received substantial attention, their joint operation in private higher education remains underexplored. Prior studies frequently emphasize direct promotional effects, while paying less attention to the evaluative mechanism through which digital communication becomes consequential. This study addresses that gap by integrating the four constructs in a single explanatory model. It examines whether (1) social media marketing, brand awareness, and perceived value are associated with enrollment decisions; (2) social media marketing and brand awareness are associated with perceived value; and (3) perceived value mediates the relationship between social media marketing and enrollment decisions. The proposed model therefore distinguishes visibility from value formation and clarifies why digital exposure may not translate directly into enrollment.

METHOD

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among social media marketing, brand awareness, perceived value, and student enrollment decisions in private higher education. The target population comprised prospective students who were actively considering enrollment. Purposive sampling was used because respondents needed to satisfy three inclusion criteria: they were active senior high school students or recent graduates, they were searching for information about higher education institutions, and they had been exposed to university promotional content on social media. A total of 170 valid responses were included in the analysis.

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via digital platforms. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Social media marketing was measured with seven items adapted from the dimensions proposed by (Kim & Ko, 2012), including entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth. Brand awareness was measured with six items capturing recognition, recall, and top-of-mind awareness (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). Perceived value was measured with six items representing functional, emotional, and social value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Student enrollment decisions were measured with five items reflecting intention, preference, and the decision to enroll, drawing on the consumer decision framework of (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Instrument quality was evaluated before hypothesis testing. Item validity was assessed using Pearson item–total correlations, with coefficients above .30 treated as acceptable. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with values above .70 interpreted as satisfactory. The original analysis reported that all items and constructs met these thresholds.

The data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each construct. Multiple linear regression was used to estimate the associations of social media marketing, brand awareness, and perceived value with enrollment decisions. Individual coefficients were evaluated using t tests, whereas overall model significance was assessed using the F test and the coefficient of determination (R^2). Normality, heteroscedasticity, and multicollinearity diagnostics were examined before interpreting the regression results. Variance inflation factor values were used to assess multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019).

The estimated regression model was specified as follows:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 Z + \varepsilon$$

where Y denotes the student enrollment decision, X_1 denotes social media marketing, X_2 denotes brand awareness, Z denotes perceived value, α is the intercept, β represents the regression coefficients, and ε is the error term.

Mediation was evaluated using the causal-steps approach adopted in the original analysis. Under this approach, a complete-mediation interpretation is supported when the predictor is associated with the mediator, the mediator is associated with the outcome, and the predictor's direct association with the outcome is no longer significant after the mediator is included. Because the original output did not report the indirect-effect estimate or a bootstrapped confidence interval, the mediation conclusion is interpreted as evidence consistent with complete mediation rather than as a direct estimate of the indirect effect.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarizes the observed score distributions. Because the constructs contained different numbers of items, their raw total means should not be compared directly. Dividing each total by its number of items yields approximate per-item means of 3.06 for social media marketing, 3.46 for brand awareness, 3.19 for perceived value, and 3.23 for enrollment decisions. The pattern indicates moderately favorable evaluations across all constructs, with brand awareness receiving the highest average item rating.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Social media marketing (X_1)	21.45	6.875	7	35
Brand awareness (X_2)	20.74	4.909	7	30

Perceived value (Z)	19.14	5.101	6	30
Student enrollment decision (Y)	16.15	4.944	5	25

Regression Results and Overall Model Test

The estimated regression equation was:

$$\hat{Y} = -1.366 + 0.053X_1 + 0.255X_2 + 0.580Z$$

All reported coefficients were positive, but their magnitudes and statistical significance differed. Perceived value had the largest coefficient (0.580), followed by brand awareness (0.255), whereas the coefficient for social media marketing was small (0.053). As shown in Table 2, perceived value and brand awareness were statistically significant predictors of enrollment decisions, while the direct coefficient for social media marketing was not significant.

Table 2. Partial regression tests

Predictor	t	p	Decision
Social media marketing (X_1)	1.198	.233	Not significant
Brand awareness (X_2)	4.546	< .001	Significant
Perceived value (Z)	9.188	< .001	Significant

The overall regression model was statistically significant and explained 69.7% of the variance in enrollment decisions, $F(3, 166) = 127.485$, $p < .001$ (Table 3). This represents substantial explanatory power for a cross-sectional behavioral model, although the remaining 30.3% of variance may reflect factors not included in the analysis, such as tuition affordability, parental influence, scholarship availability, institutional ranking, service quality, or peer recommendations.

Table 3. Overall model test

Indicator	Value
R^2	.697
F(3, 166)	127.485
p	< .001

Multicollinearity Diagnostics

The variance inflation factors ranged from 1.700 to 2.327 (Table 4). These values are well below commonly used thresholds and indicate that the predictor estimates were not materially distorted by multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4. Variance inflation factors

Predictor	VIF
Social media marketing	2.037
Brand awareness	1.700
Perceived value	2.327

Mediation Analysis

The reported mediation paths are presented in Table 5. Social media marketing was significantly associated with perceived value, and perceived value was significantly associated with enrollment decisions. The direct relationship between social media marketing and enrollment decisions was not significant after perceived value was included in the model. Under the causal-steps criterion used in this study, this pattern is consistent with complete mediation: social media marketing appears to influence enrollment decisions through the value judgments it creates rather than through exposure alone. Brand awareness was also significantly associated with perceived value and retained a significant direct relationship with enrollment decisions, suggesting that awareness may operate through both direct and value-related pathways.

