

Optimizing Digital Promotion Strategies in Higher Education: A Theoretical Review and Framework

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) can optimise digital promotion strategies to strengthen student recruitment and institutional branding. Using University College Bestari (UCB) as a case context, the study synthesises recent academic literature to propose a theoretical framework grounded in integrated marketing communication (IMC) principles. The review identifies critical variables influencing digital promotional effectiveness platform strategy, content typology, audience segmentation, and performance analytics. Findings suggest that while platforms like Instagram and TikTok foster engagement among prospective students through interactive, visual formats, parents prefer structured sources such as Facebook and official university websites. Authenticity, particularly in peer-generated narratives, emerges as a pivotal factor in building trust. However, challenges including inconsistent messaging, limited analytic capabilities, and inadequate strategic planning hinder campaign impact. As a conceptual study, it does not present empirical findings, but its value lies in offering a theoretically grounded model to guide future research and institutional decision-making. This paper contributes a theoretically grounded model to support HEIs in designing adaptive, data-driven promotion strategies, and offers actionable insights for enhancing brand positioning in an increasingly digital educational landscape.

Keywords: Digital Promotion, Higher Education, Social Media, Content Strategy, Student Recruitment, Marketing Strategy

Introduction

In today's rapidly digitizing world, digital promotion has emerged as a cornerstone of strategic communication, particularly for higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to attract and engage Generation Z. This cohort, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, has grown up in a digitally immersive environment, relying heavily on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook for information, entertainment, and decision-making (Peruta & Shields, 2017). The effectiveness of traditional marketing channels such as print

advertisements, television, and brochures has notably diminished in influencing Gen Z's decisions, necessitating a strategic pivot toward more interactive, mobile-first, and real-time digital media (Cook, 2019). Globally, HEIs are investing substantial resources into digital platforms to sustain competitiveness and brand visibility (Kowsalya, 2020). Yet, a recurring challenge is the strategic disconnect between platform adoption and actual audience engagement. This gap is often attributed to the lack of contextual adaptation, limited performance analytics, and insufficient audience research (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Successful digital marketing in higher education requires more than just visibility it calls for a comprehensive strategy rooted in audience insights, content relevance, and measurable impact (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

In the context of Malaysia, University College Bestari (UCB) has initiated several social media-driven promotional campaigns targeting prospective students. However, similar to other Malaysian private institutions, the effectiveness of these strategies remains underexplored, particularly in terms of their influence on student enrollment decisions, digital engagement metrics, and overall institutional branding. As noted by Constantinides & Zinck Stagno (2011), digital engagement must align with students' content preferences and values to impact university choice behavior. Without rigorous performance monitoring and audience-aligned strategies, institutions risk underutilizing digital media's full potential. Moreover, recent studies emphasize the growing importance of personalization, real-time feedback, and trust-building in digital strategies tailored to Gen Z. For instance, Aziz & Dali, (2025) found that students are more likely to engage with content that mirrors their aspirations, uses authentic storytelling, and includes peer-generated testimonials. This supports Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick's (2019) assertion that effective digital marketing involves more than broadcasting it entails listening, adapting, and responding.

Despite the increasing use of digital promotional tools, few higher education institutions (HEIs) have adopted systematic frameworks to guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of their strategies. This study seeks to address this gap by critically assessing the digital promotional efforts of UCB, using a framework grounded in current best practices, Gen Z digital behavior, and performance metrics. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which these strategies align with the digital consumption habits of Generation Z and evaluates their effectiveness in enhancing institutional visibility and reputation. Digital marketing and advertising offer institutions the ability to engage target audiences through cost-effective, data-driven, and measurable approaches, thereby improving the ability to assess return on investment (ROI) with greater accuracy (Sou'b & Al Shawabkeh, 2025).

Background of the Study

Understanding the institutional context and broader sectoral challenges is essential to assess the effectiveness of digital promotion strategies in higher education. This study situates its inquiry within two interrelated domains: the macro-level digital transformation of Malaysia's higher education landscape and the micro-level institutional initiatives undertaken by University College Bestari (UCB). Malaysia's higher education sector has witnessed rapid expansion and increasing competition over the past decade, driven by demographic shifts, greater private sector participation, and heightened demand for digital services (Yusuf et al., 2023). As prospective students—particularly from Generation Z rely more on mobile-first and visually dynamic platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube for educational decision-

making, HEIs are shifting their marketing strategies from traditional outreach methods to digital campaigns that prioritize personalization and interactivity (Peruta & Shields, 2017; Yusuf et al., 2025).

For instance, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) launched the *#UiTMdiHatiku* digital campaign on Instagram, which featured student ambassadors and behind-the-scenes campus experiences to humanize the brand and appeal to prospective students. The campaign achieved a 28% increase in engagement over a six-month period and influenced application intent among SPM school leavers (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Similarly, University College Bestari (UCB) piloted short-form video reels on TikTok in early 2024, showcasing student life, academic programs, and testimonials in Bahasa Malaysia. Preliminary internal analytics revealed a notable spike in website visits and inquiries during the campaign, though a formal performance assessment framework is still in development.

Despite these promising initiatives, institutional readiness to embrace digital transformation varies widely across the Malaysian higher education ecosystem. Research by Kowsalya (2020) highlights that many HEIs face persistent challenges related to staff digital competencies, insufficient integration of analytics, and fragmented marketing execution. For institutions like UCB operating in a resource-constrained environment, these challenges are compounded by limited expertise in campaign evaluation and audience segmentation. Carbonaro (2021) further note that while digital adoption is widespread, the strategic use of data to measure performance or guide content development remains underdeveloped in many Malaysian universities. As Mexhuani (2025) emphasize, maximizing the value of digital promotion requires a shift toward evidence-based marketing guided by real-time data and adaptive content strategies.

Digital Transformation in HEIs

Malaysia's higher education sector has experienced substantial transformation over the past decade, driven by technological advancements, increased private sector participation, and intensified competition for student enrollment (Yusuf et al., 2023). As the number of school leavers declines and student decision-making becomes more digitally mediated, HEIs are forced to innovate their promotional strategies to align with digital-native expectations. Generation Z, now the primary cohort of prospective university students, exhibits an affinity for mobile-first, visual-rich, and real-time content. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube dominate their media consumption landscape (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Consequently, HEIs are migrating from traditional brochures and open-day events to digital storytelling, targeted advertising, and influencer engagement (Aziz & Dali, 2025)

However, digital transformation within Southeast Asia's higher education ecosystem remains uneven, often hindered by organizational inertia, underdeveloped infrastructure, and a lack of expertise in digital analytics and content curation (Kowsalya, 2020). While many universities have adopted various digital channels, the strategic integration of these tools into unified and coherent marketing systems is still uncommon. Research in the Malaysian context reveals further systemic issues: marketing departments frequently lack adequate resources, campaign performance is rarely tracked, and digital content is often misaligned with audience expectations (Mexhuani, 2025). The successful implementation of digital strategies necessitates an institutional culture that prioritizes data-driven decision-making and agile

responsiveness—traits not yet widely embedded in Malaysia’s private higher education sector. More broadly, digital transformation enables organizations to harness technology to remain resilient and competitive in increasingly dynamic and competitive environments across all industries (Sou'b & Al Shawabkeh, 2025).

Challenges at UCB

Within the evolving landscape of digital transformation in Malaysian higher education, University College Bestari (UCB) has embarked on several initiatives to bolster its institutional visibility and attract prospective students. These efforts are reflected in its use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and its official website. The primary goals include strengthening brand recognition, expanding reach to younger audiences, and promoting academic offerings in a digitally competitive environment. Despite these efforts, the absence of a structured framework for evaluating campaign effectiveness remains a significant limitation. Metrics such as engagement levels, content responsiveness, conversion rates, and enrolment outcomes have not been systematically assessed, leaving the impact of these digital strategies largely anecdotal.