Table 5. Reported mediation paths

Relationship	p	Interpretation
Social media marketing → perceived value	< .001	Significant
Brand awareness → perceived value	< .001	Significant
Perceived value → enrollment decision	< .001	Significant
Social media marketing → enrollment decision (direct)	.233	Not significant

The absence of a reported indirect-effect coefficient and bootstrapped confidence interval limits the precision of the mediation inference. The results therefore support the proposed mechanism at the level of the reported regression paths, but the size and sampling uncertainty of the indirect effect should be estimated explicitly in future analyses.

Discussion

The results identify perceived value as the most influential predictor of enrollment decisions. Prospective students appear to evaluate private higher education as an investment and to weigh expected academic, career, social, and economic benefits against the costs of attendance. This finding is consistent with service research showing that perceived value is a proximal determinant of behavioral intentions (Cronin et al., 2000; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Zeithaml, 1988). In practical terms, visibility is unlikely to be sufficient unless the institution's communication enables students to understand why its educational offer is credible and worthwhile.

Brand awareness also had a significant direct association with enrollment decisions. Familiarity may reduce uncertainty, increase confidence in the institution, and improve the likelihood that it remains in the prospective student's consideration set. This interpretation is consistent with customer-based brand equity theory, in which recognition and recall provide the cognitive foundation for subsequent brand judgments (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Pappu et al., 2005). The significant relationship between brand awareness and perceived value further suggests that familiarity can shape how students interpret institutional benefits.

Social media marketing, by contrast, did not have a significant direct association with enrollment decisions. This result should not be interpreted as evidence that social media is unimportant. Rather, the mediation pattern indicates that its contribution depends on the quality of the perceptions it generates. Interactive or frequent content may attract attention, but enrollment requires a more consequential evaluation of educational quality, affordability, credibility, employability, and fit. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that digital marketing often affects behavior through intervening brand and trust mechanisms (Godey et al., 2016; Hanaysha, 2022; Hutter et al., 2013; Raji et al., 2019).

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to higher education marketing research by separating promotional exposure from the evaluative mechanism that links exposure to choice.

The integrated model suggests that social media marketing should be conceptualized as an antecedent of perceived value rather than assumed to exert an automatic direct effect on enrollment. It also positions brand awareness and perceived value as complementary but distinct constructs: awareness increases cognitive accessibility, whereas perceived value provides the substantive justification for action. This distinction offers a more logically specified account of student decision-making than models that treat digital activity as a direct substitute for institutional quality or reputation.

Managerial Implications

Private higher education institutions should design social media strategies around value communication rather than posting frequency alone. Content should provide verifiable evidence of academic quality, accreditation, graduate outcomes, internship opportunities, facilities, affordability, scholarships, student support, and career pathways. Testimonials and campus narratives are most persuasive when they are specific, credible, and connected to prospective students' decision criteria. Institutions should also maintain consistent visual identity and messaging across platforms to strengthen recall while avoiding claims that cannot be substantiated.

An integrated recruitment strategy is therefore preferable to isolated promotional campaigns. Social media engagement should be coordinated with admissions counseling, websites, open-house activities, student ambassadors, and transparent information about fees and outcomes. Performance metrics should extend beyond reach and engagement to indicators that reflect value formation, such as information requests, program comparisons, application initiation, and conversion to enrollment.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of the findings. First, purposive sampling and the limited study scope reduce population generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional design does not establish temporal order or causality. Third, all variables were measured through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce common-method bias. Fourth, the model omitted potentially important determinants such as tuition, parental influence, scholarships, institutional ranking, service quality, geographic accessibility, and peer recommendations. Finally, the mediation analysis did not report the indirect-effect estimate or a bootstrapped confidence interval.

Future studies should use probability-based or multi-institution samples, report respondent characteristics and fieldwork context in greater detail, and apply longitudinal or experimental designs where feasible. Structural equation modeling could evaluate the measurement and structural models simultaneously, while bootstrap procedures should be used to quantify indirect effects. Comparative studies across regions, institution types, and student segments would also clarify the boundary conditions of the proposed relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships among social media marketing, brand awareness, perceived value, and enrollment decisions among 170 prospective students considering private higher education. The model explained 69.7% of the variance in enrollment decisions. Perceived value was the strongest predictor, brand awareness had a significant positive association, and social media marketing did not have a significant direct association with enrollment decisions. The reported path pattern was consistent with complete mediation under the causal-steps approach:

social media marketing influenced enrollment primarily by strengthening perceived institutional value.

The central implication is that digital visibility must be converted into credible value. Private institutions are more likely to improve recruitment effectiveness when social media communication makes educational benefits understandable and trustworthy, while consistent branding keeps the institution salient during the selection process. Because the study is cross-sectional and the indirect effect was not estimated directly, the mediation conclusion should be confirmed through bootstrapped and longitudinal analysis.

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