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) highlight that a digital presence, while essential, is only a foundational step in effective digital marketing. To achieve tangible outcomes, institutions must align their strategies across platforms, leverage data analytics, and tailor content to specific audience segments. The absence of such strategic integration often results in fragmented campaigns that lack coherence and fail to deliver long-term value. In UCB’s case, the digital marketing approach shows signs of activity but limited signs of strategic consolidation. Further compounding the challenge is the underutilization of analytical dashboards, automation tools, and segmentation strategies a concern echoed in the broader Malaysian HEI context. Mexhuani (2025) notes that many institutions struggle to convert digital activity into actionable insights due to a lack of technical capacity and institutional prioritization. This gap limits the ability to refine campaigns based on real-time feedback or user engagement trends.

Moreover, UCB's content strategy may not fully reflect the consumption behaviours of its diverse audiences. Research shows that students are more responsive to visual and interactive formats—such as short-form videos, peer-generated testimonials, and real-time social media interactions—while parents and guardians typically favour structured, credibility-focused content highlighting academic outcomes and institutional trustworthiness. Misalignment between message format and audience expectations can significantly reduce engagement and communication effectiveness (Yu, 2024). While UCB's presence across multiple platforms reflects a growing awareness of digital trends, the lack of rigorous evaluation and tailored messaging strategies constrains the potential impact of its promotional efforts. A comprehensive understanding of platform-specific engagement patterns, content effectiveness across demographics, and the relationship between digital campaigns and enrolment behaviour is essential (Nguyen, 2016). Addressing these gaps through empirical analysis and performance-based refinement will be key to enhancing the institution’s digital marketing effectiveness and positioning it more competitively within Malaysia’s higher education landscape.

Literature Review

The literature review provides an analytical foundation for examining digital promotion strategies in higher education. It explores four critical constructs derived from the conceptual framework: digital media channels, digital promotion strategy, types of digital content, and effectiveness of digital promotions. These interrelated components inform how institutions such as University College Bestari (UCB) engage with their target audiences amid evolving digital behaviours and competitive recruitment environments (Nguyen et al., 2015; Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020).

Digital Readiness

Digital readiness serves as a pivotal moderating construct in the relationship between promotional strategies and marketing outcomes in higher education institutions (HEIs). Institutions equipped with advanced technological infrastructure, skilled digital professionals, and an innovation-friendly culture are more adept at executing impactful marketing strategies. Digital readiness encompasses the integration of ICT, institutional agility, and personnel preparedness, all of which are crucial for enhancing strategic agility and responsiveness (Issa et al., 2016). For instance, in countries like Singapore and Finland, HEIs demonstrate how real-time analytics, centralized governance, and cross-functional collaboration accelerate digital marketing success (Carbonaro, 2021).

Moreover, the effectiveness of marketing efforts in HEIs is strongly linked to their digital maturity level. Those with robust digital ecosystems can transform complex data into actionable insights, thereby personalizing outreach and increasing student engagement (Mazurchenko, 2025). Conversely, institutions with low digital literacy, fragmented IT governance, or limited data integration capabilities often struggle with campaign execution and measurement, resulting in lower promotional effectiveness (Issa et al., 2016). Therefore, digital readiness not only facilitates the implementation of promotion strategies but also amplifies their impact through enhanced feedback mechanisms and iterative learning.

Digital Promotion Strategy

Digital promotion in higher education institutions (HEIs) is increasingly shaped by strategic alignment with institutional leadership, cultural readiness, and data infrastructure. Case studies from European HEIs show that the success of digital transformation often hinges on top-level commitment to innovation and adaptable organizational culture (Carbonaro, 2021; Selwyn, 2007). Effective digital promotion strategies integrate user segmentation, cross-platform engagement, and continuous analytics feedback. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) underscore the necessity of personalized content and data-informed iterations to sustain audience engagement. This is echoed by Nguyen et al., (2016), who highlight how inbound marketing in HEIs must optimize personalization and digital value delivery based on analytics.

A layered digital strategy utilizing TikTok for awareness, institutional websites for credibility, and email for conversion has proven effective in engaging prospective students. Research highlights that short-form videos boost visibility, while modular websites support detailed engagement. Aziz & Dali (2025) emphasize that agile digital tactics and modular open educational resources became vital during the COVID-19 period. However, many higher education institutions still lack a fully differentiated approach aligned with platform behaviors and audience needs. Mexhuani (2025) found that digital marketing in HEIs often mimics

competitor behavior, leading to redundancy and inefficacy. Likewise point to low adoption of analytics-based decision-making, leading to static and fragmented campaigns.

Contrastingly, institutions in digitally mature ecosystems such as Singapore show how centralized digital units supported by robust data systems improve responsiveness and audience modeling (Kowsalya, 2020; Mhlanga, 2024). These findings suggest that limitations in resource allocation, not conceptual understanding, are the primary obstacles to success (Beebe, 2004; Mhlanga, 2024).

Digital Media Channels

Global student behaviour around digital trust is nuanced. While peer influence dominates in many regions, official institutional channels remain influential in contexts where misinformation is a concern, particularly in countries with lower media literacy (Nguyen, 2015; Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012). For example, East Asian and German students showed higher trust in structured university communications compared to their North American peers (Cai and Pinna, 2025; Schäfer et. al, 2022). This suggests that cultural and regional variations play a critical role in determining which channels are most effective.

The transition from traditional to digital media in higher education is largely driven by digital-native generations (Peruta & Shields, 2017; Nguyen et. al, 2015). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and increasingly LinkedIn provide visual and interactive formats favoured by Gen Z for discovery and brand perception (Nguyen et al., 2015). Meanwhile, parents and international agents often rely on Facebook and university websites for comprehensive academic information (Kowsalya, 2020).

However, mere adoption of these platforms does not translate to marketing success. Research shows that many HEIs operate without evidence-based platform strategies, resulting in low engagement or platform fatigue (Maringe and Gibbs, 2009). Schniederjans et al., (2013) and Dennis et al. (2016) highlight how content oversaturation reduces click-through rates unless institutions develop channel-specific differentiation based on audience needs.

Types of Digital Content

The tone, authenticity, and source of digital content critically impact engagement. Emotional storytelling and visual narratives tend to elicit stronger connections (Ifinedo, 2017; Maringe and Gibbs, 2009). Peer-generated formats like student takeovers, vlogs, and Q&A reels offer perceived authenticity and drive better results across awareness and application phases (Shneikat, 2024; Peruta & Shields, 2017). This is attributed to the “social proof” effect, which is particularly influential among Gen Z audiences (Fernández & Montenegro, 2024).

However, overuse of polished or overly branded content tends to erode trust and engagement (Nguyen et al., 2015). Students respond better to behind-the-scenes footage, student-led campus tours, and unedited testimonials, especially during discovery and inquiry phases (Nguyen et. al, 2015). Additionally, short-form vertical content (e.g., Instagram Reels, TikTok Stories) has proven effective for first impressions and emotional affinity but must be complemented with structured content for parents and postgraduate applicants (Kowsalya, 2020). Yet, peer-generated content has risks. Without editorial control, it can deviate from

institutional branding or propagate misinformation (Fernández & Montenegro, 2024). Hence, institutions must balance authenticity with moderation systems to ensure alignment with strategic goals.

Effectiveness of Digital Promotions

Effectiveness in digital promotion is most often measured through quantitative performance indicators such as click-through rates (CTR), bounce rates, cost per engagement (CPE), and conversion metrics (Nguyen et. al, 2015; Schäfer et. al, 2022). Institutions that embed real-time analytics dashboards into their campaigns are more agile in adapting content based on audience response (Mexhuani, 2025; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

German and Dutch universities have demonstrated how integrating performance analytics into both planning and post-campaign stages results in up to 35% higher engagement rates compared to institutions without such infrastructure (Schäfer et, al, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2015). However, many universities particularly in Southeast Asia and parts of Latin America continue to underutilize analytics, citing a lack of trained staff and limited budgets (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Kowsalya, 2020).

Moreover, researchers like Kowsalya (2020) caution that an over-reliance on metrics can obscure critical qualitative dimensions like emotional engagement or brand trust, which are harder to quantify. To that end, a blended framework—incorporating sentiment analysis, perception studies, and surveys—is increasingly advocated for holistic campaign evaluation (Fernández & Montenegro, 2024 ; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

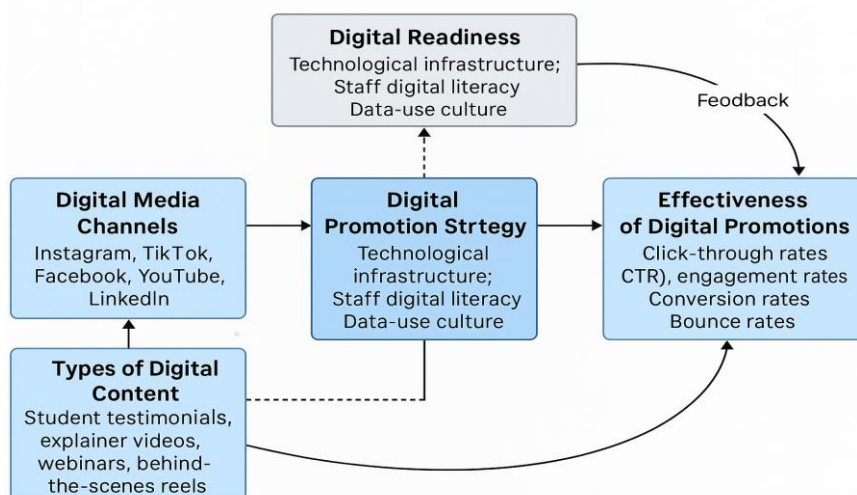


Figure 1

The proposed conceptual framework is grounded in Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory, which advocates for a harmonized and strategically coordinated approach to communication across multiple platforms and target segments. IMC’s foundational dimensions message consistency, channel integration, audience segmentation, and performance measurability are particularly relevant for modern higher education institutions (HEIs) engaging in digital outreach (Fill & Turnbull, 2016; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

These four pillars guide the alignment between media, message, and measurement across digital campaigns (Kliatchko, 2008). Figure 1 shows the framework comprises three independent variables Digital Media Channels, Types of Digital Content, and Digital Promotion Strategy and one dependent variable: Effectiveness of Digital Promotions. A moderating variable, Digital Readiness, is also introduced to contextualize institutional variation in technological capacity and agility.

Digital Media Channels encapsulate IMC's principle of channel integration. They refer to the strategic use of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and official university websites to establish consistent brand storytelling and maximize reach (Nguyen et al., 2016). Effective use of these channels enables audience segmentation and engagement tailored to behavioural data and demographic profiles (Nguyen et al., 2016). Types of Digital Content reflect IMC's emphasis on message consistency and personalization. Content formats such as student-led vlogs, explainer reels, webinars, and testimonials deliver authentic narratives that enhance emotional resonance and trust, particularly among Gen Z and millennial audiences (Fernández & Montenegro, 2024; Ifinedo, 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2017). These content types support personalized storytelling, which has been shown to influence students' application decisions and perception of institutional credibility. Digital Promotion Strategy addresses the principle of strategic coherence, emphasizing the integration of content and platform choices with institutional objectives. Effective strategies leverage analytics, real-time feedback, and cross-functional coordination to ensure alignment between message tone, brand values, and campaign timing (Fill & Turnbull, 2016; Kowsalya, 2020). Agile institutions that embed strategic planning into digital operations tend to achieve higher levels of responsiveness and lead conversion.

The Effectiveness of Digital Promotions, as the dependent variable, is evaluated through a combination of quantitative metrics click-through rates (CTR), bounce rates, cost per engagement (CPE), and enrollment conversions and qualitative dimensions, such as emotional appeal and brand sentiment (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Schäfer et. al, 2022). This construct functions within a feedback loop, informing iterative refinement of both content and strategy (Mexhuani, 2025). Finally, Digital Readiness is introduced as a moderating variable, encompassing institutional infrastructure, digital literacy, and openness to innovation. Institutions with robust analytics systems, skilled staff, and centralized governance are better positioned to convert digital strategies into measurable promotional outcomes (Mhlanga, 2024; Selwyn, 2007; Beebe, 2004). This construct explains differential effectiveness across contexts and underscores the importance of organizational capacity in shaping digital performance. In sum, the framework integrates theoretical robustness and applied relevance. It empowers HEIs to craft integrated, audience-centered, and performance-driven digital campaigns—consistent with the core logic of IMC.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual methodology grounded in an integrative literature review to develop a theoretical framework for optimizing digital promotion strategies in higher education, with a specific focus on institutions such as University College Bestari (UCB). Conceptual research, by its nature, does not involve empirical hypothesis testing or primary data collection such as surveys or interviews. Instead, it synthesizes existing literature to develop new theoretical perspectives and structured models (Jabareen, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

An integrative review approach was selected for its ability to combine both theoretical and empirical studies across disciplines, thus enabling the development of a holistic conceptualization. This is especially appropriate in the field of digital marketing for higher education, which remains fragmented across domains such as communication, business, and educational technology (Torraco, 2016; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

This approach is particularly well-suited to the Malaysian higher education context, where many institutions especially private or regionally-based HEIs—face practical constraints such as limited research capacity, underdeveloped analytics infrastructure, and variability in digital readiness (Latif, Mat, & Husin, 2021; Mexhuani, 2025). By proposing a structured conceptual model grounded in current literature and global best practices, this study offers Malaysian HEIs an accessible and evidence-informed roadmap to guide strategic thinking, internal planning, and future empirical validation. In contexts where conducting full-scale empirical investigations may not yet be feasible, a well-developed conceptual framework provides a critical starting point for capacity building and digital strategy alignment.

To ensure relevance and rigor, the literature review included peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2024, with a focus on themes such as digital media platforms, promotional strategies, content types, and performance evaluation within higher education settings. Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria emphasized studies that addressed strategic digital engagement, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)-based models, and the effectiveness of marketing efforts in higher education institutions (HEIs). Following the review, thematic coding was applied to extract, organize, and synthesize recurring patterns across the literature. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process, four dominant themes were identified:

1. Digital Media Channels
2. Digital Promotion Strategy
3. Types of Digital Content
4. Effectiveness of Digital Promotions

These themes were subsequently mapped onto the core principles of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), resulting in a unified framework that demonstrates how strategic coherence, audience segmentation, message consistency, and measurable performance interrelate in digital promotion efforts by HEIs. The proposed framework (Figure 1) synthesizes cross-disciplinary findings and serves as a structured model to inform future empirical studies. It is intended to support Malaysian HEIs in crafting integrated, evidence-based digital promotional strategies that align with institutional goals, audience behavior, and platform capabilities.

To translate the proposed conceptual framework into actionable institutional practice, higher education institutions can adopt the following Digital Promotion Roadmap as a practical guide:

Construct	Strategic Action Items
Digital Media Channels	Identify platforms preferred by different stakeholders (e.g., TikTok for students, Facebook for parents). Use analytics to evaluate reach.
Types of Digital Content	Develop peer-led, authentic content for engagement. Ensure balanced content for credibility (e.g., testimonials + academic info).
Digital Promotion Strategy	Align campaign objectives with institutional goals. Integrate cross-platform messaging with audience segmentation.
Digital Readiness	Invest in staff training, analytics dashboards, and content management tools to support adaptive marketing.
Effectiveness of Digital Promotions	Track engagement (CTR, CPE, bounce rate) and incorporate feedback loops for continuous improvement.

The thematic insights from this review platform preferences, audience segmentation, and implementation challenges map directly onto the constructs outlined in the conceptual framework. Specifically, platform preferences reflect the strategic use of Digital Media Channels, where TikTok and Instagram serve student engagement, while Facebook and official websites appeal to parents. The nuances in audience segmentation are addressed through the Types of Digital Content, with emotionally resonant, peer-generated content appealing to students, and structured, credibility-focused messaging targeting guardians. Meanwhile, Digital Promotion Strategy emerges as a critical dimension influencing how institutions coordinate content and platform use to ensure consistency and relevance.

The recurring issue of limited analytics usage and skills gaps among HEI staff speaks to the moderating effect of Digital Readiness, which conditions how effectively institutions translate strategy into outcomes. Ultimately, these themes collectively inform the Effectiveness of Digital Promotions, underscoring that successful campaigns depend not only on media and content choices, but also on institutional agility and evidence-based refinement. This alignment reinforces the validity of the proposed IMC-based conceptual framework as both a diagnostic and planning tool for HEIs seeking to enhance their digital outreach.

As this paper presents a conceptual model without empirical validation, future studies are encouraged to operationalize the framework using structural equation modelling (SEM) or mixed-method designs across various Malaysian HEIs. Developing validated instruments to measure constructs such as Digital Readiness and Promotion Effectiveness will further enhance the model's applicability. By serving as a theoretically grounded starting point, this study makes a practical contribution to digital transformation in education particularly for resource-constrained institutions seeking strategic alignment in a competitive and digitally evolving environment.

Results and Discussion

The thematic insights from this review platform preferences, audience segmentation, and implementation challenges map directly onto the constructs outlined in the conceptual framework. Specifically, platform preferences reflect the strategic use of Digital Media Channels, where TikTok and Instagram serve student engagement, while Facebook and official websites appeal to parents. The nuances in audience segmentation are addressed through the Types of Digital Content, with emotionally resonant, peer-generated content appealing to students, and structured, credibility-focused messaging targeting guardians. Meanwhile, Digital Promotion Strategy emerges as a critical dimension influencing how institutions coordinate content and platform use to ensure consistency and relevance.

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Platform Impact

Digital platforms exert differentiated influence across audience segments in the higher education promotional landscape. The literature consistently identifies platforms such as Instagram and TikTok as highly effective for engaging prospective students. These platforms capitalize on visual storytelling, short-form videos, and interactive features (e.g., polls, reels, and Q&A sessions) to create dynamic and relatable user experiences aligned with Gen Z media preferences (Ifinedo, 2017; Peruta & Shields, 2017).

In contrast, platforms like Facebook and official university websites remain essential for engaging parents and guardians, who seek structured, credible, and comprehensive information on academic programs, graduate outcomes, and institutional safety. This audience-specific communication strategy supports a dual-platform approach that accommodates varying information needs and reinforces channel integration an essential principle of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) (Peruta & Shields, 2017). According to Kliatchko (2008), effective IMC ensures that messaging across diverse channels remains consistent, while being customized to the expectations of distinct audience groups. Thus, HEIs that leverage both informal and formal platforms in a coordinated manner are more likely to achieve cohesive and resonant outreach (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Fill & Turnbull, 2016).

Audience Segmentation

The reviewed literature emphasizes the importance of differentiated messaging strategies tailored to distinct demographic groups. Students are influenced by content that emphasizes authenticity and peer validation, such as student testimonials, behind-the-scenes campus videos, and real-time content updates (Shneikat, 2024). Conversely, parents are more responsive to structured, informative messaging that communicates institutional credibility and career prospects. This divergence in audience expectations suggests that higher education institutions must not only select the right platforms but also align content types with the emotional and informational needs of their target audiences (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Without such alignment, campaigns risk alienating one or more segments and reducing overall engagement effectiveness. This insight suggests that HEIs can improve engagement rates by aligning content type with platform behaviour.

Challenges in Implementation

While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for outreach and branding, the literature reveals several common implementation challenges across institutions. These include underutilization of digital analytics, inconsistent content quality, and insufficient staff training in data-driven marketing practices (Mexhuani, 2025). Many institutions struggle with adapting content in real time, optimizing cross-platform strategies, and evaluating campaign

outcomes through performance indicators (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). The absence of an integrated analytics framework often results in missed opportunities for iterative improvement and budget efficiency. Studies suggest that institutions with strong analytic capabilities and a clear content governance structure are more likely to convert digital engagement into tangible recruitment outcomes (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

Conclusion

This review affirms that digital promotion plays a pivotal role in the strategic positioning of higher education institutions. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have been found particularly effective in engaging prospective students through short-form, visual, and interactive content (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Cook, 2019). Meanwhile, Facebook and institutional websites continue to serve the information needs of parents and guardians, offering credibility and accessibility (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018). Across both audiences, the effectiveness of digital campaigns is significantly shaped by content authenticity, platform alignment, and interactive communication strategies (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). By integrating audience segmentation, platform mechanics, and content design, this paper's framework provides a strategic guide to optimize digital promotion effectiveness in competitive HEI environments.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This study contributes theoretically by advancing the application of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) in the digital marketing context of higher education. By grounding the conceptual framework in established IMC dimensions such as channel integration, message coherence, and audience segmentation it extends the practical relevance of these constructs to the specific dynamics of HEI digital outreach (Fill & Turnbull, 2016; Kliatchko, 2008). The framework also integrates the moderating role of digital readiness, a construct emphasizing institutional capabilities, technological agility, and infrastructure, which has been recognized as a critical factor for effective implementation of marketing strategies in educational contexts (Issa et al., 2016; Mhlanga, 2024).

Contextually, this study addresses institutional challenges common among Malaysian private HEIs, such as fragmented content strategy, underutilized performance analytics, and limited staff digital competencies. By using University College Bestari (UCB) as a case reference, it anchors theoretical insights in practical realities and illustrates how resource-constrained institutions might adopt strategic digital practices for brand positioning (Ashaari, 2020; Yusof et al., 2024). As such, the model not only advances scholarly understanding of IMC in digital education but also offers actionable guidance for institutional modernization and student engagement across similar emerging higher education landscapes.

Implications

For institutions like University College Bestari, aligning digital marketing strategies with distinct audience preferences and platform functionalities is essential. The literature suggests that staff capacity building, integration of real-time analytics, and prioritization of user-generated content can significantly enhance promotional outcomes (Mexhuani, 2025; Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). Moreover, embedding performance metrics into strategic refinement cycles ensures sustainable and responsive digital marketing practices. These

synthesized findings offer a conceptual framework that may inform broader institutional efforts to modernize outreach and improve visibility, trust, and student enrolment.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its conceptual contribution, this study is subject to several limitations. As a conceptual paper, it does not include primary empirical testing, which limits the generalizability and practical validation of the proposed framework. The model, while grounded in contemporary literature and IMC theory, remains hypothetical and requires empirical scrutiny to evaluate its applicability across diverse institutional contexts. Future research should aim to operationalize the constructs identified—such as digital media channels, content types, promotion strategy, and digital readiness using validated instruments. Quantitative methods such as structural equation modelling (SEM) or qualitative case studies could help assess the model's predictive power and contextual flexibility. Additionally, cross-regional comparative studies involving HEIs from different digital maturity levels could shed light on moderating variables such as institutional culture, technological infrastructure, and user behaviour.

While this study offers a structured conceptual framework for optimizing digital promotion strategies in higher education, it is limited by the absence of empirical validation. Conceptual research contributes significantly to theoretical development (Jabareen, 2009; Snyder, 2019), but without empirical evidence such as case studies, surveys, or interviews the model's real-world applicability remains untested. This can restrict its practical utility and generalizability, which are often critical for publication in applied social science journals (Torraco, 2005). To strengthen its contribution, the inclusion of a proposed methodology for future empirical validation or an illustrative institutional case application would enhance the paper's relevance and academic rigor. Doing so would align the work more closely with prevailing standards in research-driven publications that favour mixed-method or data-supported frameworks (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

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